

# CHAPTER ONE

The girl ran.

She ran with everything she had in her, her thin arms pumping and her bare feet slapping the dirt. The long grass sliced at her skin, each piece a tiny razor blade. It hurt. Everything hurt. But if she was caught again, it would be so much worse.

*Get to the road. Get to the road. Just get to the road.*

Already her strength was flagging, her body failing her despite the desperation driving her on. She couldn't stop. She couldn't rest. She couldn't do anything but run.

The ground changed beneath her feet, and it took her three full strides before she realized it. She turned a full circle, trying to get her bearings. It was so hard to think past the blood pounding in her head and the dozen sharp pains that screamed to make themselves known now that she'd stopped moving. *Maybe I could just . . .*

*No.*

She had to get to Clear Springs.

The irony there wasn't lost on her, even in her current state. All she'd ever wanted was to get out of that little hellhole of a town, and here she was, putting everything she had into doing the exact opposite. She frowned, trying to see farther down the road. It shouldn't be so difficult to

figure out which way to go. She'd spent years on these little two-lane roads that crisscrossed their way through this part of Montana.

If it were day . . .

If she weren't so tired . . .

If, if, if.

Just *move*. She took a deep breath and put one foot in front of the other, picking a direction at random. The words became a mantra, a promise. *Just get back to town. Just get back to town, and this will all be over.*

She wasn't sure how long she'd walked before headlights cut through the darkness, blinding her. The girl went to her knees without having any intention of doing so. She lifted a shaking hand to shield her eyes. "Please."

The driver's side door opened, and footsteps padded over the asphalt. She squinted against the light, her heart skipping a beat at the familiar profile. "No . . ." *I got away. I was so sure I got away.* Behind the figure, she could make out the faint, familiar lights of Clear Springs. *So close.* It might as well have been the moon. She had the same likelihood of reaching it.

She tried to get to her feet, but her body failed her once again, her legs giving out. She barely caught herself before she face-planted. "Please. I'll do whatever you want. Just please don't hurt me anymore."

A hand touched her head, all the more horrifying because of its gentleness. "You know I can't make that promise."

The girl had thought herself beyond tears, but that moment proved her wrong. She stared at her scraped and bloodied knuckles, a horrible knowledge settling in her chest. There would be no

college, no life beyond the little town that had felt like a prison for most of her life, no future family where she could learn from the mistakes her parents had made.

Nothing.

There was nothing but the hand on her head and the pain lying in wait for her.

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“You have to do something.”

Zach Owens had heard variations of that same demand ever since he moved back to Clear Springs and took a job as a deputy nine years ago. Now, as sheriff, he heard them a whole hell of a lot more often.

This one was different.

He sat forward and pinned both Robert and Julie Smith with a look. “You know I’ve been doing everything I can.” For three days he’d been working his ass off to figure out where the hell their daughter had wandered off to. They didn’t get missing persons a whole lot around here—if someone went missing, it was because they didn’t want to be found. He still wasn’t convinced Neveah Smith wasn’t in that category.

“This isn’t like the other times.” Tears welled in Julie’s eyes. “It’s that Martha Collins. She’s got her hooks into my girl, and she’s lured her out to that damned cesspool of sin.”

“Julie, language.”

Zach sighed. It was just like Robert Smith to call his wife out on her language when their daughter might or might not be missing. The Smiths were good people. They made a point to get to church every Sunday and do all sorts of community outreach, even if they were a little zealous about some of that shit. Julie Smith had made it her personal mission to see the cult up on that hill brought down in flames.

But it wasn't Zach's job to tell her that Martha Collins was too smart to start snatching teenagers off the street.

"The folks up at Elysia aren't responsible for everything that goes sideways in Clear Springs." In all the time he'd been back in town, he couldn't remember a single thing they'd done that would shine the light of the law on themselves. Groups like that didn't make it far if they weren't able to keep their noses clean.

"Maybe not before. This is different."

She kept saying that. Zach knew her well enough to know she wasn't going to let this go. The woman might be sweet as pie, but she was like a terrier with a bone when she got her back up. Having her only daughter up and disappear was more than enough to do that.

The problem was that Neveah was a little troublemaker. She liked to worry her parents, and she loved getting herself into questionable situations. It would be just like her to disappear for a few days and then waltz back into town with a shit-eating grin and some boy in tow.

Robert wrapped an arm around his wife's thin shoulders and gave Zach a significant look. "I'm sure she'll show up before too long, but could you go talk to those freaks? It'll make Julie feel better."

The very last thing he wanted to do was go out to that commune and sniff around. He wouldn't find anything they didn't want him to find, which made the whole endeavor pointless. Martha and her people would smile and chat him up, and he'd walk away empty-handed. "I can do that, but you know as well as I do that they aren't likely to give me anything useful."

He showed the Smiths out, making more promises to go out to the commune that very morning. If it'd make them feel better, he'd do what he had to do.

"Trouble?"

He glanced over at Henry. The man had been working at the Clear Springs station since Zach was a teenager, but when the sheriff position opened up, old Henry wanted nothing to do with it. He liked being a senior deputy, and he wasn't interested in adding more responsibility to his plate with retirement only a few short years away.

Zach turned to face the west. He couldn't see Elysia from here, but he could pinpoint its exact location. Some days it felt like that damn cult cast a shadow long enough to encompass the entire town.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "The Smith girl might be missing."

"I'll bet she is. Probably missing right up to Augusta, or even over to Great Falls. The girl gets around."

He shot Henry a look. It didn't matter what either of them thought of Neveah Smith. What mattered was giving her parents some peace of mind until she found her way back into town. "They think Martha Collins has something to do with it."

"That Julie Smith." Henry snorted. "The Winchesters had a whole batch of bread turn up unexpectedly stale last week, and who do you think Julie thought was the cause? Martha Collins. How she thought the woman managed that is beyond me, but Julie ain't exactly a neutral party, you know?"

"I know." Hadn't he been thinking the same thing? "We still have to check it out."

"By all means." Henry grabbed the keys from the stand. "I'll drive."

That was just fine with Zach. It'd give him some time to think. He headed for the cruiser and settled into the passenger seat. As much as he didn't want to discount the Smiths' fear, he couldn't help thinking that Henry was right—Neveah Smith would turn up sooner or later, and it wouldn't have had a damn thing to do with Elysia.

The trip took a good thirty minutes, but only because the roads were hardly anything to write home about. The narrow asphalt lane was full of potholes and uneven grooves, which made going more than thirty miles an hour a health hazard. There was no road directly into Elysia from the main highway—something he suspected was intentional.

For someone to get to the commune, they had to *really* want to.

Terrain was tricky out here, and distances didn't always match up the way one expected them to. That was why the hill the main settlement of Elysia was on seemed to rise out of nowhere. He knew that, but it didn't stop some instinct inside him insisting that he needed to sit up and pay attention.

Everything about that damn cult was smoke and mirrors, but he'd be the first to admit how dangerously compelling both Martha and her people could be. He'd listened in on their talks a time or two when he was young and had a chip on his shoulder a mile wide, and the whole back-to-nature way of life appealed to him. If that's *all* this place was, he wouldn't have a problem with it.

But it wasn't.

They wanted obedience as much as they wanted anything—more, in fact—and when he couldn't get anyone to give him a straight answer about their belief system or what living on the commune entailed, he'd gone with his next best choice and enlisted in the Marines.

It had been the best decision he'd ever made.

Or that's what he comforted himself with on the nights the nightmares had him by the throat.

Henry pulled to a stop about a hundred yards from the gates of Elysia. They were framed by the eight-foot whitewashed fence that circled the main buildings, a direct contrast with the rest of the fencing that wound around the rest of the property, which was closer to something one would find on a cattle ranch. It marked the territory, but if someone was determined, it'd be easy enough

to slip through. Doing so was something of a rite of passage with Clear Springs teenagers these days, and the Elysians seemed to tolerate it well enough that they only called him when one of the kids ventured too close to their homestead itself.

Today the giant gates were closed, giving him a full view of their intricate design. The damn things were thick wood, a good ten feet tall and carved with a design he couldn't quite make out at this distance. He knew what it was, though—a scene of a woman being dragged through a giant crack in the ground, a second woman on the surface reaching for her, both their expressions of fear and determination. Not exactly feel-good stuff.

He got out of the cruiser and eyed the two men standing before the gates. The older man held a rifle in his hands with an ease that said he knew how to use it, and the other one had a bright smile on his face that was as false as everything else about this place. Zach lifted a hand. “Abram. Joseph.”

Joseph moved forward, his smile not so much as flickering. Abram stayed back, which was just fine with Zach. There was something just *off* about Martha's right-hand man. Just being within eyesight of him had instincts Zach thought were long dormant perking up and taking notice.

“Howdy, Sheriff. What can we do for you this afternoon?”

He'd never liked Joseph. The man was as pretty as he was false, and he had a nasty habit of whisking through Clear Springs and paying too much attention to the married women for anyone's peace of mind. As far as Zach knew, no one had crossed any lines there—and even if they had, it was hardly his jurisdiction to police cheating spouses—but it didn't sit well with him. He'd always thought the only reason Martha kept the little shit around was because he could have passed for an Abercrombie model, right down to the short blond hair and chiseled jawline. But then, that might be Zach's personal dislike for the man showing through.

He nodded at the gates. "We'd like to speak with Martha."

"Sorry, but that's not possible." Joseph's brown eyes flicked to the police cruiser behind him and then back, the only part of him he didn't bother to lie with. He might appear relaxed and easygoing, but he'd categorized everything about the situation the second Zach pulled up. "She's deep in meditation."

Meditation, his ass. He crossed his arms over his chest. "It's important."

"Not going to happen." Joseph's smile widened. "But I'm more than happy to deal with whatever brought you all the way out here. As a courtesy in the name of cooperation, of course."

*Of course.*

Zach exchanged a look with Henry. They were hiding something. That wasn't new, but usually Martha and her inner circle fell over themselves to let him wander around in an effort to prove that they weren't, in fact, a cult. He couldn't remember the last time the gates were closed to him. He was pretty sure they never had been.

*Holy hell, what if Julie is right?*

He leaned against the cruiser, putting every effort into appearing relaxed and unconcerned. "You know Neveah Smith?"

Joseph shrugged. "Sure. She's been up a few times."

He blinked. He hadn't expected the man to admit it.

And, damn it, Joseph knew it. He laughed. "There's nothing wrong with letting the kid attend a few services. If she's not supposed to be here, take that up with her and her parents. We haven't violated any rules."

They knew something. He was sure of it. There was no other reason for them to close him and Henry out. "You seen her around lately?"

“Not in a couple weeks.” Joseph flashed a grin again. “Apparently we weren’t exciting enough for her tastes. She was expecting crazy orgies and drugged-out parties.” Joseph leaned in and held a hand to the side of his mouth. “We don’t start that sort of thing until they turn eighteen.”

He was fucking with Zach.

Zach knew it, but it didn’t stop his blood pressure from rising. He’d rather deal with just about anyone other than Joseph, if only because the idiot liked to make a joke of everything.

This was serious. Or it would be if the girl was actually missing.

But he wasn’t getting anything from the Elysians today. He pushed off the cruiser. “You call me if she comes around.”

“You have no jurisdiction here.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” As much as some of them liked to pretend otherwise, they weren’t an independent state. As far as he knew, Martha didn’t even preach that sort of nonsense. But the Elysians were an insular sort, and they didn’t take too kindly to what they viewed as civilians telling them how to live their lives.

*Too damn bad.* He didn’t make a habit of meddling in their business as long as they didn’t break any laws, but that didn’t mean he’d look the other way if they *did*.

Zach headed for the passenger seat. “Don’t cross me, Joseph. If she shows up, I expect a call.”

“I’m scared. Really, I am.” Joseph pointed at himself. “This is me, shaking in my boots.”

There was a time when Zach used to solve his problems with his fists. He’d never thought he’d miss it until this moment. Punching in that smug bastard’s face sounded brilliant—except he was an officer of the law, and sheriffs weren’t allowed to go around assaulting people who made them angry. “See you around.”

“Sooner than you think.”

Once they were back in the cruiser, Henry backed away, but Zach kept his gaze on the two men the entire time. “They’re up to something.”

“Seems like it.”

But what? On the grand scale of things, Elysia might irritate the hell out of him, but they hadn’t set a foot outside the law since they’d bought the hundred acres out here. And if one of Martha’s flock stepped out of line . . .

He shook his head. When he’d been maybe sixteen, he remembered her hauling in her own daughter to the police station to report that the kid had stolen a violin. That was the only time she’d ever been in the station, and the only time she’d asked for outside help. She’d always gone above and beyond the call of duty to present the facade that Elysia was really just a harmless commune.

For her to refuse to see him and close the gates . . .

Yeah, something was up.

The radio crackled, Chase Moudy’s voice cutting through the cruiser. “Zach? Zach, where the hell are you?”

He exchanged a baffled look with Henry. *What now?* The other deputy sounded like he’d seen a ghost. Zach picked up the radio. “I’m here.”

“You gotta get here, and fast. There’s . . .” Chase’s voice broke. “There’s a dead body out on the Parkinsons’ property. It’s a girl, man.”

*Neveah.*