

The Calling

Prologue

June, 1997

That first night in their new home, the cat did what Mae wanted to do—it ran off, probably trying to go back to their old home, to the mountains. The new neighborhood was dismal, nothing but little square houses with little square yards. A car dealership and the local armory bordered it on one side, and a row of old tobacco barns on the other. The house, pale green to start with, smelled moldy in a way that made it seem greener. If this was home, it made sense to run from it.

As Mae carried the last of the luggage, what little there was, into the dank living room, the cat squirmed out of her mother's arms. Her mother, Rhoda-Rae, doted on the cat, a lavender point Siamese with the ridiculous name of Adorabelle. Before Mae had even put down the bag, the cat dashed out the open door.

"Rhoda-Mae how *could* you?" Rhoda-Rae exclaimed with a whine. "You know she's terrified."

Mae resented the rhyming name for being so close to her mother's, hated hearing it used, and it added to her aggravation. For years she'd insisted on being called just Mae, but her mother was the one person who ignored that. "Mama, I couldn't close the door with both hands full. You should have left her in her cage."

It was like talking to the TV. No one listened and the drama went on. With a wailing *o—hhh*, Rhoda-Rae Martin collapsed into one of the cracked fake leather chairs that came with the furnished rental and wept. "My baby."

"I reckon you mean the cat," Mae said under her breath. The possibility that her mother saw thirteen-year-old Mae as her baby was slim. "I'll go look for her."

Rhoda-Rae barely looked up from her crying to mumble, "Go. You do that."

More than willing to get out of the house, Mae left, closing the door behind her. She walked down the chipped brick steps and stood in the yard. Crowds of insects battered the streetlamps as dusk turned to dark. Dogs barked in the yards of several houses left and right, so she couldn't tell which direction might bring her to Adorabelle.

She was a smart, mean little cat, in spite of the silly name and the stupid lavender bow Rhoda-Rae had put around her neck, and Mae wanted to find her. The cat might be the only comfort she would have in this new place.

A creek bordered by a tangle of scrawny trees ran alongside the cross street behind the Ford dealership and the armory. *If I were a cat, I'd go in those trees.* Mae approached the creek. More dogs barked in houses or yards on either side. She didn't like this neighborhood. So much barking. Must be scaring Belle half to death.

On a low branch of a thorny bush, Mae saw a ribbon—Adorabelle's purple bow. Good thing she hadn't choked getting it snagged. It must have hurt to slide her big ears through it to get free. Must have felt good, though. A cat ought to be naked like an animal, not wear some human frills.

"Hey, kitty." Mae could never bring herself to use the cat's whole name any more than she cared for her own whole hyphenated double. Rhyming with her mother was an embarrassment almost as bad as Adorabelle. "Belle, come on."

No movement. She took the ribbon off the bush and closed her eyes, trying to imagine what she would do if she were Belle.

Strangely, she could feel something through her hand and arm, as if she had touched Belle and could feel the cat's fear. Even stranger, her vision traveled through a kind of tunnel, and then Mae could see Belle, hiding under a large brown and timber trimmed house's back deck. It was like she could see in the dark the way Belle could. The effect was startling and inexplicable. *Can Belle somehow tell me where she is?* Amazed but hopeful, Mae memorized the details of the house and its yard and then opened her eyes.

Looking through the trees in front of her, she noticed the back yards of a better neighborhood, houses that fronted a main road through town. Straight ahead of the bush where the ribbon had hung, barely

discernible though the black outlines of trees, was a shape that might be the house and deck Mae had seen. Even though seeing it didn't seem possible.

She crossed the creek with a jump and jogged to the edge of the yard. It really was the house she'd seen. Every detail, exactly right. The recognition was exciting, and a little frightening somehow. "Belle, kitty. Come on, Belle."

No barking. No lights in the house. Feeling safe to trespass, Mae crossed the yard and peered under the back deck. Her heart gave a thump of amazement. Belle's pale fur and huge eyes caught a glint of streetlight. The cat uttered a long despairing yowl.

"I know, kitty. I get it." Mae crawled into the dirt-smelling wooden cave under the deck and picked up Belle, holding the small, quivering animal against her heart. The future felt like that yowl. "It's a nasty old house Mama's put us in. I don't blame you one bit." Belle didn't purr, but she stopped shaking.

Trying not to cry, not to be a sniveling weak mess like her mother, Mae swallowed her tears and carried Belle out from under the deck. "We'll make it, kitty. I don't know how. But we'll live."

Belle hissed and squiggled on coming out of her hiding place, but Mae held her, claws and all. Bringing her home hurt. Seemed like neither of them wanted to call this home, not the damp house, the ugly neighborhood, or the town of Cauwetska. No mountains. No Daddy. No beauty as far as Mae could see.

Opening the door of the green house with one hand, she let herself in and closed it firmly before letting the cat down. Belle ran around the room a few times and ducked under the sofa. Rhoda-Rae was on the phone in the kitchen. "Arnie, honey, I've got to go," she said. "Rhoda-Mae brought the cat back, thank God. I'll see you tomorrow ... Yes, I'm fine, sugar, I'm fine. I love you, too."

Mae's resentment hardened on hearing her mother talking lovey-dovey to a boyfriend, the inspiration for this move, only six months after evicting Daddy and everything that had to do with him.

"That was quick. How on earth did you find her so fast?" Rhoda-Rae stood in the doorway, smoothing her permed and proper auburn hair as if it had been mussed by the phone call.

"It was funny." Mae slipped past her mother into the kitchen and opened a cardboard box to get a glass, unwrapping one from the dishtowel that had held it safe from breaking. She drew a drink from the tap, wondering if she could explain what had happened. It was so strange, she had to tell someone though, even if that someone was Mama. "I found her ribbon, and then ... I closed my eyes, and I could see her. I could see right where she was, every detail, like a movie."

"Are you sure, sugar?" Rhoda-Rae turned to her daughter with narrowed eyes, one manicured hand going to the cross around her neck.

"I'm not *lying*. Yeah I'm sure."

Rhoda-Rae walked to the kitchen table and sank into one of the old wooden chairs. Its uneven legs made it rock as she sat. "Oh, that Outlaw blood will show."

"What do you mean?"

"My mama. She was an Outlaw before she married your Grampa Jackson. She didn't just do the old country doctoring, she had *the sight*. Like what you just did." She sighed, folded her arms, and crossed her ankles. Even for moving day, she wore nylon hose and shoes with little heels. "Outlaw clan was known for that."

"How come you never told me?"

"I don't hold with any of it. It's against God and it's against good, modern medicine, all that nonsense. I wouldn't let her talk to you about it."

"Mama—*against God*? I found Belle."

"Letting things into your mind like that, it's like doing magic. It's *witchy*, that's what I think. My *own mama*." Rhoda-Rae shuddered, with a look to heaven, as if she hoped God could see her performance. "She made potions and sold herbs and she laid her hands on people to get them well, and they'd skip going to a real doctor. She could have killed somebody."

Rhoda-Rae was a nurse. Mae could see maybe her mother might not like the country doctoring. The other objections didn't make sense, though. Before Mae could argue again, her mother continued.

"And as for seeing what isn't your business to see, that's just plain wrong. She could spy out what someone was doing miles away, or even ten years ago if she tried. All she needed was a little bit of your hair or your clothes, and she could *see* you. If that's not the work of the devil I don't know what is."

This was silly, more superstitious than really religious. "Not if you use it to do good."

"Are you arguing with me, Rhoda-Mae?"

"I am." Mae finished her water, set the glass down, and began to unpack the rest of the box. The cabinets felt sticky inside as she arranged the glasses in them, and she wondered if it was the humidity or if the last tenant hadn't been clean. "I found Belle. That's not witchy."

"I don't want you ever using the sight again, do you hear me?" Rhoda-Rae stood, started to leave the room, and paused by her daughter, waiting for an answer. "It spooks me, sugar. I didn't raise you to be like that."

Not even a thank you for finding Belle. Too annoyed to make a promise, Mae avoided her mother's eyes. She took one of the dishcloths from the box she'd been unpacking and wet it to wipe out the next shelf before she put the dishes in it. It came away black. She should clean out the others.

With a snappish sigh, Rhoda-Rae left the room. Soon Mae could hear the radio playing country music in her mother's bedroom and the sounds of drawers squeaking open and closed.

Bewildered but intrigued by her experience with the sight, Mae tried to remember her Granma Jackson. Rhoda-Sue Outlaw Jackson had been as country as they come, a mountain widow who grew a vegetable and herb garden, raised chickens, and lived by herself in a holler outside of Boone, a long way from other people. Mae had loved her kindness and humor, and enjoyed helping in the garden. Rhoda-Sue had shared a little of her herbal medicine, but had never shared the rest of her lore and skills, apparently honoring Rhoda-Rae's wishes.

Placing bowls and plates in the cleaned cupboards, Mae felt sad that her Granma had died never teaching her, never even telling her, just because Rhoda-Rae thought this *sight* was spooky and devilish. It hadn't felt that way. It was peculiar, sure, but finding Belle had felt, if anything, like something God might want you to do, not like letting the devil into your mind.

Of course, Mama was right that if you used this sight to spy out all sorts of things that were none of your business, then it would be bad. If Granma Rhoda-Sue had done that, she'd been a little wicked. Mae unwrapped the last bowl, put it away, put the dishtowels in a drawer, and walked to her mother's room. Rhoda-Rae, singing along with the radio, danced as she hung her dresses. She had a lot of dresses. Liked to go out dancing.

"Mama?"

"What is it?"

"I won't do anything wicked with the sight. I promise."

"I should hope not, sugar. I should hope you can promise me you won't use it again at all." The phone rang, and Rhoda-Rae scurried to the kitchen to answer. "Arnie? Oh, bless your heart, I'd love to ... Rhoda-Mae, sweetheart, Arnie wants to take me out to celebrate my moving here. You're a big girl, you'll be all right by yourself for a little bit, won't you?"

"Yeah. Sure."

Belle followed Mae to her room and hid under the bed while Mae unpacked and Rhoda-Rae sang with the radio in the next room.

When Rhoda-Rae and Arnie left, calling goodbye, Mae didn't bother to see them off. She didn't care if they had a good time. She missed her father. And wished she could have unpacked her softball glove and bat he'd given her. But Rhoda-Rae had sent it all with him when she kicked him out. Every last trace of Jim Bob "Marty" Martin had gone with him. At the time, Rhoda-Rae had said it was because "men like your father should be erased from the face of the earth."

But as Mae neatly folded her running shorts and T-shirts, filling a drawer with athletic clothes, then another with jeans and sweaters, she wished she had those gifts from her father. Belle crept out from under the bed, swatting at a trailing bathrobe belt as Mae tossed the robe onto the bed. The cat's lavender-gray paw snagged Mae's mind as well as the belt. Finding Belle. *No wonder Mama got rid of his stuff. She thought I might have the sight like Granma and use it to find him, like I did with Belle's ribbon.*

Of course, six months gone and no calls, no letters, maybe Daddy was as bad as Mama said and there was no point in looking. After all, he knew where she'd been until this move.

As Mae sat on the bed, Belle crept out from under it. Mae scooped her up and lay back on the bare mattress. Belle squirmed before accepting the embrace, but her lavender-tipped tail continued to switch. Feisty thing. More her true nature not to wear that ribbon.

The mattress felt lumpy and had a dip in the middle like one big person had slept in it. This was someone else's sleep, someone else's life, in this bed. Mae closed her eyes and began to see something, the tunnel, the shape of a person in the bed. Shocked, she opened her eyes and sat up, still holding Belle. *Shoot. The sight.* She could see anything, anyone, if she wasn't careful. What had woken up in her? Was this like

puberty—you turned thirteen and it came on like your periods? She didn't want to see whoever slept the dent into this old bed.

Didn't want to see the father who left and never called or wrote. She'd probably see him doing something awful, some horrid thing Mama had kicked him out for, whatever it was, and ruin all her sweet memories of her daddy. Mama wouldn't say, wouldn't talk about him, it was so bad. Tears burned in Mae's eyes and her chest tightened.

Maybe Mama was right. *Don't use this power. Turn it off.* But it was good to have Belle back. Good to have some kind of company in this lonely, ugly place. Standing up before she broke down and cried, she tried to cut out feeling sorry for herself. She had to get the bed made up, get Belle's things taken care of, set up her litter box, get her little dishes out and give her food and water.

It was nice to have someone to take care of. "Let's get you fed, kitty."

Mae let Belle ride on her shoulder as she walked to the kitchen, then set her down to open the box that held Belle's dishes. Mae opened another box and unpacked a few cans of cat food, as well as some soup and beans. She hadn't eaten and Rhoda-Rae had left without thinking about Mae's supper. Typical. Belle wove herself around Mae's ankles as she opened a can of food and dumped part of it into a bowl, filled another bowl with water, and set them on the floor.

Listening to the familiar snicking sounds of the cat eating, Mae thought how sad it would be right now if she hadn't found Belle. She didn't want to get rid of the sight. She'd never have seen her under that deck, and Belle never would have found them again. Belle would have tried to run back to Boone and got hit by a car or eaten by a hawk.

What if she'd found the ribbon, used the sight, and seen something like that? Seen the cat die? That could have been worse than never knowing, at least hoping she was all right.

As she opened a can of soup for supper, Mae heard the radio still playing in Rhoda-Rae's room. It bothered her. She needed some peace and quiet when her mother wasn't around.

She went down the hall and looked around her mother's room to see where the radio was. Rhoda-Rae already had frilly pillows on the bed and standing on the dresser a picture of Jesus and a picture of Rhoda-Rae as a teenage cheerleader. There was so much Mae could know, if she held something and asked to *see*. And there was so much she didn't want to know, about her parents, the old tenants, the whole miserable world of adults and their problems. Like the stuff in the country song that was playing.

Turning off the radio on the bedside table, Mae realized that was what she'd have to do with the sight. Turn it off, if she could, and keep it off unless she really needed it, like needing the radio on during a hurricane. And she'd get Belle a leash to walk her like a dog, so she wouldn't have to find her again.

Chapter One

December 2009

The old red truck had sat by the edge of the field all day and the hunter still wasn't back by sunset. Mae's first thought was it served him right if he got lost. He was on her in-laws' property, and they had plenty of signs posted saying *No Hunting*. Her second thought was since this truck belonged to her ex-husband, Mack Tyler, he'd probably gotten drunk and shot himself in the foot and might need help. Back when they were newlyweds and he'd taught her to shoot and hunt, she'd caught on fast. She had to. Not just because they needed the meat, but because Mack drank too much to be safe with a gun. Lacking a sober wife wouldn't stop him now, though. Fool.

His beat-up truck leaned into the dry grass on the roadside facing the Ridley farm's fields. Mae had seen it this morning when she dropped her step-daughters off with her in-laws on the way to a job interview, and it was still there in the evening when she and Hubert brought the twins back to his parents for an hour so they could get some free time for a long run together. After her day at home with the five-year-olds and his day at the car repair shop, they needed the time outdoors and the time together.

Hubert's parents' three dogs sniff-trotted ahead as Mae and Hubert jogged down the farm's tractor lane past corn stubble in the unseasonably warm evening air.

"Reckon we should call the cops on Mack?" Hubert asked. "You know he's probably shooting on my folks' place just to piss you off."

"I don't know. Mack's probably on probation for something. Drunk driving. Bad checks. We need to get him rescued, but maybe not arrested."

"Rescued? From what?"

"His truck's been there all day. He could be passed out, and it'll get cold overnight. Or he could have shot himself or tripped and got hurt. Dogs might find him if we let 'em."

"And what if he shoots the dogs? I don't want them going after a drunk with a gun."

She considered the familiar rear view of the random assortment of ugly mutts. "You're probably right. We'll call the cops if he doesn't come out by the time we're done."

"One of us might have to go with 'em. They'd get lost out there trying to find him. I hope he comes out."

As the sun sank lower, Mae and Hubert ran two miles into the fields, staying away from the woods in case Mack was shooting, while the dogs digressed, finding smells to roll in and puddles to drink from. Then they all turned back towards the old Ridley family house. No sign of Mack emerging from the woods. Seeing the red truck still sitting as darkness crept up, Mae had a third thought about Mack.

I could find him.

After all this time not using the sight, it made her nervous to try. How would she explain to Hubert what she'd done, if it worked? He wasn't religious like Rhoda-Rae, in fact the opposite. He didn't believe in anything besides common sense and science. But what were the options? The trails were long and twisting, and somewhere in those woods was a man who might need help. If she looked, dared to use the sight again, the police would at least know where he was and what shape he was in.

"Honey, what are you doing?" Hubert watched her swing herself up into the bed of the truck.

"I think I can find him."

The feeling came on strong, like the intuition she felt in a softball game when she somehow knew she could connect with the ball. She hadn't used the sight since she'd found Belle the night she and her mother had moved to Cauwetska. There'd been no call for it, and she'd promised not to use it to be wicked and pry into people's business. But now Mack might be lost, and the night would get cold.

In the back of the pick-up, she sat holding one of Mack's once-treasured possessions, an empty beer can, and kept her mind quiet. There'd be some trace, some kind of scent-like thing about Mack on the beer can or even in the truck itself, like there had been with Belle's ribbon.

"Mae?"

"Give me a minute." This had to look crazy to Hubert, and she had no idea if she could make it make sense to him. "I'll explain this later."

Forcing herself to stop caring what Hubert thought, she concentrated on the feeling of Mack. Slowly, something came through her hand as if a line of energy linked her with her ex-husband, a heavy feeling as if indeed he were drunk. She knew Mack, regrettably, as well as she'd known the late Belle, so if she was going to be able to do this at all, it should be as quick as that search had been. But since she'd kept the sight shut off for almost thirteen years, nothing might come of this at all.

She closed her eyes, and her vision narrowed in her mind to that same tunnel she'd seen when she looked for Belle this way. The tunnel moved her and opened up to show what she was looking for. In a nest of beer cans and dry leaves behind a fallen tree covered with a few years' moss, Mack lay apparently passed out or sleeping, his rifle tipped up against the enormous dead trunk. Mae recognized the place. The trails through the woods were as familiar to her as the streets of Tylerton. In her four years married to Hubert, step-mama to his twin girls from his own early mistake of a marriage, she'd spent as much time at his parents' place as at their own home, and in the summer she ran those shady trails. This place was a long way in, but it was on one of them.

"He's near that big oak that got knocked over by Isabelle." Eastern North Carolinians were on a first-name basis with a lot of storms and dated events by them. "He's drunk. 'Course I reckon that's like saying he's breathing."

"Mae, how in hell did you come up with that?"

Mae jumped out of the truck, and she and Hubert crossed the side yard to the late-eighteenth-century farm house, dogs a few feet ahead, the old one limping, the young one chasing something no one else could see, the middle one sedate. "Come on, I used to be married to him. I know he's drunk."

"You know what I mean. The rest. How'd you figure he's near that tree?"

She doubted Hubert would accept her vision. He didn't believe in that sort of thing. "It's far enough in he'd think he won't get caught. Hiding place."

As they came to the front porch, a few sturdy December mosquitoes approached the screen door with them. Hubert smacked one against the door frame, saying they needed a frost to kill them off, then opened the door, letting the dogs in first. They scrambled with the irrational claw-slipping excitement of canines on coming home.

"So you were guessing?"

Mae hesitated. She didn't like lie to Hubert about anything. But what if she was wrong? She was sure she wasn't, but still . . . if she said she saw it and was wrong, she'd never live it down.

"Good run?" Sallie Ridley looked up over her reading glasses. She and her husband Jim, both sporting their graying hair long, wore old jeans and T-shirts, incongruous with the family antiques and the historic house. The dogs, after seeking petting, sprawled on the Oriental rug. Books and magazines lay on all surfaces not occupied by cups of tea. The couple was the picture of their typical evening at home, reading in contented chaos, while the twins lay on the rug with the dogs, drawing with crayons on the backs of pages of computer printout not quite used enough to recycle yet.

"Mack Tyler's truck is still out there. Mae says she thinks he's passed out drunk and that she knows exactly where." Hubert walked to the landline phone in the hallway between the living room and kitchen. "I'm calling the cops to go get him."

"You can't know exactly where," Jim said, frowning, and set his book down.

"I reckon not." Mae sat on the couch and looked at what the children had drawn so far. Brook's picture showed a tractor with pink tires, and Stream's, a dancing dinosaur. Mae praised the art. She could feel her in-laws' eyes on her and heard Hubert talking on the phone. "But I *feel* like I do. It's *like* I could see him."

"Uh-oh, she's turning occult on us," Sallie teased. "We've got a psychic in the family."

Jim and Sallie, more educated than most people in the area, had come back to Tylerton after college to make something of Jim's family place as an organic farm. Belief in anything mystical or spiritual, anything that couldn't be proven, was out of their range, and Mae hoped she wouldn't end up having to explain her vision to them.

"Mae," Hubert called, "you want to tell Yolanda exactly where?"

The cop would be a former classmate, Yolanda Cherry. "I'll show her."

"No, she doesn't want you going out there. She knows Mack. He's probably loaded and so is the gun."

"You know the spot. That huge oak that fell across the trail that runs toward the gully. The one y'all couldn't even cut up and move."

Jim's lean face crinkled into a grin of cheerful disbelief. "You really do think you know that, don't you?"

Mae wondered if she did know. The vision had felt so clear and right, but no one believed her. "We'll find out when they find him, I guess."

It took an hour and two cops to get Mack out of the woods and into the back of a police car. The Ridley family, including Hubert's daughters, passed the time in a board game suited to the five-year-olds.

Yolanda, a heavysset young black woman, came to the door to ask Jim and Sallie if they wanted to file a complaint about Mack's trespassing. Mae looked out the open door. Her ex slumped behind the grate separating police from trouble-makers, his thin, sharp-boned face slack with alcohol. He'd cheated on her enough in their short marriage that she could only feel a shade sorry for seeing him in that position. More, she felt sad over what he'd become.

He could have been something. But then, so could she.

"Yes," Sallie said, "we'd like to. I don't want anyone shooting on this land. Where did you find him?"

"Right where y'all said. Behind that big tree across the trail. Bunch of beer cans all over the ground. We cleaned it up for you. He still had the bag."

"Thank you. Above and beyond the call of duty." Jim looked at Mae. Raising her open hands to imply, *Don't ask me—I can't explain*, she left him with Yolanda, collected the tea cups, milk glasses, and cookie plates from the evening's gathering and took them into the kitchen. She needed a minute alone. In the farm office and all-purpose junk room, she could hear Hubert getting the girls to put away the game, calming their protests at heading home to bed.

She wished she'd said she just guessed. The Ridleys didn't believe in anything, not God, not ghosts, not a thing. They only went to church because it was good for business to look like church people. If they didn't even believe in what they heard in the Episcopal Church, where according to Rhoda-Rae folks didn't believe in much anyway, then they sure didn't believe in psychic visions.

Mae rinsed the dishes slowly, aware of the roughened surface of the old glasses, the texture of the china pattern's thin gold trim, smelling the scent of that night's dinner lingering in the air. Everything felt so down-to-earth and ordinary, that Ridley farm mix of heirloom antiques and the cheap and practical, the compostables tub on the counter waiting to be taken out to the heap, the clean thin china dishes drying in a wooden rack, the old toaster oven where most houses would have a microwave, the lanky young dog wandering in to snuffle around her feet as if she might have spilled crumbs. All of this ordinariness meant a lot to her; she loved the whole family, the way they lived and the easy way they loved each other. The last thing she wanted was to come across as crazy and superstitious.

But at least Mack was out of the woods. Mae had done the right thing by finding him. She didn't like doing it to him, but maybe getting arrested would sober him up this time.

Setting the last dish in the drying rack, Mae joined Hubert and Brook and Stream. The girls looked like their father—strong jaws and wide mouths, thick, dark hair and deep brown eyes, but they were skinny like their absconded mother rather than solid and strong like Hubert.

"We ready?" Mae asked.

"I think so." Hubert zipped Stream's light jacket. Brook wore hers with the hood up and pulled over her eyes, making eyeless faces from underneath it. They were at a delightfully silly stage. Mae yanked Brook's hood up and made a face back at her, and both laughed. Hubert glanced toward the living room. "Ready as soon as all that business out front is done."

Mae heard the front door close. "Sounds like it is."

Mae, Hubert and the twins said goodbye to Jim and Sallie in the living room and stepped out the door as the police car pulled out of the driveway, its lights turning onto the road towards Cauwetska.

"Who was that?" Stream asked, walking with Brook ahead of Mae and Hubert. The twins took turns walking sideways or backwards in some private game.

"Police arresting a trespasser," Hubert said

Brook, turning to walk backwards again, asked, "What does that mean?"

"Someone where he doesn't belong. Y'all be careful, there's a lot of roots underfoot," Hubert said. "Walk normal."

"Walk *normal*," Stream said, stretching the word out, and faced front to walk with exaggerated good posture and neat little steps. Brook joined in, walking directly behind her, giggling. "We're *normal*."

Hubert opened the back door of his car, made sure the still giggling girls got settled in their car seats safely, and he and Mae got in the front.

“So?” he asked, as he started the car. Mae knew exactly what he wanted to know.

The car rolled slowly out the end of the circular driveway, taking them towards town.

“I was right,” she said. It felt strange. Kind of scary. She had been entirely right. Seen exactly what Yolanda found.

“That is one weird coincidence.”

“It’s not a coincidence. I knew.”

“No.” Hubert glanced at her with a quick smile that faded. He sounded as if he were correcting the children’s manners or telling them that a dream wasn’t real when he said, “You *think* you knew.”

“Hubert Ridley, that is the most condescending tone you have ever taken with me. You gonna take that back?”

“No I’m not. You can’t have really seen him. You took a good guess and it was right.”

Mae felt herself steam inside. Even though she couldn’t explain what she’d done, she didn’t like having him dismiss it.

“I did *not* guess. I *knew*. I saw him.”

“What’s *condescending* mean?” Stream asked, tugging lightly on a strand of Mae’s red hair.

Mae gave Hubert a look, but his eyes stayed on the road. A herd of small, delicate-legged deer grazed fearlessly close to the slow-moving car. “It means your daddy’s acting like he thinks he’s smarter than me.”

“Is he?”

“Sometimes. Not this time. And I’m gonna find a way to prove it.” A doe raised her head. “Stop the car.”

Hubert braked, and the herd, with undulating leaps, crossed the road like a river of deer. “Don’t tell me that’s your proof, hon.”

“No—I could see the mama getting ready. But you gotta wonder how they all know what to do and when to move.” There had to be some way of natural communication animals and people had that wasn’t spooky or scary, that was actually normal. Not witchy like Mama said. Normal.

“That was pretty,” Brook sighed.

Hubert started the car moving again. “You’ve got no idea how you’re gonna prove it, do you?”

“Not much. But I’ll bet you three backrubs and five Sunday dinners that I can.”

Hubert grinned. “Honey, my back feels good already.”

She started the bet the next day. Having failed to get the job she had interviewed for, Mae had time on her hands. It would have been a dull job as a lunch shift restaurant hostess, nothing she cared about, but it would have gotten her out of the house and paid a little something. The twins were in school now and her mind was restless, staying home. This experiment was something to do.

Now that she had finally used the sight, she didn’t want to use it wrong, to see things she shouldn’t or pry into anyone’s business, so she tested it by finding and seeing people she knew at times she could be sure they were doing something ordinary. But then it was all so predictable that Hubert could explain it away.

If she held one of Hubert’s ball caps and pictured him when he was at work, she could see him all right, but where else would he be and what else would he be doing? He’d have his long hair and ponytail tucked up under some other ball cap, and he’d be working on a car, either under it, or leaning into the engine.

“It was Lorrie Smith’s old pink car and you were doing something under it.”

“And you didn’t see Lorrie drive past? See, you could’ve glanced out the window and seen her drive toward Buddy’s and not really paid it any mind, and you’d think you’re psychic.”

Holding an old family picture Jim and Sallie had given them, Mae searched for her in-laws when she knew they’d be home and working on the farm. Without telling them what she was up to, she called Sallie’s cell phone and casually asked, “What are you doing?”

“Picking the last of the collards. You want some? There’s not enough left to bother to sell.”

The work matched what she’d seen them doing in her psychic search. Easily a coincidence, according to Hubert. It was December. What else would you do but cut the last of those greens before a big freeze? Mae had to know that. Jim and Sallie had even mentioned it recently in front of Mae.

The senior Ridleys were just as predictable as Hubert. They had too much to do running a small organic farm with only a little help from their sons and their sons' wives. The only thing Hubert couldn't have explained away would have been a vision of them doing something strange, off the property. Of course, she'd seen nothing like that.

Brook and Stream, creative as they were, could be less predictable, but Mae's accuracy was not easily proven if they were at home. As soon as she'd try to see what they were doing after she experimented with a vision, they'd be doing something different, or they'd play with her and say, "Nuh-uh" no matter what she said she thought they'd been doing. And of course they didn't remember what they had done at a particular time in kindergarten that day—that was too much to ask of them. Telling time was still a challenge.

Sometimes Mae even came up wrong in a search, and saw something the way it wasn't. If she tried to have a vision without holding something the person she looked for had touched a lot, it felt more like using her imagination then. It didn't go through the tunnel. Somehow, if a vision was real, it went through a tunnel. Telling Hubert about the tunnel would hardly convince him though. She lost the bet.

Mae agreed to cook dinner five Sundays in a row and gave Hubert his three backrubs on three Saturdays—something she enjoyed a lot more than cooking.

At the conclusion of the third backrub, he rolled over and pulled her close for a kiss. "I liked that bet. Want to bet on something else?"

"Sure, if it's something where I win the backrub."

Losing a bet to Hubert wasn't so bad. She'd proven to herself what she could do, and that was enough. Maybe more than enough.

She gave up on convincing Hubert and stopped the experiments. They felt too much like what she'd promised her mother she wouldn't do—spying on people, getting into their business. Sooner or later, if she kept it up, she'd see something she shouldn't, even if it was just something embarrassing like seeing the person on the toilet or in the bathtub. She'd done all she could. It was time to put it away again before she got into trouble.

What she didn't give up on was finding a job.

Her mother knew it and called all too often with suggestions.

"Sugar, why don't you try for this? I know it's all the way in Greenville, but you could be a receptionist, couldn't you?"

"Mama, I can't drive an hour back and forth five days a week. Jim and Sallie can't keep the girls all afternoon."

The next day, another call.

"Rhoda-Mae, honey, you'd be a wonderful model, you're so tall, and look, they need models for something up in Virginia Beach."

"Mama, I weigh more than a model. My left boob weighs more than a model."

"You have very nice boobs, sugar. I hope you're not complaining about them. Some girls would be very glad to *pay* to have some like that put on, you know."

"Fine, but I can't be a model. Please stop trying to find me these jobs."

"I'm always looking anyway, it's no trouble. Arnie needs something better. God knows at least he's finally working again, but ... well, I'm not one to complain, but you know ... From that good job at the Newport News shipyard to how many years of nothing and now finally a *dollar store*?"

"At least he's got work."

"It still bothers me that he was laid off when you wanted to go to college. Seems that man could have found *something*. I swear, I have to push him to do anything."

Mae felt bad for Arnie. He'd had been depressed while out of work, and the situation in the trailer had been miserable when Mae, divorced and broke from life with Mack, had been stuck having to move back in with her mother and step-father. "I think he's just glad to be earning again."

"Well don't you *settle* like that. Look, this one's good for you." Rhoda-Rae kept pushing her job agenda. "The Health Quest Center needs a personal trainer. You're in such good shape, honey, you'd be great at that."

"I'd love it, Mama, it sounds perfect if I was qualified, but I don't have the education. I don't think working out counts as qualifying. People have to be certified, have a degree—"

"Are you just saying no to spite me? Call them. I don't mean to insult you, sugar, but they have to be desperate around here. I mean who's gonna stay to work here if they can go be a personal trainer in Greenville or Norfolk? Call them."

Mae knew she wasn't qualified, but to get her mother off her back, she agreed to call. It went better than she could have imagined—meaning her mother, for once, was right.

"Hubert, if I get a certification, they'd hire me." Mae picked the best time to bring it up, while she and Hubert worked out in their home weight room, a space meant to be a sun room or parlor in the old bungalow, if its owners lived that kind of lifestyle. They'd furnished it from yard sales, so the weight bench had duct tape on its worn vinyl and the dumbbells sat in a row along the floor without a rack. The big fitness balls served as toys for the twins as much as exercise equipment for Mae and Hubert. "Jen Baird's the fitness director now."

"She okay with you?"

"Why not?"

"Jen and I had a little something going once upon a time. Community college."

"I don't care about that. She was on the softball team with me and we got on great. She knows I was smarter than her in high school, she even said so. She wouldn't take the chance on most folks before they got certified, but she knows me. And they really need someone."

She picked up a pair of dumbbells and started a set of overhead shoulder presses. Brook and Stream grabbed their tiny pink half-pound dumbbells, another yard sale purchase, and imitated her, chatting about how they would have "muscles like Mama." Their birth mother had run off when they were infants, so Mae was the only Mama they'd ever known.

"And where are you going to get this certification?" Hubert asked, pausing at the top of a pushup.

"I looked it all up. There's a course I can take at the community education center at CVU—"

"In Norfolk? You'd pay out-of-state tuition." Hubert continued his set, up and down. Mae admired his arms as he moved. His body wasn't the only reason she'd picked him out of the crowd at community league softball, but it was one of them. The fact that he noticed and complimented her when she outran his throws helped. He didn't go out for drinks after the game, and Mae liked that, along with his smart, laid-back, off-beat parents and those little baby girls they took care of while they watched the game. She'd fallen for him slowly, not head over heels, but looking at him had definitely kick-started the process.

"It's not a college course, it's a community education course for six weeks. And it's in the evenings, so I could ride up with Patsy Johnson. She works with Mama at the hospital, and she's getting a Master's in Community Health at CVU. She and Mama already worked it out that I could ride up with her."

"What's it cost?"

Mae steeled herself. Money was always tight. "My whole tax refund and some help from Mama."

Hubert said nothing as he struggled through a few more reps to muscle failure, then sat, stretching his shoulders. "I guess we could swing that. Nice of your mama." He sounded a bit surprised that Rhoda-Rae had made the offer. "Six weeks." He stood and walked over to the row of dumbbells. "How many nights?"

This was another hard part. "Three. And I'd have one long workshop on a Saturday." She put her weights down, and Brook and Stream did the same, asking what exercise came next. She showed them, changing to a lighter weight for a bicep curl. "But I'd have a good job as soon as I passed the certification exam. The certification organization gives the exam at CVU, too, so that's my one last trip up there. Jen says the test's hard, but I'm good at taking tests. I'd have a real job, sweetie. I'd do something I care about."

"I reckon you'd ace that test, that's true." Hubert picked up one of the largest weights, leaned an arm on the bench, and drew the weight back in a bent-over row. "You really want this, don't you?"

"Like water if my ass was on fire."

"Could you work times we wouldn't need a babysitter? It wouldn't make sense to get a job and spend all the money on child care."

To her it would. They'd be the same financially, but she'd be different—using her mind, seeing adults, feeling productive. Much as she loved her step-daughters, being a mother was never something she'd planned on for a career. "Maybe. Sometimes. I'd be new. I'd ask, but I'd be low man on the totem pole for schedules."

"We need to think about it."

"Hubert, I want to work. I'm going crazy not working. It's the best thing that's ever gonna come along around here and you know that. Look at Arnie, making minimum wage at his age. If I see one more downtown go belly-up and boarded up, I'm just giving up on this place. There's nothing. I need this."

Both paused in their routines and their eyes met. She hoped he'd agree. After all, he'd gone to the tech for his automotive trade degree. He had what he wanted. He had his parents' farm, his house, his family, work he enjoyed. His life was complete. Hers wasn't.

"I don't like to hear you say you'd give up on this place. This is home."

"I meant for work. I didn't mean for life." She resumed her lifts, and so did he. Brook and Stream lost interest in their pink toy dumbbells and asked if they could go play with their toy cars.

"If you stay in your room, yes," Mae said. "Don't bring 'em in here and get underfoot."

"Yes, Mama." The girls scampered out to their room, whispering to each other and squealing.

"Good," Hubert said. "You had me worried for a second."

Each completed their sets. Mae sat on the weight bench when she had finished, still feeling the tension of the unresolved decision to be made. Seeming to take the cue, Hubert sat beside her, shoulder to shoulder, and slipped his arm around her. "Talk to me."

"You gonna be good with this even if we need to get a sitter during the summer?" she asked. "Can I do this and not have anything come back at me? I don't like feeling I have to ask you if I can have a good job, if I can do something important. I kind of want to just go do it. I know we have to think like a family, about money and everything, but if I don't get to think like *me* once in a while I won't be much good to the family."

"I'll make you a deal." He ran his hand along her back, his voice soft. She could tell by that tone and that touch, he was getting ready to make a joke, and that he was giving in to her.

"What deal?"

"If you can pass this test, I get a free personal trainer." His hand caressed her hip. "Maybe real personal."

She laughed, and turned and kissed him on the mouth. "Deal."

He held the kiss, bringing his hands up to her neck and then into her hair. Finally releasing the kiss, he drew back a little. "I want you to be happy. You know that, don't you?"

Looking into his soft brown eyes, she said, "I do. And I love you. I'm not *unhappy*, I just need to be ..." Nothing seemed to say it right. Independent. The person she could have been if she'd never married Mack, the person she could have been if Arnie hadn't been laid off and she'd gone to college. The person she'd be if she was more than a wife and mother. "I need to be me."

Rhoda-Rae, barefoot but still in nurse's scrubs, crowed with joy at the news when Mae stopped by the trailer in Cauwetska to tell her. After a hug, Rhoda-Rae sat on her thrift-shop colonial sofa, and Mae in the matching rocker. Belle's inadequate replacement, a white Persian with a pink ribbon, jumped into Mae's lap.

"Look at that. Gigi likes you. That's so sweet. Well, I guess your mama trying to find you jobs wasn't so bad after all, now was it, sugar?"

"No, it wasn't. Thanks. You set me up good."

"I always felt bad about not being able to even send you to the tech, with Arnie being out of work so long. And you are so smart, Rhoda-Mae, you are such a bright, bright girl." Lost in some inner drama, Rhoda-Rae pressed her hands together and rocked, her large green eyes misted, but Mae knew her mother's scenes too well to take the tears seriously. She'd noticed over the years of little mama-dramas that Rhoda-Rae wore too much eye make-up to let the tears spill over unless the emotion was deep and real, worth spoiling her face for. This wasn't.

Mae moved on to practical matters. "I guess you should give me Patsy's number so I can work out the car pooling."

"I've got it on a magnet on the fridge." Rhoda-Rae dropped her mood briskly, stood and went into the kitchen, returning with a scrap of paper. She handed it to Mae and resumed her seat.

Taking her cell phone from her purse, Mae programmed the number into her contacts list. "Patsy Johnson. I don't know her at all. What's she like?"

Rhoda-Rae's hand went to her cross. "I don't think she's a bad person, sugar, but ... she's not church folk. Bless her heart, she's good with the patients, good with the other nurses on the floor, but she's got some funny ideas since she's been in that graduate school. Don't listen to her if she runs on about that crazy alternative medicine course she's taking. She'll talk your ear off about that stuff if you let her."

Petting the purring white cat, Mae felt immediately intrigued by anything her mother disapproved of. "What's wrong with it?"

“My word, sugar, some of the things those professors have her reading are as witchy as your Granma. And I think Patsy halfway believes it.”