

CHAPTER 1

I WAS THREE AND A HALF the first time my dad told me we had to get rid of my mother. On that bitter cold morning in February, he jumped up from the table after eating his usual eggs, grits, and bacon and threw on his coat. Lonnie, Sam, and I had finished our cornflakes long before he sat down.

“Thelma Lou, get David ready,” he told my mother. His deep voice filled our tiny house. “He and I are going for a ride.”

Mom lurched into the living room with that twitchy look she got whenever Dad asked her to do something. I sat cross-legged on the floor watching *The Little Rascals* as she jerked back and forth in front of me like a broken wind-up toy. “Get ready, David!” she shrieked.

My younger brother, Sam, still in diapers, pushed his Tonka truck across the worn carpet and giggled when Mom stumbled over his toys. Our cat, Midnight, leapt out of her way and glided to safety under a chair. As usual, Lonnie, then seven, was camped out in her room with the door closed, listening to her radio and ignoring the rest of us.

Mom always acted nervous, like something bad was going to happen. It got worse when Dad was around. Before she could touch me with her clammy hands, I ran to the closet, put on my jacket and boots, and bolted out the door.

On the front porch, I hung close to the house and shivered while Dad scraped snow and ice off our Nash Rambler, or what I called the Green Bomber. I had a nickname for everything. White smoke poured from the

exhaust and filled the air. I wished Dad would hurry up, but I would never tell him that. Behind him, the giant Navajo Compressor Station where he worked rose into the sky. Dad told me millions of pounds of natural gas flowed through the huge pipelines. They were connected to turbine engines that rumbled so loud I thought they would shake apart.

A fence surrounded the station and the twenty houses belonging to El Paso Natural Gas workers and their families. Everybody called the company EPNG for short. Our only other neighbors were rattlesnakes, stray cattle, sheep, coyotes, jackrabbits, and roadrunners. They all disappeared when it got cold. Dad said we lived on the Navajo Indian Reservation, but because we were Cherokees, we didn't have to follow any of the damn Anglo rules.

The snow blew hard, stinging my face, and I hopped around to stay warm. Dad carved out two openings on the frozen windshield, then snapped ice off the handle on the passenger door and signaled me to get in. "It's colder than a well-digger's ass, so move it," he shouted, hustling to the driver's side of the car. "We're gonna have some fun."

Dad knocked the snow from his boots and slid onto the seat. His burly arms and barrel chest seemed even more massive in his heavy work coat, the one with the familiar red-and-yellow EPNG logo. His head almost touched the ceiling.

"Let's go!" He stomped on the gas pedal and the Green Bomber sped out into the snowy Arizona desert. Just as I got up on my knees to see where we were going, he hit the brakes and jerked the steering wheel to the side, throwing me against the door, like the whirlybird ride at the Navajo fair.

"See— isn't this fun, boy?"

He stepped on the gas and we jolted forward. Seconds later, he slammed on the brakes again. I bounced up to the dashboard and underneath it, banging my head on the hard metal. Dad laughed. "Hey, don't break the glove compartment," he said. "We can't afford a new one."

The next time, I flipped upside down, and Dad laughed some more. I crawled back onto the seat and took another nosedive when the car stopped and spun again.

"You sure as hell better be tough." He wagged his finger at me. "I hate sissies. You're scrawny and you can't hear worth a damn, but you're a determined little son of a bitch. Remember, you're a Crow, by God, a Cherokee Indian of superior intelligence and courage."

Dad straightened the wheel but didn't slow down. The wipers screeched against the icy windshield as swirls of snow whipped around us. "Now it's time for a real talk," he said. "I have something important to say, and you need to promise not to tell anyone." He reached over and squeezed my arm with his gigantic hand. "Got it?"

"I promise," I blurted through nervous laughter. I grabbed the door handle to keep from falling, afraid it would turn and I'd fly out into the cold.

"We need to get rid of your mother," Dad said, his voice low and sharp. "She's no goddamn good, and if you grow up with her, you'll become just as loony as she is. She's worthless and destructive, like her whole family. She'll ruin you. Ruin us all. You know we can't keep her around, don't you, boy?"

No, but I nodded anyway. He said bad things about Mom all the time, that she was a crazy, stupid, whiny bitch just like her mother and the other freeloading assholes in the Dalton family.

But he wouldn't really get rid of her, would he? He yelled at her to go away and not come back, and sometimes he slapped her hard. Even then, she never left the EPNG compound unless Dad drove her to town. And usually things returned to normal after dinner. I could hear them laughing in their bedroom at night.

I wrapped both hands around the door handle and studied Dad's face. Below his thick, wavy black hair, a Y-shaped vein popped out on his forehead, and his large blue eyes bulged like they might explode. His mouth stretched tight. He always looked scary like that when he was angry.

Would he leave Mom at the trading post? Or on the side of the road next to the Navajo drunks? Maybe he'd put her on a bus and send her back to her mother like he threatened so many times. But Dad said her whore of a mother didn't want her. Neither did her two shiftless, alcoholic, mooching brothers. And Granddaddy Dalton could barely take care of himself.

The only time Mom went anywhere alone was when she borrowed a cup of sugar from one of the ladies in the compound—though she always dumped it down the sink when she got home. Once in a while, she dragged me with her, and I listened to her tell them that her mother was cruel and her brothers beat her up. Even her daddy couldn't save her. Clutching the ladies' hands, she would put her face close to theirs and say her life was no better now, because Dad hit her and her kids didn't behave. The women pulled away, handed Mom the sugar, and closed the door as fast as they could.

Poor Mom. She'd lie on the couch most of the day and call to Lonnie and me to do things for her. "I need help," she'd say. "I can't do this by myself." My sister would roll her eyes. Mom never had energy for anything. Sometimes she stayed in her nightgown and didn't get dressed until just before Dad got home—or not at all.

The other moms in the neighborhood weren't like that. They smiled and laughed. They packed lunches for their kids and talked to them while they waited at the bus stop. When the bus came, the moms hugged them and told them to have a good day, and then they turned around and walked back to their houses, full of energy, their arms swinging.

Not my mom.

Lonnie packed her own lunch, got her homework ready, and fixed her own breakfast. Our mom went from the bed to the couch. I felt sorry for her, but her whiny, squeaky voice made my head hurt.

If she disappeared, who would be our mom? That nasty, old Mrs. Bell from next door?

Dad slammed on the brakes and returned to spinning the car in circles. The tires crunched across the icy ground. His face was loose and relaxed again, like it was when he joked with the guys from work. My hands were tired and sweaty.

"Having fun, boy?" He laughed.

Maybe he didn't mean what he said. Maybe he wouldn't leave Mom so she couldn't find her way back home.

But he sure seemed serious about it.

DAD PROBABLY TOLD LONNIE THE SECRET TOO. My sister knew everything about our family, though she never talked about Mom other than to say she was nuts.

Lonnie was thin like Mom and had her reddish-blond hair and green eyes, but they acted nothing alike. My sister had a happy, bright face and a spring in her step. She played the piano, read constantly, and got straight As. Everyone liked her. Lonnie was full of life—and Mom flopped around like a deflated balloon.

Most mornings after Dad left for work, I ran through the house and Mom would tell me to stop yelling like a banshee. I'd kick my rubber ball,

swing my bat, and throw baseballs into lamps, pictures, and the lazy Susan on the living room coffee table. Mom chased after me, trying to grab a piece of my shirt or pants, but I was too fast for her. Once I made a big enough mess, she would let me go outside.

One morning she made me stay in because it was raining. To change her mind, I climbed on top of the washer and tossed in a baseball bat during the spin cycle. Mom came running right away, but the cylinder was already dented so bad it had to be repaired. Dad spanked me really hard for that dumbass stunt, as he called it. The marks stayed on my legs a long time.

On another rainy day, I put Midnight in the dryer after he came in soaked. He screeched like mad. When Lonnie got him out, he tore through the living room and flew onto the venetian blinds, clawing them off the windows. As soon as someone opened the door, he took off.

Lonnie slapped my face and called me a wild animal. She said all the neighbors called me that too. But I just wanted to dry him off. I didn't mean to scare him.

Dad told Mom he hoped I'd run away and join the circus.

On the mornings Mom would let me out of the house, I'd race over to the compressor station looking to break a few rules. Dad told me to get away with whatever I could. "But don't make anyone important mad at you," he said. "If you do, I'll have to punish you hard."

I would carry a small wrench from his toolbox, making believe he forgot it and needed me to bring it to him. When I crawled up the metal steps and banged the wrench on the compressor building's giant steel door, one of the workers would open it and smile down at me. Then he would turn and cup his hands around his mouth. "Go get Thurston," he'd yell above the noise.

All the guys laughed. Kids weren't allowed to go inside where the big engines lived, so Dad pretended to swat my butt. Sometimes while I was there, Dad gathered his men around to tell them stories about me. "No other boy would have the gumption to come here and knock on the door." He'd rub my head and smile. "David is the only one who would pull that kind of stunt."

Before sending me home, Dad would take the wrench from me and later return it to the same spot in his toolbox. The men would say, "See you tomorrow, sport."

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WHEN I TURNED FOUR THAT SUMMER, Dad started putting me through drills before he went to work. I needed to be strong and brave like our Cherokee ancestors, he said. He'd toss me into the air and hold out his hands to catch me, but then often pull them away, letting me drop to the ground. My body was covered with scrapes and bruises.

Dad would laugh. "I'm teaching you to be on guard, boy. I might not always be there to protect you."

He yelled at me when I got scared, telling me not to watch his hands. "Put your arms out to brace the fall," he said. "Protect yourself. Do I have to tell you everything? Besides, a little bump on your head won't hurt anything."

Other days, Dad tied me to the pine tree in our front yard. He'd wrap a thick, scratchy rope around my chest and ankles and tug on it hard to make a tight knot.

"Try to get out of that, you clever little bastard." He would turn and walk away.

"Dad, please untie me . . . please . . . please."

"Not a chance. I don't want you to be afraid of anything—except me," he'd say over his shoulder.

I would squirm and squirm, but that never worked. The rope burned my skin and pulled snug like a Chinese finger trap. Soon my body started shaking, and I struggled to breathe. The tears came next, dropping on the rope. I didn't feel like a brave Cherokee.

If someone walked by, I'd yell out, "Hey! I tied myself to a tree by accident. Can you help me?" I forced out a laugh, but it sounded strange, kind of ragged and uneven.

Often Mr. Bell came over and untied the rope. "I know your dad did this," he said softly. "And what he's doing is wrong."

If Mr. Bell didn't set me free, Mom would scurry from the house and do it as soon as the Rambler was out of sight.