

“The quest of the endearing characters in this poignant family drama captivated me from the first page. I loved stepping into the history and beauty of the Great Smoky Mountains and Karen Barnett’s expert weaving together of the past and present threads. Pure joy to read!”

—Melanie Dobson, award-winning author of *The Winter Rose* and  
*Catching the Wind*

“Barnett’s tale set in the Great Smoky Mountains flows as smooth as wildwood honey. The two timelines are stitched together like alternating blocks of a quilt passed down through the decades, keeping family connected and rooted. I love a good Appalachian tale and Barnett’s hits all the right notes from the familiar dialect to the natural beauty of the mountains. I felt utterly at home.”

—Sarah Loudin Thomas, award-winning author of  
*The Right Kind of Fool*

“Once again, Karen Barnett paints America’s historical landscape with deft skill and steady hand. Her deep-seated love for the Smoky Mountains etches each page like a poem. Pitch-perfect research and incomparable heart paint every corner of the brilliantly colored canvas of *When Stone Wings Fly*. Readers, get ready: your newest split-time fiction experience rests in the hands of a master.”

—Rachel McMillan, author of *The Mozart Code*

“I loved getting to know Karen Barnett’s characters in *When Stone Wings Fly*. I was right there with them, flipping through the pages as fast as I could to see what happened next. Compelling writing, gripping action, and fascinating Great Smoky Mountains National Park history make for a heartfelt story you won’t want to miss.”

—Ann H. Gabhart, best-selling author of *Along a Storied Trail*

“As a former park ranger, Karen Barnett knows the landscape of mountains, rivers, forests, and trails—and the inner workings of the National Park Service, both historical and present-day. Both leap to life in the pages of this time-slip novel set in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park where, faced with irrevocable change, one woman struggles to preserve what’s left of her family and her mountain home, while another seeks to piece together a mysterious family history shattered long ago. Forging our dreams while holding them in open hands is a dichotomy poignantly explored by the engaging characters in this heart-tugging and surprisingly suspenseful tale.”

—Lori Benton, Christy Award–winning author of *Burning Sky* and other historical novels

“*When Stone Wings Fly* brings to light a little known time period in history when the glory of National Parks usurped on the ownership of private lands. But more than that, this is a heartrending story of belonging, a place to call home, and what family truly is in spite of grievous errors and the turbulence of life. I was entranced in this tale of the Smoky Mountains, devouring it to the last page, and pondering its message long after the book was closed. As a dual-time author and reader, I can truly say that Karen Barnett has provided a story equally captivating in both time periods, and the ties of ancestry continue to show how intricately woven the past is to our present. This will be a cherished story on my bookshelves for years to come.”

—Jaime Jo Wright, author of *The Souls of Lost Lake* and Christy Award–winning novel *The House on Foster Hill*

WHEN  
STONE  
WINGS  
FLY



WHEN  
STONE  
WINGS  
FLY

A Smoky  
Mountains  
Novel

Karen Barnett



*When Stone Wings Fly: A Smoky Mountains Novel*

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To the people of the Great Smoky Mountains-  
all who went before  
and all those yet to come.





## PROLOGUE

Great Smoky Mountains National Park  
March 1942

THESE MOUNTAINS HID countless secrets—what was one more?

Benton rolled the tiny stone bird between his dirt-stained fingers, studying it in the last vestiges of sunlight coming over the ridgeline. *Her ridge.* Benton would never have claim to the mountain, no matter how many years he'd toiled making a life for himself here. He glanced up at the river rocks forming the cabin's tall chimney. He'd mended it just two months ago. How long until the forest reclaimed that as well?

He slipped the small figurine into his shirt pocket as the screech of an owl cut through the evening stillness. Jamming the shovel into the hard-packed dirt, he ripped a chunk of the earth free. Disturbance was the lifeblood of the forest. Even though Rosie's family had walked this land for generations, in truth the woods were constantly reinventing themselves. Dying and coming alive with every breath, every leaf, every new sunrise.

But if he worked at it hard enough, one thing might stay.

Sweat trickled down his back as he deepened the hole, opening a scar in the black soil. Tossing the shovel aside, he nestled the stone into the ground like a babe in its bassinet. No matter what happened to the cabin—to the land—this little piece of Rosie's heart would stay.

Turning away, he gazed around the small clearing. His daughter stood by the coop, using a twig to tap a playful rhythm on the metal

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wire. He wiped his dirty palms on his trousers before reaching for her hand. "Come on, McCauley. It's time to go."

She stared at him, her big brown eyes so much like Rosie's that his throat nearly closed. "Where are we going, Pa?"

He clasped her fingers in his, unable to answer. Thankfully, she fell into step beside him without asking a second time. Maybe someday he could find the words to explain to his daughter how the gunshot that had stolen her mother's life had taken their home as well.

Or maybe he never would.

Nashville, Tennessee  
Present Day

FOUR YEARS OF college and she was back to juggling plates? This was not how she pictured her life at twenty-seven. Kieran swung a purse over her shoulder and made for the diner's rear door. "Can you use me on the breakfast shift, Ash? I need some hours."

Her friend, the owner and manager, hefted a stack of plates into a bin. "You practically live over at SeniorCo. Don't they pay you for all your work there?"

*When the funding allows.* "They'll sort it out, but for now—"

"Of course. We can give you a few hours tomorrow, but I've got some new girls coming in for the lunch rush."

Her husband, Nick, lifted a basket of shrimp from the fryer and gave it a quick shake. "Heading out already? Got a hot date or something?"

"You bet. With a handsome hero. Navy SEAL." Kieran edged past the prep tables, careful not to bump the salad fixings on her way out.

"Haven't you finished reading that military novel yet?" Ash wrinkled her nose. "You know I'm next in line. I've been done with book one for a week. How long are you going to make me wait?"

Nick grinned as he scooped the fried shrimp onto a serving platter. "I should have guessed. You don't strike me as the type to hang out with sailors. Now, army? Those are the heroes."

"We all know *you* are, at least." Kieran patted his arm as she passed.

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Nick had done two tours in Afghanistan, and Ashleigh had been relieved when he'd finally left active duty. Opening the Gray Gull had been the culmination of a lifelong dream. All seafood, all the time. It didn't matter that the closest beach was a seven-hour drive from Nashville.

Ash clucked her tongue. "SEAL, Green Beret—does it matter? As long as he's got muscles and a sweet smile." She winked at her husband.

Kieran hid a laugh as she waved to her friends and ducked out into the fresh night air, away from the lingering odor of fish and fries. As long as said hero was safely ensconced in the pages of a novel, she was happy. That was how she liked her men—imaginary. Those were the fellows you could trust.

Parking her ancient Volvo outside of Sycamore Terrace Senior Living, Kieran took a moment to gather herself. Would Gran be awake this late? She checked her phone to find five messages from desperate families who'd searched SeniorCo's website for information on emergency housing, finances, and Medicaid. She'd be up late tonight reading through their questions and helping to find placements for their loved ones. If only there were enough affordable options for everyone. The problem tugged at her heart. No one's mother, father, or grandparent deserved to be on the street. A community that didn't care for the most fragile among them had no right to be called a community.

But first, her own gran needed her.

Kieran retrieved her knitting bag off of a heaping laundry basket in her back seat and tucked it under her arm. The half-finished sweater was a disaster, as always, but Granny Mac would save it.

She locked the car and hurried inside the squat brick building, barely pausing to wave at the night nurse and scoop up a visitor's badge from the front desk.

Gran dozed in her chair, the throw blanket on her lap a swirl of orange, purple, pink, and blue, like the darkening sky outside the window of her small apartment.

Kieran studied the tiny woman, so peaceful in sleep, such a

powerhouse when awake. Kieran brushed her arm. “Gran? Can I help you get into bed?”

Granny Mac’s eyes fluttered. “What? No. I wasn’t sleeping.” Her fingers clutched the throw. “I was knitting. See? Almost done.” Her brows pulled tight as she rumbled the afghan. “I must have dropped my needles. Where did they get to? I don’t want to lose any stitches.”

She’d probably owned the blanket for decades, but Kieran knew better than to point it out. “Don’t worry, Gran. We’ll find them.” Pulling a stool close, Kieran sat next to her and patted her hand. “I’m happy to see you.”

Gran’s brown eyes clouded. “I’m sorry, dear, but I don’t . . .”

“It’s Kieran. Michael’s daughter.” Saying her father’s name always left a bad taste in her mouth. He was nothing but the flimsy thread linking her to this wonderful woman, and his choices had left Kieran as lost as a dropped stitch.

“Mike’s—” Her lip quivered. “Of course you are. You look so much like my mother. Have I told you about her?”

“Some.” Kieran reached for the half-full coffee cup sitting on the end table. “Would you like me to pop this in the microwave?”

Gran frowned, her pinched face reminding Kieran of a cotton shirt that had been crumpled at the bottom of a drawer for too long. “No, ghastly stuff. There’s some blackberry tea on the counter. I love that blend. It tastes like the mountains—”

“—especially if you add honey.” Kieran finished the words as she headed for the tiny kitchen. They’d need to move Gran to the memory-care wing soon. She really shouldn’t have access to a stove.

“How’s work, sweetie?” Gran leaned back in the chair. “What is it you do again?”

Kieran smiled. “Oh, a little of this, a little of that.” She’d tried explaining her life to her grandmother before, but it never stuck.

“So long as it keeps a roof over your head.” Gran dug into the seat cushion beside her, apparently still looking for the knitting needles.

## WHEN STONE WINGS FLY

*If only.* Kieran found the tea-bags and retrieved the honey from the cupboard. Few things brought Granny Mac joy like the sweet tastes of her mountain home, though how her grandmother could identify the difference between Appalachian honey and store-bought made little sense to Kieran.

After filling their cups, Kieran returned to the chairs and settled in, exhaustion dragging at every muscle. She needed sleep, but she hungered for this connection even more than a little shut-eye. Gran's stories helped fill the holes left from Kieran's fractured childhood.

"You look so much like my mother, dear." Gran repeated the words as she took a sip of the tea. "Have I told you about her?"

Kieran rested her head against the upholstered seat, fighting to keep her eyes open. What was once more? "Tell me."

"I used to love listening to her and Papa talking late into the night on our front porch. Sometimes I was already tucked into bed up in the loft, and I'd fall asleep to that gentle sound. Then I'd awaken to her singing as she cooked breakfast. Papa said she was like a bird, always a song on her lips."

"This was in the Smokies?"

Gran nodded, a faint smile touching her face. "She had a little stone bird she kept in her apron pocket too. I think it had belonged to her Cherokee great-grandmother. She used to let me hold it." She stared down at her own knobby knuckles, as if seeing them for the first time. "Wish I still had it. I could pass it on to you."

"What happened to it?" It wasn't unusual for items to go missing when someone went into a care facility. It was one of the issues she dealt with in senior services.

A frown darkened Gran's face. "Where did those needles go? I've got to get this blanket finished."

Kieran reached for her bag. Sometimes it was better to let the memories scatter like autumn leaves, falling wherever the wind took them. Demanding answers only made Gran anxious. "I brought the sweater

I'm working on. I hoped you could help me. It's a bit of a mess." She pulled the misshapen object from her bag. Together they'd knitted and reknitted it several times. It was less about finishing a project and more about providing Gran an anchor while they talked.

Gran drew it into her lap. "You're pulling the stitches too tight again. Relax your hands while you're knitting—don't strangle the needles. The joy happens in the open spaces between the loops. Otherwise you'll get a solid wall of fabric instead of a supple, cozy piece." She demonstrated a few stitches. "A well-made sweater is like wearing a hug from someone you love, not a piece of armor to protect you from the world."

The words wove through Kieran's heart. "You make it sound so lovely, Gran."

"It had ought to be lovely, darling." She lifted the blanket from her knees and held it out, the folds opening to cascade down to her feet. "I made this'n for my mother." Her brows drew together. "Wait. That's not right. No, I made it *about* my mother."

"What do you mean?" Kieran set down her own knitting to touch the soft wool throw, the years causing the yarn to pill. Blue and violet blended into pink and orange.

"It was the view as the sun climbed up over the ridge and spilled into the holler each morning." She drew a shuddering breath. "Of course it already belonged to the park at that point."

"But you still lived there?"

"The government made Ma sign a paper saying she could live there until she died." Her eyes filled, tears coming more easily these days. "We thought we'd have more time." She dug a handkerchief from the pocket of her flowered housecoat. "Everyone thinks they've got all the time in the world, but that's not how it works. The world takes you when it will—when God wills. He knows best."

Kieran stilled, the thought creeping over her like a shadow. She'd only found Gran a few years ago, finally pulling together a semblance of family from the broken shards of her own childhood. If God wanted

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her grandmother, He'd have to get through Kieran first. "What happened to her?"

"They'd only get the land if she died. It's what they wanted all along." Gran glanced toward the window, as if the answers lay outside in the fading evening light.

"What are you saying?" Kieran tucked the blanket around Gran's knees. "It isn't as if the government killed her, right?"

"Her stone bird's still on the ridge. Rosie's Ridge, Pa called it." She pulled in a quick sob, covering her mouth and rocking in the seat. "I wish I had it. I could give it to you. You've been so good to me."

"Gran." Kieran grabbed her hands and planted a quick kiss on her fingers. "You don't need to give me anything. It's been wonderful just to have you in my life these past few years. You're the family I never had."

"The land, the ridge. It's still there, right?" Her wide eyes sought Kieran's.

"Of course it is. It's part of Great Smoky Mountains National Park now. Protected for all time. Rosie's Ridge is safe."

Gran struggled to rise. "You ought to go get it. It belongs to you."

"The ridge? No—Gran, it doesn't." Kieran jumped to her feet, the perpetually half-finished sweater tumbling to the floor as she steadied her grandmother. *Don't argue with dementia.* Wasn't that what she told her clients' families? "Let's get you to bed. It's late. We can talk about it tomorrow."

"Kieran, loosen up those stitches. You hold everything too tight. Tension's no good."

Tension never helped, especially with memory issues. The joy happened in the open spaces, as Gran said. "I will. I promise."

As they walked toward the bed, Gran took Kieran's arm. "If a bird wants to fly free, first it has to release the branch.' That's what my ma used to say. You can't do that if you squeeze too tight."

After she settled her grandmother into bed, Kieran used the cramped bathroom to change her clothes and wash away as much



of the *parfum de* fried fish as she could manage. Back in the car, she plugged her phone in to charge as she drove across town, looking for a good place to park for the night. Maybe she could sneak in a few minutes of reading before falling asleep in the passenger seat.

It had been four days since she'd been evicted from her apartment. Kieran knew every loophole available to secure housing for at-risk seniors, but finding an affordable one-bedroom in Nashville if you weren't on Social Security? Completely out of reach.

Great Smoky Mountains, Tennessee  
March 1932

FALLING THROUGH THE kitchen roof was not on Rosie McCauley's list for today. Instead, she shuffled her rear closer to the edge, taking care not to put all her weight in any one spot. Gripping two rusty nails between her lips, she wedged the wooden shingle back into its place. She hoped driving a nail through the weather-beaten slat wouldn't cause the thing to crumble. With how life had been treating them lately, she wouldn't be surprised if the whole cabin collapsed in a heap.

Lorna found the oaken shake in the yard after last night's blow—right next to a fallen tulip poplar. The trunk had missed the old cabin by about twenty feet. If it had hit the house, a mere shingle would be the least of their worries.

Rosie hummed the notes of a hymn as she lifted her head, watching her sister hang bedsheets on the line to dry in the early spring sunshine. She'd spent most of her life keeping an eye on Lorna, as if that were the only reason the good Lord had put her here on the earth. Even though Lorna was grown, she'd always need looking after. God had put her together a little differently than most folks.

Rosie returned her attention to the roof. Moss caked in the cracks made the morning's chore a slippery adventure. How much longer before the mountains reclaimed what their father had built so many years ago? Rosie would add a new roof to the list of things she'd do

when her ship came in, or if John D. Rockefeller stopped by with an extra million dollars.

After sinking the two nails, she sat back and surveyed her work. The sun's rays had warmed the wet surface till steam rose around her, like God redeeming the earth after the deluge. Wasn't that just like life? Rain fell, then out came the sun to kiss it all anew.

Beads of water still clung to the leaves on the nearby dogwoods, the light sparkling through each droplet. Her mama's mountain rose in the distance, the forest clinging to its crumbling slopes in much the same way Rosie held fast to this house—with deep roots. “God in heaven, it's beautiful. Thank You. And thanks for keeping watch over all my kin up there with You. I'm sure hoping You can spare a thought for us folk down here.”

A familiar loneliness crashed through her. Resting her head against her knees, Rosie breathed in the damp scents of the forest, letting the chittering melodies of the birds soothe her spirit. The music of the mountains, her pa would say.

Crunching in the underbrush caught her attention, and she straightened to look. They didn't see bears round these parts much anymore, but you couldn't be too careful.

*Worse.* A stranger hiked through the woods with a pair of field glasses clamped in one hand, a roll of paper in the other. He didn't walk like a local, following the well-worn game trails, but instead pushed straight up the hill above her cabin. A revenuer? Her stomach clenched. Her pa's grave had hardly grown over, and the agents were already skulking around again?

They'd never find a still on her property. Not after what happened. “Halloo!”

Rosie startled, one foot giving way on the slick rooftop. Someone must have walked up the road that ran along the far edge of her clearing. She peeked over the ridgepole toward the front of the house. The screen door slammed below, vibrating the boards under Rosie's bare

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feet. Lorna must have run for the house. She used to love trading how-dies with folks in the holler, but no more.

Beau Tipton trudged up the dirt path, his hands jammed in his pockets. “Rosie-girl, you home?”

“Yeah, Beau, up here.” She took a few careful steps. “Just fixing a loose plank.” Rosie cast one last glance at the other fellow—the stranger on the ridge. Thank goodness Lorna hadn’t spotted him, or she’d be fighting nightmares for days. Beau was familiar enough, but a revenuer? Hopefully, she’d get over these nervous spells soon and be back to her normal self.

Rosie scrambled down the wooden ladder, the seat of Pa’s old work trousers damp from where she’d been woolgathering on the roof for the past ten minutes. She brushed them off with dirt-stained palms. “I ain’t seen you or Maudie in a few days.”

Beau pulled off his cap. “Been cleaning up our place. That storm was a real frog-strangler. One side of my cabin’s caked in mud, and the water’s all across the floor. Maudie’s fit to be tied. I’ll have to shore the place up. Don’t want to get washed clean off the mountain, if you know what I mean.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. At least you got a beautiful spot up there.”

“Not a bad one right here. And a little more river bottom to work with. Not that it’s going to do either of us good for much longer.” He dug into his pocket. “I picked up your mail on my way through the holler. ’Fraid it’s a mighty official-looking envelope. Folks been getting ’em up and down the road, and they ain’t none too happy ’bout it neither. We ain’t got one up at our place yet, but I reckon it’s about the park.”

“Park.” She spit the word back, the taste of it as bitter as dandelion greens. “They’ve been going on about that for years now. What’s changed?”

“Ever since Tennessee started talking ’bout condemning property, folks are as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. They’re saying if you don’t take the government deal, you get nothing.”

Rosie lifted her gaze to the ridge, remembering her pa's stories of meeting her ma at a singing and following her home like a stray mutt. He might have built the house, but he always said it was Mama's mountain. *There's no way it'll ever be the government's.* "I told that state man, the only way he'd get me off my ma's land was in a pine box." She was tempted to take the letter inside and toss it in the cookstove. Instead, she slid a thumbnail under the envelope's lip.

Beau rubbed a fist across his gray-and-brown whiskers. Apparently he was going to wait for her to read it.

She unfolded the crisp white sheet. The words "Tennessee Great Smoky Mountains National Park Commission" marched across the top edge. Rosie skimmed the brief letter, her heart sinking to her stomach.

"What's it say?" Beau edged closer to peer over her shoulder.

She lowered the letter to her side. "It says they're going to take me up on that deal."



Benton Fuller pushed through the laurel thicket, the whine of mosquitoes driving him to distraction. The hollows were thick with them this time of year, and apparently fresh blood was especially alluring. He smacked one off his neck. At least he had the comfort of knowing Dr. Hayden was facing even worse in the tropics. Benton's colleague had left on an Amazonian expedition ten days ago, taking half of Cornell's ornithology department and several deep-pocketed donors. Was it wrong to wish the man a few malaria-laden mosquitoes? Benton swatted away the professional envy like one more pesky bloodsucker.

Several weeks in the Smokies ought to ease his foul mood. Hayden could have the noisy toucans and macaws—Benton was more than happy with the birds of Tennessee and North Carolina. They might lack the same glamour, but they made up for it with mystery and secrets. He wanted to learn them all.

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He pushed through to a clearing near the top of the ridge, offering a view of the mist-draped hills stretching into the distance. Benton stopped to catch his breath. A subtle fragrance hung in the air, the blend of trees and wildflowers far more pleasing than any concoction devised by a perfumer.

The government had finally listened to the public's cries to set aside this area as a national park. The west had Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon, and now the Great Smoky Mountains would take their place among America's most treasured and protected lands, once the states of Tennessee and North Carolina finished purchasing the property.

Benton leaned against a hickory tree, the hardwood's strength speaking to the ageless endurance of these mountains. The land bore scars from those who had seen her assets stripped clean, but now that would change. In time the Smokies range would reclaim its former beauty. He could see it when he closed his eyes. The deer, the birds, the bears would all return in great numbers. But best of all? His owls.

A shrill call drew his attention, the sound echoing through the forest. He studied the treetops as the familiar *chirup-chirup-chirup* resounded. He'd expected to see Kentucky warblers but had yet to lay eyes on one for his census. The small songbird typically kept itself hidden in the dense foliage along the river bottoms. He needed a firm sighting before recording it in the official document.

He moved back down the slope toward the creek, careful not to shake the brush. Stopping, he raised the field glasses to his eyes and scanned the shadows for the flash of the warbler's yellow feathers. The call continued to ring through the woods.

The bird finally bounced into view as it flitted along the forest floor, picking at the leaf litter. Benton lowered the binoculars and reached for his notebook. It wasn't a rare Amazonian parrot, but the sighting still delivered a jolt of satisfaction. Another species could officially be listed in the new national park.

As he scribbled, the warbler's call shifted to a sharp *chip*. Seconds later, another. Benton lifted his head. He'd been here for several minutes already—why was it sending up the alarm now? A second warbler echoed the warning somewhere in the distance.

As if in reply, a lower-toned trill cut through the day, the notes descending like the soft whinny of a horse. Benton held his breath. *Screech owl*. He'd been hoping for this moment since he'd set out from New York but hadn't anticipated it midday. His colleagues had bickered as to whether any actually existed in the Smokies, though it seemed like prime habitat.

He shoved the book under his arm, turning to gaze around the tree-tops. He'd dreamed of finding a nesting pair early in spring so he could follow them through an entire life cycle. Ideally it would have been closer to where he was staying at Elkmont's Wonderland Club Hotel, but he knew better than to look a gift owl in the beak . . . or whatever.

Benton mimicked the call, hoping to catch sight of the tiny owl and follow it to its tree cavity. After two more tries, he received a tremulous response. He cocked his head to track the call through the trees. Jamming the notebook into his pocket, Benton shouldered his canvas pack.

Most folks thought of the forest as a quiet place, and in comparison with the city, he supposed it was true. But it was also alive with activity—leaves rustled on the wind, squirrels scampered through the limbs, water dripped from leaf edges and trickled from springs, and bird life created interesting melodies. The Smokies were a symphony of sounds and smells. The idea of returning to the classroom and Cornell's stuffy library was something he wouldn't dare consider at this moment. It seemed ludicrous that a love for birds and nature should lead to someone being locked away in academia.

A fluttering to his right stopped him in his tracks. The small owl rested on a limb about twenty feet up in a shagbark hickory. The bird roused its reddish-brown feathers and shook like a wet dog before

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stopping to preen them into place. If it hadn't been for the motion, he'd never have seen it. He mimicked the call again, a gentle trill from deep in his throat.

The owl turned its head left and right, as if trying to locate the interloper before responding in kind.

Lowering himself to one knee, Benton lifted the binoculars and studied his feathered subject. "Come on—show me your home."

Instead, the owl remained stationary for ten minutes and then closed its eyes.

Sometimes one had to endure long stretches of boredom to earn those fleeting moments of enchantment. Lowering the field glasses, he reached into his pack for the paper-wrapped sandwich he'd stashed earlier. He wasn't going anywhere soon, that much was obvious.

From this vantage point, he had a good view into the hollow. He traced a column of smoke to a run-down cabin just this side of the creek. The mountain people seemed to eke out the barest existence from their small farms. This family must be one of the few still fighting condemnation.

The familiar low trill made him look up. A second owl swooped over to join its mate. Ducking inside a hole in the decaying trunk, it disappeared from view.

"Got you." He reached for his notebook and scribbled information as fast as he could. He might be in the park to conduct a census of the overall bird population, but screech owls were his passion. If he could get enough info to send to the Audubon Society, they might fund future studies.

The owls and their nest were perfectly hidden in the tree cavity, safe from larger owls and anything else that might harm them.

*Hidden.* Benton glanced up at the nearby trees. A blind would be ideal for studying this pair. He could observe them whenever he wished, and they wouldn't be disturbed by his presence.

A branch snapped in a nearby thicket, and the warbler uttered its



sharp *chip-chip-chip* again. Benton straightened. The owls might be safe from predators, but he was not.

The dark barrel of a shotgun slid into sight from the dense brush. “What’re you looking for?” A voice growled from the cover of the laurels.

Benton’s thoughts scattered like so many sparrows. “I . . . I don’t . . .” He lifted his hands. “Birds, mostly. I’m not looking for trouble.”

“You government?”

“I’m a professor of ornithology from Cornell University. So no.” Benton considered the voice. It didn’t sound like a grown man’s. A boy perhaps? “I’m performing a bird survey for the new park. They want a record of how many different species are living in the mountains here.”

“You ain’t in the park.” The shrubs quaked, and a young woman stepped into the open, her grip on the shotgun secure. She cut an odd figure, dressed in a man’s plaid shirt and denim trousers. Underneath a beaten hat, a dark braid hung over one shoulder and reached nearly to her waist.

Benton retreated a few paces to keep a comfortable distance between himself and the business end of her firearm. “Begging your pardon, miss, but my map says it is—unless I somehow wandered off course.”

“You’re on McCauley land, and over yonder”—she gestured with the gun—“is Samson property. They’re just as likely to shoot you as say hello. Iffen you’re out looking for stills, I don’t cotton to such business on my land.”

“I’m simply looking for birds. Here, I can prove it to you.” He lowered his pack to the ground.

The action caused her to step back and tighten her grip on the shotgun.

“I only want to show you my census.” Benton unbuckled the straps and opened the bag, letting several books and charts slip onto the ground. “You’ve got some wonderful specimens in your woods here. I just located a nesting pair of Eastern screech owls.” He opened his Audubon guide and pointed at the illustration.

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“I’ve seen ’em. They come through every summer.” Her brown eyes softened. “Never did understand why they called them ‘screech.’ They’ve got lovely calls. Now barn owls? Their screech could shave a year off your life.”

He couldn’t resist the grin spreading across his face. “You appreciate birds?”

“Don’t most folks? They add a little color and music to God’s world, don’t they?”

“I think so—to our world, anyway.” He’d never been much for God talk. Still, the knot of tension in his shoulders eased. “But I have a particular interest in owls. I’m hoping to do a study on screech owls while I’m here working on the bird census. I’d love to spend some time watching this pair, if you don’t mind me on your property.”

“Hootenanny?”

He closed the guide, suddenly feeling more lost than ever. “Beg pardon?”

“The owls—Hoot and Annie. That’s who you’re watching?” Her brown eyes held an air of mischief.

He smiled. “You’ve named them?”

“I name a lot of the critters hereabouts. My sister and I have done that since we was little.” Her gaze locked on his book. “Why are they counting the birds?”

“The government wants to better understand the land they’ve purchased. Find out what’s here and what’s not.”

“Purchased?” An unladylike snort escaped her. “They’re *stealing* is more like it. Families been living here for generations, and the government thinks throwing a few dollars at us will send us packing? Where are we supposed to go?”

He’d heard the complaint before. Whereas the western parks had been carved largely from public land, this new venture was being cobbled together from bits of private land. Schoolchildren from North Carolina and Tennessee had been donating their pennies for years, and

now that Rockefeller was matching their funds, things were moving quickly. “I know it’s been difficult for the local communities, but this park is going to be beautiful. It will benefit so many people.”

“You want to walk over to my family’s graveyard and tell that to my Cherokee great-grandmother? Because she’d understand that sorta talk better than anyone.”

Benton scooped the books into his bag. He wasn’t here to debate with the locals. “I’m sorry about the trespassing, but I truly thought this parcel had already been obtained. Is that Jakes Creek down there?”

Her eyes narrowed. “It is.”

He reached for the map and unrolled it, studying the contour lines that delineated the various ridges and hollows. “I was told everything from the Little Brier Branch to the top of Rocky Ridge had been purchased already. Perhaps your husband—”

“You’re wrong.” She shook her head, sending the braid swinging. “I ain’t signed nothing.”

Surely this young woman couldn’t be the owner. He folded the map over. “You’re going to be completely surrounded by park land soon. I do hope you’re not alone out here.”

That had been the wrong thing to say. Her face darkened, her hands tightening on the gun. The barrel rose slightly to point at his shoes. “I ain’t alone.”

He tucked the map under his arm. “Look, we started badly. I never even introduced myself. My name is Benton Fuller. And I’d really like to have the opportunity to study your owls. This will be part of the park eventually, after all, Miss—”

“McCauley. Rosie McCauley.” Her brown-eyed glare had returned. “And you’d best get off my land.”



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The man's words haunted her for days. "*This will be part of the park eventually, after all.*" She'd heard the same thought expressed by many people, but for some reason this birdwatcher's offhand comment had sunk right to her core. He was so matter-of-fact, like he was just talking about a change in the weather.

Rosie sank onto the ladder-back chair as the last of her energy drained out of her. She pulled the crisp white paper out of its envelope and studied it. Over the past weeks, three different neighbors had stopped by to say goodbye—families who had lived in the holler for generations. At this rate, she and Lorna might soon be the only ones left.

*"I do hope you're not alone out here."*

She let her head fall forward into her hands, lacing her fingers over her eyes. Once again the roof had leaked overnight, leaving her feather tick soaked. First thing this morning, she'd dragged it out to a sunny patch to dry, then had spent the early hours weeding the garden and tending the bees. Now she faced the unwelcome task of climbing back onto the roof. She didn't have money for new shingles and certainly not enough to pay anyone to do the work. To top it off, she'd found one of their two hogs dead in the woods, the meat long spoiled. If she couldn't track down the other one before butchering time, there'd be precious little bacon and lard this year. Letting them forage meant she didn't have to feed the animals from their minimal corn supplies, but it also put them at risk. Could she afford to keep the second one penned up all year? Could she afford not to?

Worst of all, would she have to choose between the roof and food for the table?

She unfolded the paper, spreading it flat and smoothing the creases.

The state land agent had come by at least four times in the past year to wave money at Rosie and make threats if she didn't take the deal. The idea rattled around her mind like a raccoon stuck in a box trap. Leave their home—the cabin Pa had built for Mama so many years ago?

*Pa, what would you do?*

Their neighbors, the Allens, had moved to Sevierville to live with their kin, but she and Lorna were alone in the world. She'd not felt it so keenly since they'd laid Pa to rest in the family cemetery six years ago. With the money the government was offering, they could buy a small house in town—but then what? Other girls dreamed of marrying and getting out of the mountains, but she couldn't put her mind to living anywhere else. And Lorna would never understand.

She ran a finger over the last line. This was the first time they'd offered a deal she'd even dare consider—a lifetime lease. They'd only peddled such offers to a handful of the older folks, ones who were nigh on to the grave anyhow. Had Lorna's hardship triggered this?

According to the letter, if she sold the deed to them, she and Lorna could stay right through Rosie's lifetime. She'd pay a dollar a year for the right to live on their land. For that, they'd pay her three thousand dollars up front. Three *thousand*. It was a heap more cash money than she'd ever dreamed of. It would pay for the roof and buy supplies for years. They didn't need much.

But the homestead would no longer be hers.

Lorna's shriek jerked Rosie to her feet. Her sister burst through the door and flew past, aiming for the loft ladder.

Rosie grabbed for her elbow but missed. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

Lorna's attention darted back to the doorway, mouth slack. She shook her head violently, lifting both hands to dig into her hair. A moment later she launched herself up the ladder like a bear cub clambering into a tree.

Rosie hurried out to the porch. Her sister didn't like guests, but this was a bigger fit than she'd thrown for anyone else. Was it that stranger from the other day?

Her breath caught when she spotted the Samson brothers coming up the road. Just what she needed. Resisting the urge to grab her gun

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from the pegs, she hopped off the edge of the porch and headed to meet them.

Will Samson weren't so bad, but his brother Horace could be a handful—and then some. Both of them had courted Rosie at one point or another, but Horace was the only one who'd tried strong-arming her into the woods after a barn dance. He'd reeked of shine that night, but he wasn't much better stone-cold sober. Her pa had always warned her to stay clear of them. She'd trusted his judgment after that.

And yet they were still neighbors.

"Afternoon there, Rosie." Will tipped his slouchy hat toward her, his other arm tucked tight against his chest. He'd injured his hand in a logging accident a few years before, and it hadn't been much good to him since.

"Will. Horace." She came to a stop at the edge of her clearing. She didn't aim to invite them in to visit a spell, not with how Lorna was acting.

Horace pulled off his cap and ran stubby fingers through his brown hair. "Beau Tipton said you got one of them letters. Curious what you're planning to do."

"I ain't made a decision yet. We could use the money, but I don't like the idea overmuch."

Will nodded. "We're staying, if that helps you any. We got work on the road crew, and they'll let us stay put for now."

Horace jammed a hand into his pocket. "In case you was worried about us deserting you."

The thought hadn't crossed her mind, but probably best to keep that to herself. "Glad to know we'll still have neighbors. Lots of folks are hightailing it out of here. The cash payments are mighty tempting." She folded her arms. "I'm needing a new roof and some other repairs. Our place took quite a beating in that last blow."

Will gestured toward her cabin. "We could help with that."

"That's mighty nice of you, but—"

"In fact . . ." Horace cut in. "We got a business proposition we wanted to discuss."

Will shot his brother a sideways glance. "Not that one has to do with the other."

"Iffen we work out a deal, she'd have the money she needed." He folded his arms.

Rosie couldn't imagine what he was talking about. "What sort of proposition was you fixin' to offer?"

Horace spat tobacco juice at the ground behind him. "Your branch. We want to use it. The water's cold and sweet—the best in the holler. By the time it gets down to our place, it's slow and muddy."

"We could have a nice little 'shine operation." Will's blue eyes caught hers. "We could pay you outright or split the profits, whichever you prefer."

Rosie's throat tightened. "You know how my pa died. How can you even ask such a thing?"

"It'd be good money." Horace jutted his chin forward. "Fix that roof and put a little aside."

Will lowered his voice, his tone gentle. "Your pa's death were an accident, Rosie. We'd be careful."

"And he wasn't? Is that what you're saying?" She heard the hypocrisy in her words, but she couldn't stop them. *If only Pa hadn't been so desperate.*

"Of course I ain't. But you don't have to worry. We'll set it far back in the woods—there'd be no risk to you or Lorna. You wouldn't even know it was there."

"I would know. And when the revenuers show up, they'd know. I saw a stranger in my woods a few days ago. I don't want to have to jump every time I see someone."

"There's no reasoning with McCauleys." Horace glared at her. "Never has been. Pa says the only reason the government's offering you the lease deal is on account of your feeble-minded sister. Otherwise, you'd have to take the money and get, just like the rest of the holler."

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“Horace . . .” His brother growled a warning.

Rosie curled her fists. “Don’t you dare—”

“She was up at our place again last week.” Horace’s eyes flashed. “Stole a quilt off our line. She tell you that?”

*Stole?* A pit opened in Rosie’s stomach. Lorna always brought in treasures from the woods, but she’d never taken anything that belonged to someone else.

“Now, we don’t know that for sure.” Will’s face drew down.

His brother’s nostrils flared. “I seen her. And she ain’t supposed to be on our land nohow.”

“Lorna doesn’t mean no harm.” Rosie found her voice. “She likes to visit your goats.”

“Pa says he’s going to the sheriff and get her committed.”

To think she’d once found Horace handsome as the day was long. “Get off my land, and take your shady schemes with you.” She turned and headed for the house.

His derisive snort sounded like a hog a-rooting. “Gladly.”

“Rosie.” Will followed her into the yard. “Horace’s just jawing you. Don’t listen to him.”

She whirled on him. “Get her committed? Of all the fool things to say.” Her shrill tone likely carried to where Horace was walking away. She hoped it did.

“Pa’s just sore the park offered you a lifetime lease and not us. It’s a right plum deal, ’specially since you ain’t got no husband or kids.” A shy smile crossed his face. “Not for my lack of trying.” He tucked his weakened arm against his chest. “Rosie, you had oughta take it afore they change their mind. If they kick you and Lorna off the land, where’re you gonna go? How would she make it out in the world?”

The thought sent a chill through her. Folks hereabouts weren’t always kind to Lorna, but at least they were used to her odd ways.

“If you see the quilt returned, I’ll talk to my Pa—make sure he



don't cause trouble for y'all. But it was one my late mama stitched, so it's important."

"Iffen she has it"—she swallowed against the tightness in her throat—"I'll make certain she returns it to you."

He shook his head, eyes downcast. "Maybe you'd best bring it alone."  
"All right."

"And, Rosie . . ." He released a long breath, splaying his fingers against his shirtfront. "Let me help with the roof. Please. Or we can have a working, if you'd rather."

His gentle tone melted something inside her. "I . . . I'll think about it."

He touched the brim of his hat in farewell and followed the path his brother had taken a few minutes earlier. The trail they'd oft walked together back in their courtin' days.

She went inside and climbed the ladder to the loft. "Lorna? They're gone now."

Lorna sat on the bed with her face buried in her hands. She peeked out over her interlaced fingers, a question hovering in her eyes.

"Will said . . ." A heaviness settled in Rosie's stomach as she glanced around the room. *Please don't be right.* "He said a quilt was missing. Do you know anything about it?"

Lorna stayed motionless.

Ignoring the tightening in her chest, Rosie set her jaw and walked to the trunk her sister kept near the window. Bending down, she unhooked the latch and opened the lid. A ragged yellow quilt lay wadded in the corner, wedged between Lorna's old doll and a few books that had belonged to their mother. Rosie drew it out, the fabric soft from age and too many washings. "Oh, Lorna."

Her sister jumped to her feet and grabbed a corner of the cloth, yanking it from Rosie's hands. She shoved it back into the box and slammed the lid.

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“It don’t belong to you.” The thought of carrying the quilt to the Samsons’ made her sick to her stomach, but there was nothing else to be done.

Her sister screeched, pushing Rosie away.

Rosie lost her balance, her tailbone smacking hard against the rag rug. She gaped at Lorna who’d thrown herself across the trunk’s lid, sobbing. Her sister had never raised a hand to her, not once in all their years together. She was as gentle as a summer breeze. “What’s gotten into you? What’s happened?”

Managing Lorna had always been a challenge, but the past few months she’d been restless, like her nerves was all to pieces. Would she continue to worsen until Rosie could no longer keep her safe? What then?

Lorna gulped through her tears, her chest heaving with her rapid breaths.

Rosie had spent her life reading her sister’s face, and this was an expression she’d only seen once before—when Lorna had found their pa after the still exploded.

Placing her hands over her sister’s a-trembling ones, Rosie pulled her close. The quilt could wait. “You’re safe, Lorna. You’ll always be safe here.”

After finally crying herself out, Lorna let Rosie tuck her into bed. She cuddled her rag doll and drifted off for a nap, like a six-year-old somehow trapped in a woman’s body.

Rosie sat on the edge of the bed and watched her sister sleep. If only Lorna could tell her what was wrong and why she had stolen the quilt in the first place, maybe then Rosie could explain it to the Samsons. Then Eb Samson might rethink his plan to talk to the sheriff.

Sheriff Jones had been to their cabin only once before, the day Pa had died. This huge man who weren’t afeared to go toe-to-toe with brawlers had shrunk away from Lorna like she’d been one of those lepers in the old-time Bible stories. Would he haul Lorna off to an institution just

on Eb Samson's say-so? The idea curdled Rosie's stomach like a crock of buttermilk left in the hot sun.

Maybe selling off the land and heading to town would give the pair of them a fresh start.

The moment the thought crossed her mind, she dismissed it. Reality pressed down on Rosie, crushing every bit of air from her lungs. Lorna couldn't abide change. The only hope for her sister would be to keep things exactly as they were for as long as she could manage it—Samsons or no Samsons.

Rosie tiptoed over to the trunk and removed the quilt. She ran a hand over its worn seams, tracing the simple design. After clambering down the ladder, she laid the folded coverlet on the table. The government paper still sat where she'd left it.

There was only one way to prevent change in their little world.

Taking a fountain pen from the basket, Rosie sat down in the ladder-back chair. A lump settled in her throat as she unscrewed the pen's cap.  
*For Lorna.*

Rosie McCauley signed her name.