



THE
RELUCTANT
VISIONARY

DATTA GROOVER

Award-winning author of *Different*

Prologue

Center Point, Texas

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Jessica Atwood groaned and buried her head under the pillow when Kat shouted something from the other end of the farmhouse. She couldn't quite make out her mother's words, but they probably wouldn't have made sense anyway. They never did during her so-called visions. Half a minute of silence passed before Kat yelled again, something about popcorn.

"Dammit!" Jess threw off her covers, climbed out of bed, and pulled on her worn Dallas Cowboys bathrobe. Was living in a normal household too much to ask?

The teasing she endured at Center Point High—especially when one of her mother's visions didn't come to pass—irritated her profoundly. What she hated most was the Little Orphan Annie nickname she hadn't been able to shake since middle school. The rumor floating around school was that she'd been adopted. How else could a person of color have two white parents? Her half-brother Kevin being white as well gave the rumor momentum. Plus, she had the perfect corkscrew curls for the Orphan Annie role—or so the bullies said. There were seventy-three more days until graduation, and she could hardly wait.

Already frustrated by her mother's yelling, Jess swore under her breath when a floorboard creaked as she stepped out of her room. She trudged down the hall, its unfinished knotty pine walls lit by the glow of the armadillo-shaped night-light her stepfather Dave installed after she had a few late-night collisions with door frames.

She arrived at her parents' bedroom just as Kat mumbled something about a family getting out in time. Her mother looked like a wild woman, sitting up in bed with scattered blonde hair covering half her face. Dave had already switched on his Texas flag bedside lamp, and he raised his eyebrows at Jess as she walked in.

"Are we doin' this again?" she asked, feeling a pang of sympathy for him. He tolerated more than anyone could reasonably expect, and as far as stepfathers went, he wasn't half bad.

"Don't reckon we have much choice, though you coulda stayed in bed. Kevin is sleepin' right through this."

"Your son always sleeps through these episodes," Jess said. "I don't know how he does it, but—"

"They're all up there," Kat interrupted, staring at the ceiling.

Jess sighed loudly. "Here we go again."

Kat mumbled something about a store with smoking wires. No point in asking what she meant. The drill was to wait until she was ready. That could mean three minutes—or the better part of an hour.

“Dave, honey, are you awake?” Kat finally asked.

Jess face-palmed herself. Who did her mother think had switched on the light? Gremlins?

Kat told her husband to call Scott Polk, who owned the hardware store downtown. She’d dreamt it was on fire.

Dave yawned. “I’ll do it in the mornin’. We all need our sleep. Kale harvest starts Thursday, and we’re already behind schedule. Besides, your last three visions didn’t even pan out. We might be wakin’ him for nothin’.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Jess said, hoping the episode would end before things got too crazy for a change.

“*No!*” Kat shouted, startling them both. “Call him now.”

Dave glanced at his bedside clock and shook his head. “It’s after midnight. You know how Polk is.”

“Dave Atwood, you call him or I will. You know he sees you as the man of the house. If you think he’d be grumpy with you callin’ him this time of night, imagine how he’d be if I called.”

He grudgingly picked up his cell phone and searched for Polk’s number. “You sure about this?”

Jess dreaded the thought of yet another story about her mother’s visions making the rounds. What sane person would wake their neighbor in the middle of the night to tell them about some crazy dream? “Yeah, Mama. If there’s a fire, shouldn’t we call 911 instead? You could block your number and call anonymously.”

“That’s not how I envisioned it, and they’d ask if I actually saw the fire, which I didn’t. Besides, you can’t block your number on a 911 call anyway. They’d still know it was us.” Kat nodded at Dave’s phone. “It won’t work any other way. Please, I’m sure this time.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he tapped the call button and switched to speaker mode.

A sleepy Scott Polk picked up on the fourth ring. “This better be good.”

“Hey, Scott, Dave Atwood from Heart of Texas Farm. Sorry for callin’ so late, but—”

“It ain’t late. It’s early. Way too early to be talkin’ on the phone, that’s for damn sure.”

“I know it’s not the best time, and I hate to bother you—”

“Then why *are* you botherin’ me?”

“Well . . .”

“Well, *what?*” Polk snapped.

Kat took that as her cue. “Tell him his store is on fire.”

Polk heard her. “The hell you carryin’ on about? Look, I don’t know if y’all are drunk or just playin’ some cute little prank, but I’ve got the best remote monitorin’ system money can buy, and there’s no report of smoke or fire. I’m lookin’ at the green ‘all clear’ symbol right now. Glad y’all think this is funny, but I’m goin’ back to sleep. Don’t bother me again.”

“Mr. Polk,” Kat said, “this is no joke. I’ve seen it.”

“What do you mean, you’ve *seen* it?” He undoubtedly understood exactly what Kat meant. Probably half of Kerr County knew about her visions.

“That family upstairs won’t have a chance,” Kat said, “unless you call the fire department now.”

“You listen here, ma’am. I mean no disrespect, but that is crazy talk. There ain’t one livin’ bein’ upstairs or anywhere else in that buildin’ except maybe a few mice. Our system’s got smoke detectors, heat detectors, motion detectors, broken water pipe detectors . . . we’ve got more detectors than you can shake a stick at, all reportin’ back to me in real time. If anythin’ did happen, it’d wake me right up. So y’all just go back to whatever you were doin’ before you rang—or don’t—but do not even think about callin’ here in the middle of the night again.”

Jess heard Polk’s wife in the background ask what was happening.

“Nothin’, dear, it’s just them organic folks sayin’ there’s a fire at the store when there ain’t.”

Polk’s wife said something else that Jess couldn’t quite make out.

“Of course I’m sure,” Polk responded. “They’re just barkin’ up the wrong tree.” He came back to the phone with even more edge in his voice. “I’ve had it with y’all,” he said and hung up.

Jess crossed her arms. “That went well.”

“Better than you think, sweetie,” Kat said. “Go on back to bed. Everythin’s gonna be fine.”

“Seriously? How is everythin’ gonna be fine? Didn’t you just tell Mr. Polk his store was on fire? All you did was make him mad. Folks are just gonna think we’re plumb crazy.”

“You mean they’re gonna think *I’m* crazy.”

“No, Mama, they already say our whole family’s insane. This will just give ’em more ammunition.” Earlier that month in biology class, a girl named Rachel had joked that Jess’s family probably ate hallucinogenic mushrooms for supper, and a few kids laughed. Jess

dumped a jar of wet fruit fly paste into Rachel's lap without missing a beat. It earned Jess a three-day suspension, but hearing that girl scream was worth it.

"Let's call it a night," Dave said. "This drama is officially over."

Jess rolled her eyes. "Is it *really* over? You know it's only a matter of time before she does it again."

"Please don't talk about me like I'm not here," Kat said.

"And what dimension were you visitin' ten minutes ago? 'Cause you surely weren't here."

Dave drew a sharp breath. "Jess! Don't talk to your mama like that."

"It's okay. She's just blowin' off steam," Kat said, giving her daughter a weak smile. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I know how difficult this must be for you."

"Ya think?" Jess glared at her mother and stomped out of the room.

She used the bathroom, hung up her robe, and heard the wail of faraway sirens as she climbed into bed.

* * *

Two days later, the front-page headline of the *Center Point Online Gazette* read: "Family Saved from Hardware Store Blaze." The article described how firefighters arrived at Polk's Hardware moments after a rapidly growing electrical fire had started. They saved a family of undocumented workers living in a second-floor storeroom, hidden there by one of Polk's employees. A shorted-out popcorn maker had been the cause, but the damage was minimal. The *Gazette* quoted Scott Polk saying that a high-tech monitoring system hadn't warned of the problem when it should have. When the *Gazette* reporter asked Polk how he knew about the fire, he simply shrugged and wouldn't say more.

The Atwoods, of course, knew the whole story. Yet Polk still hadn't called to thank them, which Jess thought was weird considering that Kat's vision had saved lives.

"Some folks aren't much good at showin' gratitude, but that doesn't mean they're not grateful," Kat said, putting the plate she'd just dried back in the cupboard.

"Huh." Jess stopped washing and stared at the soapy dishes in front of her. "Does that mean I don't have to thank you for makin' supper?"

"You never have to thank me, honey. You should do it only when you want to practice gratitude and respect." She started on another plate. "The difference 'tween you and Mr. Polk is that he doesn't have his mama there to remind him."

"Lucky me."

Kat slid her arm around Jess's waist and stared out the window a few moments before

kissing her daughter's shoulder. "Lucky you."

* * *

Despite the disturbances from Kat's visions and the occasional teasing Jess endured at school, for the next two years, she truly believed she *was* lucky, even when some mean girls started calling her Oreo in her senior year—as if the Little Orphan Annie nickname wasn't bad enough. Her best friend Elena Rodriguez encouraged her to ignore the haters, which helped. People cared about her, and overall, life wasn't so bad.

That was before she wore the wrong shoes and turned her world upside down.

Chapter One

Center Point, Texas

Present Day

The strange dream about a choking baby had returned and kept Jess awake most of the night. Her greatest fear was not that people would see her as crazy—the way they’d seen her grandmother, Anna Mae, and Kat when they were alive—but that she really *was* crazy. Worst of all, Jess could do nothing to keep these hit-or-miss visions from coming. What was the point of seeing an anonymous baby in distress other than to frustrate her?

In this latest version, the dream included a neighbor’s house down the highway, past the fork in the road. She was pretty sure their name was Thornton. They were Yankee transplants from Chicago who owned the Happy Platter Cafe downtown. Jess had never met them in person, but everyone in Center Point knew the café.

She rolled over and eventually fell asleep, but the same dream woke her again around five a.m. She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands, thinking about the busy day that awaited her.

They decided as a family to keep the farm instead of selling it when Kat inherited the property from her uncle Rudy, but Jess often wondered if they had made the right choice. Organic production took far more effort than any of them expected. Without Kat and her organizational skills, they struggled to make a profit. They essentially lost Dave at the same time. He was physically present but drunk half the time—and more than half useless. In their first season without Kat, they had hired Jess’s old high school friend Elena as their business manager. She was a big help, but she wasn’t Kat, and they had been financially strained for the past few years. If they didn’t turn things around, they could lose the farm.

More than anything, Jess wanted peace from visions that weren’t always accurate—or relevant. Why couldn’t she have a vision that would teach her how their farm could make money instead of losing it? If there was a baby choking, wouldn’t the parents either deal with it or call 911? Part of her wanted to just leave it alone, but like Dave used to say back when he was sober, there were three kinds of people: those who act, those who react, and those who never act.

The last time she ignored one of her visions and didn’t act, a young couple died. Jess’s dream about an orange Chevy Camaro with black racing stripes colliding head-on with a

trash truck had begun early one May. It returned every two or three weeks, interrupting her sleep and disturbing her days. From the faint light of fireworks exploding overhead, the woman in the car looked like a girl who had been in her high school graduating class. Jess had dismissed it as nothing more than a recurring nightmare. Besides, was she supposed to call every trash company in town and have them warn their drivers to be careful on the Fourth of July based on her dream? They would think she was a prank caller.

In hindsight, if she had warned the sheriff's department in time, it might have made the difference between life and death, but Jess would never know for sure. All she knew was that she didn't act, and her nightmare vision became real. On his way to load up spent fireworks and other trash from the Kerr County public display in Kerrville, the driver had his eyes on the show in the sky and didn't notice when his truck crossed the double yellow line. The couple in the orange Camaro had apparently also been distracted, as there were no skid marks from either vehicle until a few feet before they collided.

She had made no agreement with anyone to report dreams that might or might not come true. However, that did little to lessen her guilt over the couple's death. She never forgot Kat telling her when she was only nine or ten, "Hope all you want, but the past never changes. Your future, on the other hand, is unwritten until you act." Jess sighed and pulled on her running clothes. Time to act.

Not wanting to wake her brother or stepfather, Jess made her way through the dark and quiet house, wincing every time she stepped on a creaky floorboard. Her great-uncle Rudy had built the place in the sixties, and the Atwoods were often reminded it had been a do-it-yourself job. If she was honest with herself, though, she liked its cozy, rustic feel.

What she didn't like was navigating in the darkness. When Kevin was only eight or nine, he told her she couldn't see well in the dark because her eyes were made of chocolate. Kat told Jess to ignore her annoying little brother.

The eastern horizon had just begun to lighten by the time she got outside, though a scattering of stars still decorated the navy-blue sky, subtly contrasting the moon's pale-yellow crescent. The Kidwells' rooster across the road was already trying to wake the world with its crowing. Wallaby, her Australian shepherd, whined pitifully when she told him to stay and barked angrily when the door closed. Dave and Kevin wouldn't be happy about that, but they would probably be up in the next half hour anyway. She glanced at her watch. At least Kevin would. With Dave, it depended on how hungover he was.

She had thought about asking Kevin to come with her, but he wouldn't have approved. Her younger brother usually splashed cold water on anything to do with her visions, though

she felt safer with him around. In her senior year, after a boy in her class started a rumor that he'd had sex with her, Kevin punched him in the nose. It was all anybody talked about for weeks—the gay freshman with a stutter giving a bloody nose to a senior class student twice his size. However, while she liked that he was protective, he was a frequent source of unsolicited advice. The last thing she wanted that morning was to argue with him about warning the Thorntons.

The next-door neighbors' farm took a long time to run past. Crape myrtles, their bright red blossoms gray in the predawn light, lined the road for a thousand feet. Behind them lay three hundred and seventy acres of wheat. Jess could tell from the scent of the gentle summer breeze that it had ripened and was nearly ready to harvest.

She was halfway to the fork in the road when she asked herself why she hadn't taken the pickup truck since the Thorntons lived over a mile away. At least it gave her time to think about what she'd say when they opened the door. "Good mornin', I was wonderin' if your baby might be chokin' . . ." Or better yet, "Hi, I was wonderin' if your baby was chokin', but for some reason you haven't called 911." Or . . . nothing else came to mind.

Kat had earned a reputation as a crazy woman by telling people stories about the future that didn't always come true. Jess had no desire to follow in her mother's footsteps. She slowed to a walk and looked over her shoulder, torn between doing what some dubious vision told her was right and making a fool of herself or going back home and minding her own business. She came to a complete stop. The choking baby dream may have only been a nightmare. *There might be nothing to this.*

Then again, there might be.

She started running again and soon arrived at the Thorntons' property. The sun hadn't fully risen, but there was sufficient light to see the modern three-story brick house—a bit of an anomaly in that part of Texas—set back from the highway, just as it had appeared in her vision. Crookneck squash, zucchini, and Swiss chard grew on either side of the driveway, some of it going to seed. The Thorntons apparently produced just enough so they could advertise locally grown ingredients in their café. Closer to the house, she passed multiple rows of fragrant English lavender, their faint purple hue just beginning to show in the early-morning light.

She knocked on the solid mahogany front door with its fancy decorative trim, first softly, then with increasing intensity. No response. She tried the doorbell and heard a muffled electronic chime deep within the house, but nothing else. She knocked harder and waited.

Still no response. At least she'd tried.

As she turned to go, a faint sound came from inside. Jess pressed her ear against the door and thought she heard a soft noise that could have been almost anything, including the sound of a baby choking.

She tested the door handle, but it was locked. She trotted around the house, feeling a sense of urgency bordering on panic. After knocking on a few windows, she scolded herself for not bringing her cell phone. She pressed her face against the glass side panel of the back door with a “Protected by ADT” sticker and could barely make out what looked like an old-style baby basket in the far corner of the room.

Jess pounded on the locked door with her fist and then checked under the doormat for a key. No luck there, and time was running out for that baby. She picked up a stone large enough to break the glass, and her stomach churned as she thought about her next move. She needed a vision that would show her the right thing to do—but nothing came. It never did when she tried to force it.

She took a deep breath, then hurled the rock at the ADT sticker, scattering bits of glass everywhere. Her hand shook as she reached in, and she swore when her fingers touched a secure deadbolt cylinder. Feeling around the wall to the side, she found a key hanging from a small nail. She used it to unlock the deadbolt, then pushed the door open. Two steps inside the house, she froze at the scent of cinnamon on buttered toast. Maybe they were home and just didn’t want to answer the door. She had read about Texas’s “Stand Your Ground” law, which gave homeowners the right to shoot an intruder without having to answer too many questions afterward.

“*Hello?*” she called out. With butterflies in her stomach and eyes fixed on the baby basket, she walked across the room in what felt like slow motion. Her heart sank when she found only a white blanket with little blue koala bears on it and a strong odor of talcum. Had she risked so much for nothing? At least the alarm hadn’t gone off. Maybe they had forgotten to set it—or perhaps it was the silent kind.

Jess tried the bedrooms down the hall one at a time, her mind desperately urging her to get out of there. The third door she opened was to the master suite. A crib stood on the far side of a canopied four-poster bed. She heard rustling from that direction and crossed the room in a few quick steps. In the crib lay a baby in a charcoal-gray and sky-blue onesie who seemed as surprised to see her as she was to see him. A baby who was definitely not choking.

A silver SUV pulled up out front, and Jess frantically considered her options. If she ran out the back, she would look like a common thief, but trying to explain her misguided vision would be an even bigger mistake. She had to get out of there.

Jess hurried toward the back door and nearly collided with a shocked Lisa Thornton.

“What are you doing in my house? Are you from Child Protective Services? I was only away for a few minutes.”

“I was at the door and heard what sounded like a baby chokin’.” Jess hoped she sounded more confident than she felt.

Lisa pushed past her, ran into the bedroom, and came out holding her baby a few seconds later, her face flushed. “Does he look like he’s choking? What are you *really* doing here? How dare you come in here and—” Her eyes widened as she noticed the broken glass, and her voice rose in pitch. “You broke in! What were you thinking? You were planning to kidnap little Jimmy, weren’t you?” She shifted the now-whimpering child onto her hip and pulled a cell phone out of the rear pocket of her tight-fitting designer jeans. “I’ve seen you around town. What’s your name?”

“I’m—” Jess began, then bolted out the back door.

Lisa yelled something she couldn’t make out, but Jess wasn’t about to stick around and find out what. Crossing the neighboring fields, she ran most of the way along the river, as far from the road as possible. She was well into a dense growth of Texas mountain laurel when a sheriff’s patrol car raced by with its siren wailing. It had been a mistake to run. Why hadn’t she stayed and explained the situation to Lisa Thornton instead of acting like a common criminal? How hard would it be for the authorities to find a woman of color in a virtually all-white town?

The only reason she was in this mess in the first place was because of a stupid dream she’d thought was a vision. She probably would have screamed in frustration if she wasn’t so out of breath.

Back home, she waited in anticipation through the morning and into the afternoon, listening for a car in the driveway, which could mean the sheriff arriving to question or arrest her, or maybe one of the Thorntons coming to holler at her. How could she have been so foolish? Who in their right mind would break into their neighbors’ house based on a stupid dream?

Elena knocked on her door in the middle of the afternoon. “Ready to go over the accounts?”

“Sure.” Jess had forgotten their plan to go over the previous month’s profit-and-loss statement. She didn’t want to meet but didn’t see any way out of it.

“We’re not getting the numbers we need,” Elena began, “and thanks to you being behind on the accounts, we don’t even know how far off those numbers are.”

It was difficult to focus, and Jess kept wondering whether she'd be caught for the Thornton break-in. Elena eventually gave up with a dramatic sigh, telling her to reschedule when she was ready to give their meeting her full attention.

By the end of the day, Jess felt relieved that no one had shown up to arrest or yell at her and promised herself she would be more careful in the future. Just the week before, Kevin had said her visions were hopelessly intertwined with her imagination.

Maybe he had a point.

* * *

"Why are you mopin' around?" her brother asked after supper that evening as she watched a video of a national-level paintball competition on her smartphone.

She pulled out one of her earbuds and frowned. "I'm not mopin'."

"Of course not. This is what you look like when you're happy."

"Thanks, I was hopin' someone would come along and say that. Now, if you don't mind, I'm kinda busy," she said, turning her gaze back to the phone. She wasn't about to tell him what had happened at the Thorntons' house that morning, though she'd decided to explain everything to Elena when she saw her next. Their business manager was more understanding and less judgmental. More importantly, she was a friend, while Kevin was . . . an annoying younger brother she happened to be in business with.

"Come out b-back and pop off a few rounds with me while there's still some light left. It'll do you good."

She glared at him. "You should know better than to ask me that."

"Call me a slow learner, b-but I see no reason not to ask you. We walk down to the river, shoot at some cans and targets, and suddenly feel much happier. We could even make it a competition."

"You know I don't touch guns."

"Am I confusin' you with someone else, or aren't you obsessed with a sport that's all about shootin' people?"

"Paintball is nonlethal."

"So is shootin' paper targets and tin cans. B-besides, I don't see any problem with firearms b-bein' lethal, long as you make sure the person on the receivin' end deserves to die."

"Which is probably what the guy who shot my daddy was thinkin'."

"Right. You're mad at whoever killed your daddy and are therefore mad at guns—but only the kind that use gunpowder, not paintball pellets. Maybe it's just an excuse for b-bein'

mad at the world.”

“I think you missed your callin’ as a master psychologist, Kevvy.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Why not?”

He shook a finger at her. “You know damn well I don’t go b-by that anymore.”

Jess just shrugged and walked away. That night, she woke from a nightmare in which she’d been led naked, hands cuffed behind her back, down a dark hallway with jail cells on either side. Imprisoned men and women with hideous faces snarled at her as she walked past.

It was nearly dawn before she fell asleep again.

Chapter Two

Wears Valley, Tennessee

May 1964

(Twenty-six years before Jess is born)

Anna Mae Cole found the sweltering heat and oppressive humidity disorienting. She always felt uneasy when things weren't the way they'd appeared in a vision because it meant something was out of order. The Fraser firs were more fragrant than usual because of the higher-than-normal temperatures, causing them to release extra pitch. The sheen of sweat on her skin made her pale-blue cotton dress cling uncomfortably to her. May wasn't usually so hot.

In her dream-vision, she hadn't seen the rich earthy loam of the woodland floor, soft enough in places for her bare feet to make imprints. The chorus of cicadas around her hadn't been in the vision either. She tried gathering her long blonde hair into a ponytail, but that didn't work because she had nothing with which to tie it back. After struggling to knot it a few times, she gave up when it kept slipping loose.

She came to a campsite and considered the four trails branching out in front of her while attempting to wave away a swarm of gnats, sweat trickling down her back. She'd lost all sense of order, leaving her with a vague feeling of panic. Which way to go? The Great Smoky Mountains National Park had thousands of little paths here and there. Some were made by animals, some by humans—and some by humans no better than animals.

Suddenly, order and direction were back. Anna Mae saw herself following the path off to the left, which would take her along Dakota Ridge and past an old abandoned barn.

Her mother had warned her not to enter the park. The National Park Service displaced the family of her father, Jefferson Cole, from Cades Cove when he was only ten. He said they took homes and livelihoods away from thousands of people so they could create a place for a bunch of fat-assed tourists to gawk at trees.

When he was in high school, her big brother Rudy came home one day arguing that a hundred years before any white people had been evicted from the Smokies, the federal government forced thousands of Cherokees to leave their homes there. They then marched them at gunpoint to reservations in Oklahoma. His father slapped him for saying that.

The senior Cole didn't allow anyone in their family to even mention the park. Anna Mae

would be severely punished if he knew she'd been there.

Did she want to make her father angry? Of course not. But neither parent would know since they had gone into Gatlinburg for the day to hear some half-pint teenager named Dolly Parton sing. They didn't ask Anna Mae if she cared to come along, but she had better things to do anyway.

She spotted a patched and tattered army tent when she got to the part of Dakota Ridge that overlooked Redberry Creek. Rudy used to have one just like it. It was down beyond the switchback, so it would take her a while to reach it. She was going to walk right past and not think about her brother too much. Anna Mae missed him but understood why he'd left home. As soon as she was old enough, she'd leave as well. Her father had rarely whipped her when Rudy still lived at home, but now it happened far too often.

She hit a tripwire about a hundred feet from the tent, rattling some empty Campbell soup cans. It had been almost invisible, strung just a few inches above the path.

A short, stocky Negro man with a scar on his cheek emerged from the tent, waving a revolver. "Hold up now," he said, "you don't belong here."

Her mind told her to fear, but her heart stayed calm. The man's frown deepened as she came closer. She would pass within a few feet of him, but it'd be all right.

"Where you goin', blondie?"

"Just walkin' by. I ain't here to create no bother."

"Well, that didn't work, now did it? You sho' nuff botherin' me."

She kept her eyes on the path. "I got no bone to pick with you, mister."

"Damn right you don't." He pointed the pistol at her as she came closer. "You stop right there."

She glanced at the gun. Stopping would get her off track and out of order. It wasn't going to happen.

"Hey now," he said, "I ain't done talkin' to you."

"My interest ain't with you today."

"Your interest? You go when I say it's okay for you to go. You're on my land."

"This ain't your land. This is God's land."

He laughed. "Well, you got that right," he said, following her. "But you got no bidness here."

"I *do* have bidness here," she said over her shoulder. "It just ain't with you."

"You see I got a gun. What are you thinkin'?" He paused. "You stop now, chile."

She continued walking, increasing the distance between them, sure he wouldn't shoot her.

“You must be crazy,” he said. “There ain’t nothin’ down here for you. You don’t even have no shoes on.”

She didn’t answer. No point in that. At least he’d stopped following her. Did he have anything to do with the girl she saw in her vision? Maybe she was running from him.

But she knew in her heart he wouldn’t do anybody harm—gun or no gun. Besides, he hadn’t been in her vision, which meant he wasn’t the reason she was there. Yet somebody—or something—who *would* do harm was around, and that was why she’d been called to go there. She would be safe if she kept with the order the vision had shown her. Order always kept her safe. She could have just gone to a park ranger or the sheriff, but she got into big trouble the last time she’d done that. Despite her detailed description of where to look, they didn’t find a young boy in distress as she’d claimed.

What would she have told them this time? If she shared her dream about a teenage girl running along a ravine, glancing back at something scary, that would go over like a lead balloon, as Rudy used to say. Especially if they had to hike through miles of hot and humid woods to get there.

A thrill surged through her when she reached the barn, its red paint peeling, roof sagging, sections of the siding warped and twisted. She felt validated whenever she experienced something she’d foreseen in a vision. Empty milk bottles, old sardine tins, and other trash littered the area.

She continued along the path for miles, avoiding frequent patches of poison ivy. Even though the trail branched off a few times and became less obvious the farther she went, order stayed with her, and the direction she had to take remained clear. She finally arrived at the ravine with the rock formation high on one side, exactly as it had been in the vision.

She almost tripped over a body covered by branches and bright green leaves, and it took all the self-control she had to not scream. Before her lay the lifeless form of the girl she’d seen in her vision, sprawled catawampus across the path, her blood-stained clothes ripped, eyes opened wide.

The vision’s comfort, security, and purpose evaporated as if they had never been. Order—and therefore safety—were also gone. She heard a twig snap and spun around but saw no one. In the space of two heartbeats, she turned and ran back the way she’d come. More than once, she thought she might faint.

Her dress was soaked in sweat by the time she neared the old tent.

“*Hey, mister!*” she called out, struggling to catch her breath. No response. She reached the tripwire and deliberately shook it, rattling the soup cans. The man emerged from the tent,

his face clouded by anger.

“Why do you think you need to bother me again?”

“You should know the sheriff will be here soon.”

“Why? What the hell did you do?”

“I didn’t do nothin’, but I found a girl’s body down near the ravine.”

“Don’t you be playin’ games with me now. That ain’t no funny joke.”

“I ain’t bein’ funny, cross my heart. The first house I get to, I’m callin’ the sheriff. If he finds you here, it won’t be a good thing, especially with that gun of yours.”

The man cursed, went back into his tent, and started rustling around.

Anna Mae turned to go, then had another flash of a vision. The man in the tent was part of it, but otherwise, it was vague and dark.

She almost said something but instead hurried back toward safety, civilization, and a phone.

Chapter Three

Center Point, Texas

Present Day

Jess woke to the lazy rumble of distant thunder, the earthy scent of rain, and the patter of raindrops on the roof. She yawned, pulled aside her curtains, and looked out at the gray morning. This was good. Their crops needed water, and the rain gave her a great excuse to be inside. She felt more secure indoors, though if there were going to be any repercussions from the Thornton break-in, they most likely would have already happened. Besides, it would give her a chance to bring their accounts up to date.

Instead of accounting, however, she spent the first few hours of the day organizing her bedroom. As if it mattered which side of the desk her trash basket with the John Legend sticker was on or whether the pink comforter with little white dots was positioned correctly on her bed. Her brother loved to tease that her room looked like a teenager's, but she didn't really care what he thought. She wasn't going to tell him about the set of Pokémon cards she'd concealed at the bottom of her underwear drawer—or that she occasionally used them as tarot cards. The surprising thing was that they actually worked, though more often than not, she didn't want to know the future if she could avoid it. The problem was that she couldn't stop the visions even if she wanted to. For Jess, they were like unbidden guests who overstayed their welcome.

She had only just booted up her computer when the doorbell rang around ten-thirty, and her heart fell when Kevin yelled her name. Trudging downstairs, she saw Dave hunched over his morning coffee at the kitchen table, red-eyed and unshaven, in his frayed U.S. Navy bathrobe and slippers. His unkempt salt-and-pepper hair used to look good on him, effortless and rakish; now he just looked like a bum. He watched her walk past and grunted a greeting, most likely nursing a hangover. Jess knew that people had to grieve in their own way, but it had been ten years since they lost Kat.

Two somber sheriff's deputies stood on their porch, rain dripping off their ponchos. One of them—a man with hazel eyes—said a woman had broken into a house down the street and asked if that had been her. She could deny it, but then they would probably bring her to the sheriff's office and have Lisa Thornton identify her—and prove her a liar. Few people of color lived in Center Point, so it'd be one of the fastest lineups in history. Kat used to say that

while there would be many things in life she wouldn't have control over, she could always choose to act with integrity.

"Mrs. Thornton said the woman we're seekin' is around thirty, with your approximate height and weight," the hazel-eyed deputy said. "And color," he added after a pause.

Heart pounding, she raised her chin and looked him in the eye. "Yes, sir, that was me, but I can explain. I thought I heard—"

"Mrs. Thornton has lodged a formal complaint." The deputy glanced behind her. "Is your stepdaddy here?"

"He is. *Dave!*" she yelled over her shoulder.

Of course they knew who her stepfather was. They also undoubtedly knew he was a regular patron of Clancy's Cowboy Saloon and had buddies in the sheriff's department. He and the Kerr County Sheriff were both Navy veterans, which was how Dave had connected to the department initially. Before Kat died, he'd perform at their yearly fundraisers without fail, with the whole family there to cheer him on.

After a few seconds, he shuffled up behind Jess.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Atwood," the taller deputy said, "but we're gonna have to arrest your daughter."

"On what charges?"

"Criminal trespass, breakin' and enterin'."

"We hate doin' this," Hazel Eyes said, "but we have to follow through. Mr. Atwood, if you like, you can meet us at the sheriff's office."

Jess noted the conflict on her stepfather's face. At least he felt something. Then the look faded. "No, I'm good. Y'all just do what you gotta do."

With a heaviness in her heart, she watched him pad back toward the kitchen. He used to be so different.

"Do we have to do this?" she asked, turning back to the deputies.

The taller officer pursed his lips. "'Fraid so, miss."

All she had done was to try to save a baby. A baby who didn't need saving, but her intentions had been in the right place.

They handcuffed her and put her in the back of the patrol car. As they drove off, she tried explaining the reason for the break-in to the deputies.

"You know, you're more than welcome to have a lawyer present whenever one of us talks to you," the taller deputy said. "He or she would tell you to hush 'cause we can use what you say against you and enter it as a confession."

“I thought that baby was in trouble.”

Hazel Eyes turned in his seat. “You hard of hearin’, young lady, or just plain stubborn? For your own good, don’t say anythin’ more about it. Sometimes we can forget what was said, but that only goes so far. If the judge asks me to tell the truth, I have to tell the truth. You understand me?”

Jess nodded and stayed quiet during what felt like the longest ride of her life.

They fingerprinted her and took mug shots at the sheriff’s office, just like they would for a real criminal. She kept thinking about what it would be like to be in jail and have a felony conviction on her record. All because she couldn’t leave well enough alone.

After processing, they brought her before a judge who explained that since it was a first-time offense and she was a local business owner, they would release her on her own recognizance. That, at least, was a relief. As tight as their finances were, she didn’t know how they would have come up with the bail. The judge set a hearing date for the following Monday.

Jess hated calling Kevin to pick her up, but Elena wasn’t available, and Dave might not have been sober. The rhythm of the wipers clearing light rain from the windshield was the only sound in the pickup truck all the way home. As they climbed out, her brother smiled tightly. “Tell me about it whenever you’re ready.” He raised an eyebrow. “Or not.”

* * *

Jess worked on chores around the farm through the overcast and often drizzly weekend. She sprayed a tangy-scented mixture of diluted soap, lemon oil, and cayenne on cauliflower growing in the south field, brought the accounts up to date, and felt mortified over what had happened. All because she’d believed her dreams were real.

She called a lawyer named Victor Carson, whose father had supposedly worked with her great-uncle Rudy back in the sixties. He met her in the sparsely furnished Kerr County courtroom lobby Monday morning. “Well,” he began, sitting next to her on the hard wooden bench under a painting of George H. W. Bush. “I have good news and bad news.”

“Just give me all of it, please.”

“It looks like you drove down here for nothin’.”

“Say what?”

Carson smiled. “Which brings me to the good news. Mrs. Thornton came in yesterday saying she decided not to press charges after all.” He checked his watch. “I would have called, but I only just now found out myself.”

“Are you serious?”

“Serious as a heart attack. The sheriff’s department can still pursue the matter, but I don’t think they will. That’s good, ’cause you could’ve seen up to a year of jail time.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You can say you’re one lucky woman who can count her blessin’s,” he said, shaking her hand. “Give me a holler if you hear from the sheriff’s office again, but I doubt they’ll do anythin’.” He winked at her and walked away.

* * *

Jess absently scratched at a spot of dried pasta sauce on the kitchen table while arguing with Kevin over the best way to make their farm profitable and get out of debt. Her brother could be so thick sometimes.

His self-labeled brilliant solution to their financial problems was to grow, process, and package edible mushrooms. He explained how the idea came to him while browsing farming trends on Reddit. As they discussed it, she realized his suggestion might not have been as clueless as she had first thought. But they couldn’t just pile on more debt while already overextended. She tried to explain the simple math, but he wasn’t getting it.

The doorbell rang, sending chills up her spine. Were the deputies back? “Can you answer that?” she asked her brother.

He gave her a funny look and walked to the door. “*Jess, you need to come here,*” he called out a few seconds later. Maybe she wasn’t as lucky as she thought.

She caught her breath at the sight of Lisa Thornton standing on their porch wearing high-heeled snakeskin boots, with her baby in her arms, looking like she’d rather be just about anywhere else.

“Mornin’, Ms. Thornton. I’m so sorry about what happened last Friday.”

“Don’t be. I’m here to thank you. You saved my little Jimmy’s life.”

The hairs on the back of Jess’s neck stood on end. “What do you mean?”

“One reason I got so mad when I found you in my house was because I knew leaving him home was a stupid habit.”

Jess slowly let out her breath. “Okay.”

“It’s just that I don’t have anybody to watch him with Rick always off in San Antonio, and it’s such an ordeal to get Jimmy to sleep . . . I didn’t want to wake him. I’d made a quick dash to the café to get the cinnamon buns rising. All I had to do was take them out of the cooler and set them on the counter. I was only gone from the house five minutes, tops.” She examined her bright-red fingernails. “Maybe six at the most. Your visit the other day got me thinking about how wrong that was. The next morning, I put my little boy in the baby basket

and carried him into the café. As soon as we got inside the front door, he made a strange sound.”

“Oh, my.”

Lisa’s eyes welled with tears. “He was choking on something. At first, I couldn’t tell what it was, but then I pulled out a little metal rattle lodged in his throat.” Her voice broke, and she paused. “It looked like a baby toy from the fifties before they figured out babies can choke on small things. It must’ve been in the vintage basket I bought on eBay, but I never noticed it.”

“That was a close call.”

“It sure was. I don’t know . . . if he’d been home or in the car alone, he might have died, but thanks to your warning, I was much more careful. I probably wouldn’t have taken him with me if it hadn’t been for you.” She pursed her lips. “You saved his life.”

“You’re the one who chose to bring him along with you.”

“Yeah, but from what happened Friday with you in my house . . . well, I think it was a warning from above,” she said and kissed her son’s cheek. The baby cooed softly, and both women smiled at the sound. “The sheriff made it pretty clear that they could report me to Child Protective Services for leaving Jimmy alone—and I’m so glad they didn’t.” A tear ran down her cheek. “And he was right. It was . . . I was irresponsible.”

Jess opened the door wider. “Won’t you come in?”

“No, but thank you. I just wanted you to know.” She turned and walked to her silver SUV. After strapping Jimmy in his car seat, she nodded to Jess and climbed in.

Jess watched her drive off, still processing the shock of what had just happened.

Kevin came up behind her. “I caught a few words. I take it that was somethin’ good?”

“Oh yeah.” She shook her head in disbelief. “Somethin’ incredibly good.”