

Chapter One

For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what was nagging at me. My grown son and his family were visiting for dinner. Normally, this would be my happy place.

I popped a chunk of butter into the pot of boiled potatoes, added a splash of milk, and turned on the mixer. Steam coated the windowpanes, sealing in the tantalizing aromas of chicken sizzling in the skillet and apple pie browning in the oven.

My granddaughter Stephanie stopped pecking away at her laptop and looked up.

"What are you working on, Steph?"

"A report on nutrition for my science class. Do you think this lettering looks okay?"

I stepped over to the table. "Looks super. I like the way you used different sizes and colors for the title, but the whole thing looks like it belongs together. Like one of those cool memes I see on Facebook."

Stephanie inserted an image of a basket of fruit at the bottom of the page. "Thanks, Granny."

I returned to my potatoes but paused, mixer in hand. "Hard to believe it's the middle of September and you've already been in school for a month. In my day, school never started until after Labor Day."

"That sounds good to me," Stephanie said.

I reached to the upper cabinet near the stove for the saltshaker.

"Hey, what's on the inside of your cabinet door?"

Ugh. I hurriedly shut the cabinet door. "Nothing. Go back to your project."

Like that was going to happen. Stephanie jumped up to inspect the set of self-photos I'd taped to the inside of the door. "Granny! Look how much weight you've lost since the first picture."

I gently pushed her toward the table. "Not a big deal."

"Yes, it is. You look really pretty today. Did Aunt Morgan talk you into coloring your hair and wearing lipstick?"

"Yep. You know what they say—if the barn needs painting, paint it."

She giggled. "Dinner almost ready?"

I brushed my wanna-be blonde hair behind my ears. "Just need to make some gravy. Why don't you call your little brothers inside to wash their hands?"

"Aww, can't we call them in after we eat our dinner? It's so nice and quiet in here."

I almost agreed. The boys were definitely a handful. "You know we can't—"

"Biz, come here. You need to see this."

My husband's voice held a rare urgency.

I turned off the mixer and rushed to the family room. "What is it?"

Robert handed me his iPad. "It's about Graham. He's been arrested for dealing drugs."

I stared at the screen but couldn't seem to focus. "Can you just tell me what it says?" My knees buckled, and I fought for a deep breath. My son, Robby, helped me to my recliner. "Relax, Mom."

My daughter-in-law, Vickie, hurried to the kitchen, on a mission to get a brown paper bag to help me with my breathing.

I ducked my head between my knees. "I just need a minute."

"And this."

I looked up. Vickie's Raggedy-Ann-orange curls fell across her freckled face as she handed me the bag.

"Thanks, honey." I placed the bag over my mouth and looped my fingers around the top to tighten the opening. As I breathed in and out, my light-headedness faded and my breathing steadied.

Stephanie squatted before me. "Granny, what's happening?"

Vickie placed a hand on Stephanie's shoulder. "Granny's fine. She's just having a small anxiety attack."

Robby loomed over me, his tall, stocky body blocking my view. "You sure you're okay, Mom?"

"Yes. Please, sit down." I rubbed my neck. "What if Graham's in danger? I feel so helpless."

"You're worried about a drug dealer?" Stephanie lowered herself to the floor and crossed her legs. "So, who's Graham?"

The room went still, the jovial atmosphere now befouled with the possibility of impending trouble. The onus was on me to answer Stephanie's question. Graham was my secret. Stalling for time, I dropped the paper bag and looked to Robert. "Is Graham okay?"

"I think so, but he's obviously in some hot water. The police caught him with a gang of thieves at his parents' ranch. Says here the police realized up front that the burglary was destined to be a high-profile case because the property belonged to the former governor of Indiana. Authorities secured search warrants before police entered. In the end, they discovered large amounts of cocaine and heroin in the gang members' trucks, along with stolen jewelry and electronics from the house."

"Did Graham admit to being involved?"

Stephanie patted my knee and whispered, "Granny, who's Graham? What's going on?"

I put my finger to my lips.

Robert continued. "Graham Cooke, son of the late Governor Daniel Cooke and his wife Marjorie, was recently in the news when the plane he piloted crashed over Indianapolis on July 1. Cooke's parents were both killed in the crash, which is still under investigation. Graham suffered broken ribs and facial lacerations."

Robert looked at me. "You sure you want me to continue?"

"Keep reading."

"The young Cooke claims he was in the house when the gang broke in and insists he is not connected with them in any way. Detectives, however, discovered packaged cocaine in Cooke's truck along with thousands of dollars taped in plastic to the inside rim of his spare tire."

I covered my face. "Oh, God. Please take care of him."

We decided to forgo sitting around the dining room table for dinner. Vickie finished up the meal and brought plates of food to us in the family room. Robby set the boys up at the ping-pong table in the basement and put a movie on for them.

I was no longer hungry.

"Now, can you tell me?" Stephanie said. "What's going on, Granny?"

Robert cleared his throat. "Maybe we should discuss this later."

She jerked her head back. "Come on, Grandpa. I'm fifteen years old."

This girl was my mini-me in so many ways. I swallowed hard and prayed for strength as I gave her my attention. "When I was a teenager—fifteen—I had a baby. I named him Dean after my grandfather, but I was forced to give him up for adoption."

Stephanie clamped a hand over her gaping mouth and rose to her knees. Her bulging eyes studied mine. I could almost read them. *Granny . . . you had a baby? . . . You got pregnant when you were fifteen?*

She worked her fingers through her long, kinky hair. “And?”

“Just recently, I found him. Graham Cooke is my son. He’s forty years old and lives about an hour away.”

I immediately regretted including her in this conversation. I’d stolen a piece of her innocence. My precious grandchild didn’t need to wrestle with her granny’s painful past. I leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “It’s a long story, sweetheart.”

Robert lowered the footrest on his recliner and sat forward. “Biz. I’m not sure she needs to know much more.”

My husband, the counselor. So wise. I winked at Stephanie. “Grandpa’s right. And what I’ve told you must remain our family secret, especially now. Graham might be in danger. Can I trust you to keep what you’ve heard in confidence?”

Stephanie nodded. “Of course, Granny. Are you going to try to contact him?”

“I don’t know, honey. Honestly, with what we’ve just learned, we first need to find out if it’s even safe to reach out to him.”



“The wind’s really kicking up out there,” Robert said after the kids left. He slipped into his corduroy work jacket and pulled a wide brim cowboy hat over his thinning white hair. “I’m going to put the horses in for the night. I hope I don’t get blown away.”

Pleasant jolts of electricity buzzed through my system. With his ruddy complexion and broad shoulders, my man still lit a fire in my pit. My goodness, I could just imagine him on a western television set. Stand back, John Wayne.

But I welcomed the opportunity to be alone, desperately needing to wrap my mind around what I’d just learned. First things first, though. Time to set the girls free and slip into a baggy T-shirt and some sweatpants.

I shoveled leftovers into containers for the fridge and tidied the kitchen. How could Graham be a drug dealer?

I had so many questions. How did the police know to show up at the former governor’s ranch? Why would Graham need dirty money when he was the sole heir to his father’s wealthy ranch and financial portfolio?

Where would I find the answers?

The backdoor opened and shut. “Hey, Mom. I’m home. Something smells really good.”

Morgan dropped her Gucci purse on the counter and smoothed long strands of windblown hair away from her face. She was tall like her brother but had inherited slim genes from her father’s side of the family. “Mom, I read something horrible in the news.”

“Daddy and I saw it, too.” My fingers wouldn’t cooperate as I attempted to close the zipper on the plastic bag of dinner rolls. After three tries, I gave up and allowed the tears to flow. “I just can’t believe Graham would do something like this. I’ve always had such special pictures of him in my mind.”

Morgan took the Ziploc from me and sealed it. “Have you thought about him a lot over the years?”

I nodded and sat at the table. “Especially on his birthday. You’ll think I’m ridiculous, but each year when others celebrated with fireworks, I’d disappear.” I covered my face. “This is hard . . . I actually imagined meeting him and giving him a gift.”

Morgan placed a warm hand on my shoulder and kissed the top of my head. “You kept his memory alive all these years and never said a word to any of us?”

“No, I considered it a holy meeting. I’d let him grow a little taller each year . . . the imaginary became alive in my mind. I knew it wasn’t real. But for those few minutes, our lives touched, and the warmth radiating through me was real, like a fire of hope in my soul.”

Morgan squatted and wrapped her arms around me. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

I shook myself to escape the foggy daze of memories.

Morgan stood. “Where’s Daddy?”

I glanced at the clock. “He went to put the horses up, but he’s been gone for over an hour. What could be keeping him?”

“I wouldn’t worry. You know how distracted he can get.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Morgan clomped up the stairs, her blond hair bouncing with each step. I liked having her around. Single and three months pregnant, she’d moved back home when we bought our new house in the country. “Hey, Mom?” she called from the second floor.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t worry about me if I don’t return right away. I just bought a new novel. I’m going to soak in a bubble bath for as long as my skin will allow.”

“Sounds good, honey. Think I’ll do the same later.”

The wind howled and rattled the windowpanes. I wanted to believe Morgan was right about Robert, but I couldn’t shake the apprehension chewing at my gut.

I grabbed my fleece and hurried outside, thankful for the floodlights at the corners of the barn. Sinister shadows fingered paths around the bushes and sketched lines across the driveway, daring me to cross at my own risk. The temperature had dropped significantly, but not enough to account for the keen chill settling in my bones.

“Robert?”

No answer.

His car was in the driveway. My chest tightened as frightening scenarios blitzed my mind. “Robert? Can you hear me?”

I dashed through the barn, checking the stalls, and calling up into the hayloft. Again, no answer.

I left through the back door of the barn and noticed a light flicker near the edge of our property. I broke into a run . . . well, more like a high-speed power walk for me and my short, chubby legs. “I’m coming, honey. I see you.”

Several times I had to stop to catch my breath. As I neared the site, I could make out a faint image—Robert’s body propped against a large tree, his flashlight resting on the ground beside him. My feet stopped, unwilling to move forward. *Oh, God. Please help us.*