



# CHAPTER 1

*Wednesday, August 7, 2:57 AM*

**HER BONES WERE AS** delicate as Belleek china, her skin like ancient parchment stretched thin over aged, sinewy muscles formed during a life working the ranch.

The shape of her body under the blanket was like that of a grade-school girl whose height had outraced her weight. So thin. In the dark, he felt the faintly familiar warmth of arousal as he stared at her, imagining the ease with which he could wrap just one hand around her throat. How effortless it would be to squeeze the balance of her short life out of her insignificant body. But he wouldn't do that. Of course not. That would leave a mark, make her eyes bulge from her emaciated skull. Not a symptom of a woman who would die from the cancer that had eroded her from the inside out.

Instead, he would quietly slip a pillow over her face, covering those eyes that had always judged him. Her husband had warned her to be nicer to him, to mind her manners and be more hospitable. Ernif Hanson may have been known as a mountain of a man, but he knew differently. When Ernif so willingly flopped onto his belly on that rock, he proved he was nothing more than a mouse. Ernif laid down his life for his wife, a woman he couldn't control. A woman who refused to see his vision, to support the cause. His cause.

And now the all-powerful Helma Hanson lay here in the dark. Alone. Unable even to muster enough strength to roll her tiny frame over in her hospital bed. Struggling for every breath. Clinging to life instead of the pride that had caused her world to crumble only days ago.

Glancing at the glow of the numbers on her bedside clock that read 2:57 AM, he wondered if she was even aware that her husband's funeral was scheduled to take place in a short thirty-two hours. On Thursday. He wondered if she would even notice that her husband wouldn't be with her during her weekly oncologist's appointment later today. A doctor's appointment that Ernif had been so adamant about attending.

No matter—now, after thirteen long years of careful planning, the date had come. He would finally be vindicated, knowing that the Hansons, the final obstacle, would be extinguished as of today. August 7. The day he had originally intended for Ernif's glorious demise.

The bed next to Helma's was empty. Lucky him.

He poked his head around the door and glanced down the dimly lit hall to make sure the night nurse was nowhere to be seen. He strained to hear her heavy footfalls nearby in case she had varied from her scheduled rounds. But he saw nothing, heard nothing. And he knew the night nurse was probably leaning back in that soft easy chair at her desk, the volume on the television turned low, her head lolling forward with her chins resting on her massive chest as she snoozed.

He stepped quietly over to the edge of Helma's bed. Anchoring his resolve to the stillness, he reached over toward the empty bed and hooked his fingers around a pillow. Afraid the sound of his awkward movements would wake her, he stood motionless above her for a moment before slowly positioning the pillow over her face.

He hesitated briefly, wondering if he'd waited long enough, if Helma was indeed too weak to fight back. A sadness washed over him as he wondered if he'd waited too long, if Helma was so far gone she wouldn't even be aware of what was about to happen. He longed for her to be aware. He *needed* for her to be aware. He had something to tell her.

There was only one way to find out.



Just as he placed the pillow down on her thin nose and small mouth, he cooed, "Helma."

Her eyes snapped open, too late to let out a scream.

"You know what I told him, Helma? The last words Ernif ever heard?"

He pressed the pillow down hard on her face, feeling her struggle against him.

"There was a crooked man who walked a crooked mile. He found a crooked sixpence against a crooked stile."

With images from Sunday of Ernif's final moments of life on this earth flashing in his mind, the strength in him surged, as did the pure joy from feeling Helma's fight intensify beneath him.

It was not too late after all.

"He bought a crooked cat, which caught a crooked mouse," he said, pressing his hands against the pillow.

He was yet again experiencing the thrill. And the nursery rhyme seemed to further infuriate Helma Hanson.

She kicked and flailed, her deathbed creaking and groaning. Afraid the noise might attract the nurse's attention, he threw himself against her, a bony knee connecting with his ribs, his grip loosening on the pillow. A muffled croak sounded in the stillness, and he pushed harder on the pillow, feeling her tiny frame buck against him, her brittle fingers clawing at his hands.

"And they all lived together . . ."

He could no longer see her eyes, but he imagined they were widening with the realization that her life was nearly over. Those eyes. The piercing accusation they had made the instant before he covered them with the pillow. It was anger he saw in those wide eyes, not fright as he expected. Her eyes bore through him, her will strong and resilient.

Surprised by her resistance, he leaned into her ear. "In a crooked. Little. House."

He almost missed the warning. The hurried steps down the hall were not heavy, not those of the night nurse, Hester Moore. Instead, they sounded like army boots, quick and stealthy. He glanced over his shoulder at the fish-eye mirror hung over the door and saw a form racing down the hall toward the room. Toward him. It was most certainly not Nurse Hester, whose six-foot, 250-pound frame would have been unmistakable, even in

the dim glow of orange. This person was not much more than five feet, weighing a fraction of Hester. And from her silhouette she appeared to be carrying a weapon and wearing a hedgehog as a helmet. He blinked, thinking it was he who had been deprived of oxygen, who was now delusional and conjuring up impish apparitions. But the figure kept coming, quickly and surely toward him.

Although Helma's bucking had slowed, her fingernails retracting from his wrists, he found himself out of time. He released his grip and pushed himself off the bed. He tossed the pillow aside and darted quickly for the door, ducking behind it just as the waif reached Helma's room.

"Helma?" a woman's voice whispered in the dark.

At first Helma lay still, giving no answer. He smiled in the shadows, thrilled to mark August 7th indelibly as his fondest memory to date.

That is, until Helma gasped. She choked to catch the breath he had stolen from her. The tiny figure rushed to the old woman's bedside and cradled her like a child against her chest, cooing and comforting the very-much-alive Helma Hanson.

"Are you okay? Helma?"

As Helma hacked and coughed, he studied the small woman, trying to make out details in the stingy light that touched her face. She was beautiful in an unreal way, like a fairy, her eyes disproportionately large, set within a heart-shaped face. But something about the way she carried herself reminded him more of a leprechaun, quicker and stronger than her beauty and size would otherwise suggest. She handled and manipulated Helma Hanson effortlessly, as if the imp were an ant able to carry ten or even fifty times her weight. Freakishly strong, and with hair that was every color of the rainbow. Spikes of bright blue, lemon yellow, cherry red, and the greenest green he had ever seen. Leprechaun green.

Who *was* this woman?

She rocked Helma in her arms until the sputtering and spewing turned to wheezing and whispering, harsh and hurried. He couldn't make out what Helma was saying to her through the shushing noise the fairy creature was making. He stood graveyard still, fixated as if under the woman's spell, wondering why he had never heard of this nurse before now. And he worried that Hester wouldn't be far behind, eager to snap on all the lights,

his discovery inevitable. He began to work a plan out in his head, one that involved force, if necessary, and one that required calmness, patience, and careful consideration of timing that would allow him to disappear like a shadow in the night should Hester pad into the room.

Just as he was cursing himself for not considering that Hester may be training a new nurse, the woman added, "I came as soon as I got the call about Ernif. I am so, so sorry, Helma. I'm here now. Shh. I'm here."

He stiffened, confused by the proclamation, watching as she stroked the old woman's twiggy back and shoulder blades. Ernif and Helma were childless; he had made sure of that. Checked the records thoroughly and accumulated information from several sources. They had no nieces, no nephews. No one. So who the hell was this?

He found the simple act of swallowing difficult, an unfamiliar feeling creeping up his spine. He stood watching, still as the night, and studied her, introspection clouding his thoughts. It didn't take him long to finger the cause for his symptoms. It was doubt. And the mischief-maker who came out of nowhere to take up a bedside vigil by Helma Hanson was the deliveryman. Or woman. Women were always trouble, his father used to say. Father was always right.

His ruminations abruptly scattered as the imp shouted, "Nurse!"

His mind froze as he went rigid behind the door. Hester Moore was waddling down the hall, her footsteps so heavy and hurried he could feel the vibrations through the soles of his sensitive feet. He braced for action. Three women. Should he take out Hester first, then the waif, or vice versa? Either would be formidable, and both would be nearly impossible to take down easily. Just as he landed on a plan, Hester snapped on the light and bustled toward the bed, both she and the imp with their backs to the door.

Again his plans changed. He opted for stealth and slipped from behind the door, unseen, and down the hall.

Not, however, before he heard Helma cry out the imp's name, "Elizabeth!"