

Chapter One

The Sign

Folks don't understand this unless it happens to them: When your daddy dies, everything changes. He's not around anymore to teach you how to drive a truck when Mama isn't looking, or tell you man stuff that J isn't old enough to hear, or listen to you holler when you're mad, and say, "I hear ya, son," while he lets you figure out what you're going to do about it.

Even if your brother is seven years old, he goes back to being a baby and acting more annoying than usual. Your mama turns into some kind of zombie, walking around aimlessly, in between fits of crying. And you want to cry, too, except you're the man of the house now and you know your daddy said he could always count on you, so you can't let him down.

PORTER'S: WE FIX IT RIGHT! That's what the sign above our car repair shop says. It was the truth, too. Daddy said us Porters had been taking care of vehicles around Stony Gap ever since cars were born. That's how come our street is

called Porter's Shop Road. Daddy could tune an engine, fix a flat, smooth your dents, jump your battery — he even managed to keep Miss Georgia's Rambler running, and that sickly old thing was held together with spit and prayers. I didn't know how anything could get fixed right again, now that Daddy was gone. Why couldn't the doctors fix him? How hard could it be to jump-start a heart?

I closed the shop door behind me and pushed the hair off my sweaty forehead. "It sure is a hot one, isn't it, Daddy?" Inside the shop I could talk to him out loud and nobody heard me. Not that there was anything wrong with talking to him. Heck, Miss Georgia still spoke to her husband and he died about thirty years ago.

I walked up the stairs in the back where Daddy had his office, taking in a deep breath of everything I loved. The shop was oil and gas and paint and dirt. It was brake pads, hoses, filters, and about any kind of tool you'd ever need to fix a car or truck. It was Lava soap, old rags, and a sink with a faucet you could turn on with just your elbow. It was the last place I saw Daddy.

I sat down in the swivel chair at my great-great-granddaddy Porter's rolltop desk. Old Man Porter built our house, shop, and convenience store way back over a hundred years ago. Daddy called it the "holy trinity" because with the house and store on the road, and the shop in the middle behind them, the buildings made a triangle. "Don't worry, Daddy," I said, "I'm going to take care of this place. You know you can count on me."

At the back of the desk was a brass plate screwed into the

center drawer: FREDERICK STEWART PORTER. I was named after my great-great-granddaddy, even though everyone just called me Red. I'd inherited his red hair, too. Daddy always said I'd inherit his desk because "it has your name written all over it."

A shotgun went off across the creek, and I jumped. "It's Mr. Dunlop," I said, "after those raccoons again." As if Daddy wouldn't know. I wanted to close the window and block out Mr. Dunlop's hollering even if the August heat killed me. But I sat back down when I heard Beau's voice rising from our convenience store, singing that hymn *Rock of Ages*. It was good to hear some singing coming from the What-U-Want, even if it left a lump in my throat. Daddy used to sing there all the time. And he used to sing to drown out Mr. Dunlop, just like Beau was trying to do.

Sometimes when we heard Mr. Dunlop swearing at his family, Daddy would pull a lock of hair over his forehead so he'd look like a rock singer and strut over to the food shelves. He'd wink at me, pick up a can of beans like it was a microphone, and belt out that Aretha Franklin song. Moving his hips like they belonged to Elvis Presley, he'd dance to the back door, throw it open, yelling, "What you want . . . huh . . . huh . . ." and sing about wanting a little respect, spelling out the word loud enough to zing all the way past Mr. Dunlop's shed, the Confederate flag on his front porch, and right into his ignorant head. The Dunlops were a whole line of bad blood, and we'd hated them since forever. Except for Rosie, of course. It was hard to believe she was a Dunlop. Everyone loved Rosie as much as they hated her daddy. Like

Miss Georgia said, “That girl is so full of love, even her face is shaped like a heart.”

I heard a car crunch onto the gravel between the house and the shop, and I sat up straight. Me and Daddy always tried to guess the type of car by the sound it made. He called me the Boy Wonder of Cars because I have a knack for understanding them. I guess it’s in our blood. I listened to the car door as it opened and slammed shut. It wasn’t as heavy as a pickup. It wasn’t a high-performance car like a Corvette, either. “What’s your guess?” I asked Daddy.

The kitchen screen door whined open, and Mama’s voice gave a shaky hello. After that she called, “Red? I need to talk to you, honey!”

She probably needed help fixing some mess J made. That kid was like a tornado, running wild, causing havoc, and leaving everyone feeling bad. I took in a giant whiff of Goodyear tires as I walked down the steps from the office and headed for the door. Before I opened it, though, I told Daddy what kind of car I thought was outside. “Late model four-door sedan, V-8 engine.” I scrunched my face up to think real hard. “Chrysler or Chevy.”

When I opened the door, dust was still settling from Mr. Harrison’s ’71 Chrysler 300. “Yes!” I couldn’t help smiling because Daddy would be proud.

Mama waved at me and opened her mouth to speak, but Mr. Harrison said, “I know you want to get to Ohio as soon as possible, Betty, so I’ll get to work right away.”