





## CHAPTER ONE

I didn't know there was a storm coming.

Had I known, I might have done things differently.

But I'd promised to help my teacher, Mrs. Taylor, clean the schoolhouse before she locked its doors for the summer.

So I made my way up the lane from our glen to the top of the hill, past Toby's grave (though I stopped for a moment to lay my hand on his headstone), down again through a field of young wheat, and into the woods of Wolf Hollow.

The trees themselves were friendly enough, and the sunlight filtering through their leaves tried its best to cheer me up, but the path through the hollow awakened dark memories I'd tried to put to rest. Memories that never slept soundly and were apt to startle like birds at the smallest twitch, rising as they woke, while I fell deeper and deeper into gloom.

Just months before, I'd tried to save my friend Toby from a girl named Betty. She, a bully through and through. He, a ruin of a man who made an ample target for a girl practicing her aim. Both of them gone now, except for the marks they'd left on me. The marks I'd left on myself, trying to be of help.

Since Toby's death, I had been distracted by might-have-beens and if-onlys. Consumed with what I could have done differently. Not quite trusting myself as I once had. All of which laid me low. Especially when I walked through the woods that had once been Toby's home.

But Mrs. Taylor was waiting for me, her broom and scrub brush, bucket and mop ready for work, and I was glad to join her for a task that would set me straight again, face forward, my memories folding their wings and settling again in their nests where they belonged.

"And how is your summer so far, Annabelle?" Mrs. Taylor asked as she polished dust and stove-soot from the windowpanes.

June was an odd time: school was out—which meant a pause in my most important job—but there was so much farmwork to be done that I was busier than ever.

"It's been fine," I said, sweeping up boot-mud and dried bits of nimblewill. "Lots of planting to do. Strawberries to pick." She didn't need to be told. Most of us in the township

were farmers. Everyone knew what that meant. “But I love being outside. So.”

She nodded.

We worked on in easy silence, the schoolhouse strange without the squeak and shuffle of children at every desk and the patter of Mrs. Taylor huddled with one small cluster after another up at the chalkboard, the smell of warm bag lunches: meat sandwiches, oily cheese, a whiff of boiled egg.

Instead, we shared a silence punctuated only by the squeal of newspaper wetted with vinegar that Mrs. Taylor was using to clean the windows. The *hush, hush, hush* of my broom. And then, unexpectedly, a knock at the door.

Mrs. Taylor looked at me and I at her.

“Who on earth?” She climbed down off her stepladder and went along quickly to find out who had come and why.

I followed her, standing back a little but able to see that there was a man on the stoop. Past twenty but not yet thirty. Someone I’d never seen before.

I would have called him handsome, but he wasn’t. He was beautiful.

“Can I help you?” Mrs. Taylor said, wiping her hands on her apron.

“I hope so.” He smiled, his teeth even and white.

He had a well-trimmed mustache, though no beard—which was unusual in these hills, where the two usually

went hand in hand—and green eyes, my favorite kind. A big man, especially across the shoulders, with a barrel chest, like a lumberjack. Except he was dressed more like someone from town, in clean, tidy clothes, his cuffs buttoned, the kind of hat my father wore to church.

The word *gentleman* came to mind, but his eyes were curiously flat, and I had a vague suspicion that he might not be quite what he seemed. Perhaps he'd been in the war and was still finding his way all the way back from that. Or—

“I’m looking for my dog, Zeus,” he said, and I relaxed. I liked people who liked dogs.

“My name is Graf. From Aliquippa. Far enough so I doubt you’ll see Zeus around here. But I’ve been looking for most of a week, and I guess I’m grasping at straws.” He made a small, helpless gesture with one hand.

“What kind of dog?” I asked.

“A bull terrier. Brown. With a white patch on his shoulder.”

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Taylor said, “but I haven’t seen a dog like that. Have you, Annabelle?”

I shook my head. “Lots of dogs around here, but not one like that. I’d remember.”

“Well, let me know if he turns up.” Mr. Graf pulled a strip of paper from his pocket and held it out. “Here’s my telephone number.”

Mrs. Taylor took it and slipped it into her apron pocket. “Of course we will.”

It seemed that we were all done, Mrs. Taylor raising her eyebrows as if to say, *Was there something else you wanted?*

But I saw no need to hurry. Looking at him was like looking at a painting or a flower garden, and I hadn’t yet had my fill.

“I’ll ask my brothers to keep an eye out, too, Mr. Graf,” I said.

“Call me Drake.” He smiled at me, and I felt taller. Older.

“Like the duck?” I said . . . and I immediately felt small again. Young. “Not that you look like a duck. In fact—”

“Never mind that,” Mrs. Taylor said briskly. “We’ll be in touch if we see your dog, Mr. Graf.”

“Good.” He hesitated. “I wouldn’t recommend that you try to put a leash on him. Zeus isn’t very . . . comfortable around strangers. Best just to call me if he turns up.”

I wondered about that. About the word *comfortable*. Which could mean a few things.

And that name. Zeus. A Greek god. Which made the dog sound fearsome.

But dogs got their names when they were tiny and weak and blind, so I decided the name said more about Mr. Graf than it did about Zeus.

“Oh, and I’m offering a reward. Ten dollars,” he said. Which was a lot of money.

I wondered why he had saved that piece for last, like a cookie.

If we had already found his dog and said as much without knowing about a reward, would he have given one? I thought maybe not.

But then I felt guilty for thinking ill of a man who’d done nothing wrong. I didn’t like it when other people jumped to conclusions, so I tried not to do that myself, though it was hard sometimes. Knowing what to trust and what to doubt.

“That’s a lot of money,” Mrs. Turner said, her eyebrows up.

“Zeus is a lot of dog,” Mr. Graf replied, smiling his white smile.

I watched as he tipped his hat and turned toward his truck, which was parked along the edge of the dirt road that led through Wolf Hollow and out, eventually, to the hardtop and on toward places like Aliquippa with its gas stations and coffee shops and beauty salons and all the other things we didn’t have in our hills.

Compared to such places, the glen where we lived was like a cradle.

“You can always go visit somewhere else,” my father liked to say, “but then you get to come home.”

So far, home had been plenty.

But as Mrs. Taylor and I watched Mr. Graf pull away, a part of me wanted to see what else there was to see.

“He must really love his dog to go driving around the countryside like that,” Mrs. Taylor said. “And to offer such a big reward!”

“He must,” I replied.

And then, just before she shut the door, I caught sight of a boy on the other side of the road, a bit down from the schoolhouse, standing in the tall weeds, watching us.

Despite the trees casting shadows along the road, despite the way he had pulled his hat down low over his forehead, I knew who he was.

Andy Woodberry.

“What’s he doing here?” Mrs. Taylor said, and I could hear that she was frowning.

“I don’t know. He’s hardly ever in school when he’s supposed to be, but now it’s June and here he is.”

Mrs. Taylor responded by closing the door and, with it, the subject.

But I stayed where I was for a long moment, wondering what had brought Andy this way. There was nothing much along this piece of road except the school and, a bit farther down toward the flatland, our old potato house where we stored the crop until we could sell it. A distance beyond that: the Woodberry farm. Where Andy should have been.

But Andy wasn't my business anymore. And I was not his keeper.

So I bolted the door and turned back to my work, Mrs. Taylor wondering out loud about Mr. Graf and his missing dog, both of us eager to finish up and be on our way home.

I decided I would tell everyone about Mr. Graf and Zeus at dinner that night, in case they met either one.

The reward money would be nice. Finding a lost dog would be even nicer.

As I swept and dusted, I imagined saving Zeus. Taking him home to Mr. Graf. How good that would feel: to do something right. With no mistakes. No might-have-beens.

And that was when I heard the first roll of thunder in the distance.

"Was that thunder?" Mrs. Taylor asked, peering through the window. "We could certainly use the rain."

I joined her, looking out at a sky still blue.

"Maybe I ought to hightail it on home," I said as the thunder sounded again, still as mild as gravel in a bucket, though perhaps a bit closer this time. "Before it gets here."

Mrs. Taylor looked at me doubtfully. "Do you think you'll be all right?"

"I'll run," I said. "I'm sure I'll beat it home."

But I hadn't reckoned on the speed of that storm, or how easily it would cross the distance between us.



## CHAPTER TWO

By the time I had climbed up out of Wolf Hollow to where the woods ended, the storm had come stomping out of the west in its big black boots, gnashing its teeth and shouting itself hoarse, and I realized that I shouldn't have ignored the maple leaves that had flashed their white warnings or the wind as it had suddenly blown cold against my bare arms.

But I *had* ignored them, and now I was caught unprepared, without so much as a hat on my head.

I knew about storms. I knew not to stand under a tree. I knew to stay away from anything metal, anything tall. I knew that if I could hear thunder, I was within reach of lightning.

But I was nearly home, with no shelter to be had, and the thought of lying flat on the ground to wait out the worst of it seemed idiotic. So I hurried on just as the storm pulled a fistful of cold, wet marbles from its pocket and flung them against my face.

In the space of a moment, I was drenched, heavy with rain, torn between wanting the shelter of the trees and knowing I should leave them.

It was the lightning itself that made me run, though I crouched at every white flash—as if the storm were taking my picture—and then raced on, fast as I could.

When I reached the crest of the hill where the lane waited to lead me down again toward home, I paused, shocked at the sight of the hemlocks along the lane thrashing and twisting like they were trying to pull up their roots and run.

I was standing there, rigid with fear, when suddenly the air fizzed around me, as if I'd been dipped in wasps.

In an instant, those wasps stung me all at once, every inch of me, inside and out, and I knew nothing at all except a sizzling pain in my head, a dreadful heat, a sharp emptiness in my chest, and a kind of ending.

Someone started me again.

From a dark and distant place, I felt someone pounding on my chest, again and again, and I thought of my mother punching down a great white belly of dough.

I opened my eyes, hoping to see her, but found myself in a curious night, impossibly dark, as if the stars were all inside my head.

The pounding stopped.

I felt a rough hand on my cheek.

Suddenly—the cold rain, though it had surely been falling all along. The deep, disturbing thud of thunder in every one of my bones.

And then I slipped away again.

When I woke, I was being carried.

Not gently. At a run. I still couldn't see anything, and my thoughts were clogged with mud and old straw, better suited for a swallow's nest than a girl's head.

But I could smell the rain as I'd never smelled it before: both clean and tarnished, like hot metal and plowed dirt and pond rot all mixed together.

And then I was inside. In my own home. I knew it from the smell of bleach and bread but also, for the first time, from other things, too: the chalky white mineral crust around the sink spigot, the vaguely rotten stink of the gas stove, and especially the slop bucket, full of tattered cabbage leaves and coffee grounds.

And I knew it from the smell of the people. Their end-of-the-day sweat. A sweetness that brought to mind my grubby little brothers. A sourness that was, perhaps, the scent of my grandmother, who was unwell.

*What's happening to me?* I thought as I heard my mother say, "Lay her there," in a voice ragged with fear.

I wanted to tell her I was all right, but my own voice was still trying to find its way back.

“What’s wrong with her?” my grandma said. She sounded as if she were crying, which choked me, too, and made me cough, which loosed from my aunt Lily a quick bark of prayer.

I knew I was on the big tiger oak table in our kitchen where I’d been laid out once before after I’d stumbled into a nest of yellow jackets. My mother had daubed me with wet baking soda until I was as speckled as a fawn.

Even over the thunder, I could hear my little brother James yelling, “Annabelle!” over and over. “Annabelle, wake up!”

Which was when I began to see again.

Just a little light at first, and then, more quickly, the shapes of people, the color of them, their faces all around the table looking down at me, like the petals of a flower.

As my sight cleared, everything became sharper and sharper . . . and then went past what I’d always seen before, past ordinary, to colors that were brighter, everything edged in light.

My mother, leaning over me, must have seen that same light reflected in my eyes.

“Oh, there you are,” she murmured, trying to smile, her hand on my cheek, which took me back to the top of that hill. To the memory of that other, rougher hand.

She closed her eyes and let out her breath.

“It must have been just a glancing blow,” my father said, his hand on my pulse. “Her heart’s good and steady.”

“But look at this!” My mother lifted my right arm, and I could see a frenzy of red burns that ran across my skin like a lightning-vine. “*Dear Lord.*” She laid my arm gently down again.

“I called Dr. Peck,” my father said, smoothing the hair off my forehead, “but his wife said he’s over in Coraopolis, delivering a baby.” He leaned closer. “Can you hear me, Annabelle?”

I nodded. I could hear him too well, in fact, as if he were shouting, though he wasn’t.

My father felt for my pulse again. “Can you sit up?”

With some effort, I could.

“Then we’ll wait for him to come.” My father tried for a smile. “He’ll have you good as new in no time.”

“There would be no need if you hadn’t gone out in the storm in the first place, Annabelle,” Aunt Lily said, and I wanted to smack her. “I thought you were smarter than that.”

But smart often comes *after* a mistake.

That was one lesson I’d already learned more than once.

I reckoned I’d learn it again, but I didn’t foresee the other mistakes that were coming, or what other kinds of smart I’d become.



### CHAPTER THREE

I'd once been shocked pretty badly, when I was ten, helping my father with wiring that should have been dead. And I would always remember how it had felt when the electric current ran up my arm. Like a warm, metallic hum in my veins. Something coppery on my tongue.

And then my father had shoved me away with his shoulder.

“Never grab a person with your hands if they're being shocked,” he said later. “The shock will spread and make your hands grip harder, so you can't let go. Always use something wood to break the connection. Never metal. Or, if you must, make sure to knock the person free with a part of yourself that won't grip.”

“Like your shoulder.” I rubbed the place where he'd shoved me.

“Or a fist.”

I remember thinking how odd that was: punching someone to help them.

As I lay in bed that night, trying to come all the way back from where I'd been, my mother dozing in a rocker nearby, I realized that someone had saved me this time by punching my heart awake.

My mother saw the bruises on my chest as she helped me get dressed the next morning. Ugly blue-and-green blotches, nothing like the red burns that unfurled like fiddleheads all along my arm.

“What are those bruises?” she asked me, wide-eyed. *“Annabelle, who did this to you?”*

But I couldn't answer. The words waited, but they were in no hurry.

I stared at her, trying to make sense out of the jumble in my head. Trying to snap myself properly awake.

But while the rest of the world marched on at its usual quick pace, I was living in slow motion, like I'd been slapped hard and was still stunned.

Only my senses were fully alert. I could smell everything from the Fels-Naptha soap my mother used on stains to the scorched ruins of my shirt, draped over the foot of my bed. And I could hear every footfall, the sound of my grandmother humming to herself in the kitchen below, the wail of a freight train, though the nearest tracks were

miles away. And I could feel even the slightest touch, how the stitching on my clothes lay on my skin like tiny chains.

I felt as if I were inside a kaleidoscope, full of bright, colorful puzzles, and I was both fascinated and alarmed by what was happening to me.

“Annabelle?” my mother said, her face pinched with worry. “Did you hear me? Do you know where those bruises came from?”

But when I still didn’t answer, she grabbed me in her arms. Kissed the top of my head. “It’s all right,” she murmured. “We’ll sort everything out. Just go easy now.”

And she helped me brush the weird, frizzy clumps from my hair, and then held my hand as we made our way slowly down the stairs to the kitchen.

“Well, there’s our girl,” my grandpap said from his spot at the table. He smiled at me, but I could see the worry in his eyes.

My grandma put down her coffee cup and reached out an arm. “Come here, child, so I can get a good look at you.” Her heart was bad, and she now lived from chair to chair, else she would have come bustling to my side, all plump arms around me, all soft cheek against mine.

She pulled me into a half hug and murmured “*Thank you*” into my ribs, though I knew she wasn’t talking to me.

“I bet Annabelle has superpowers now,” James said.

“Like maybe she can shoot lightning bolts out of her fingers.”

My other brother, Henry, who was a couple of years older than James, huffed at that. “Why would she want to shoot lightning bolts out of her fingers?”

“What a foolish question,” James said.

“What a foolish boy,” Henry replied. “Your superpower seems to be shooting nonsense out of your mouth.”

My father said, “Boys,” in a stern voice, but I could see that he was trying not to smile.

And I would have smiled, too, but I was too far away, too deep inside my own skin, though I noted with interest that Henry seemed oddly grim, almost angry, as he sat at his breakfast that morning.

My grandpap gave me an answer to that when he said, “Still no sign of Buster?”

Henry shook his head.

Buster was Henry’s dog. A beat-up stray who’d arrived two months earlier on Easter morning when no one expected anything beyond church and a dinner of ham and scalloped potatoes, applesauce and cinnamon, warm buttermilk biscuits, the first of the asparagus tasting like spring.

There had been other dogs on our farm, and we’d liked them all, but Buster was special, especially to Henry, and

from that day forward, the two of them were paired and promised, like all best friends are, and never far apart, even on school days. Buster would sit outside the schoolhouse like a flop-eared sentinel, waiting for Henry to reappear. And he slept at the foot of Henry's bed despite Aunt Lily's protests, most of them having to do with mud and fleas and slobber (though Buster was remarkably tidy, for a farm dog).

And now, it seemed, he was missing. Just like Mr. Graf's missing Zeus, though I couldn't imagine one had anything to do with the other.

I wanted to ask what had happened to Buster, but the question in my head stayed there, stuck.

At the look on my face, Henry sighed. "He was out in that storm, too, though I don't know why, since he's a big chicken when there's thunder."

Like most dogs. Thunder and gun shot. Fireworks, too, though we had those but once a year.

"I went with Daddy to Ambridge to pick up some peck baskets," Henry said bitterly. "Buster was gone when we got back. I should have taken him with us."

I watched Henry. His bowed head. The sag in his shoulders.

I knew something about regret and was well aware of the should-haves of my own life. Well aware that there would be others.

Already had been.

Among them, my decision to try and outrun a storm.

“Eat up.” My mother put my breakfast down in front of me. “Dr. Peck will be here any minute now.”

I hoped he would be able to help me release what was stuck.

My voice, mostly. But questions, too.

The loudest of them: Who had brought me back to life?  
And why had they not stayed to say so?



## CHAPTER FOUR

“She’ll be fuzzy and out of sorts for a few days, but she’ll talk again,” Dr. Peck said as we sat in my room, me on the bed, him on a chair alongside me, my parents standing nearby. “I’m quite sure of it. When she’s ready. Nothing wrong with her vocal cords,” for I had made a sound when Dr. Peck pricked my foot with a needle. “Or her hearing,” for I had answered his questions with a nod or a shake of my head. “Or her eyesight,” for I had followed Dr. Peck’s finger back and forth. “Her circuits are a bit scrambled.” He frowned a little. “Lightning will do that to a person. But we’ll see how it goes.”

I didn’t know much about a person’s circuits, but I knew enough to ask the question that bothered me most. “Isn’t my brain all circuits?”

And there I was. Back. Just like that.

I reckoned curiosity was a potent force, too.

My mother burst into tears. My father smiled.

“Well, that’s a relief,” the doctor said, though he’d been “quite sure” I’d speak again.

I cleared my throat and asked my question again. “Mrs. Taylor told us we run on electricity, like radios.”

Dr. Peck answered with a frown and a waggle of his head. “Well, yes, Annabelle. We run on electricity, head to toe. Fortunately, the human body is a wondrous thing. Especially a child’s body. It can repair many problems that ail it. As you yourself just proved.”

“What about the burns on her arm?” my mother asked, drying her tears.

“Those are called Lichtenberg figures. Keraunographic marks. Lightning flowers. Lots of names for something so simple. Yet so unusual.” He lifted up my arm and peered at the burns. “They’ll fade away in time.” He looked into my eyes again, thoughtful. “Of greater concern is any deeper burn, to the muscles or the organs. But you seem to be all right, Annabelle. Unless there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Just that everything’s louder than before,” I said slowly. “Brighter. And everything smells and tastes so strong.”

“Hmm. Well, more is better than less. So if that’s all

you've noticed, I'd say you're one very lucky girl. The lightning barely grazed you, else you'd be in the hospital right now and facing months of recovery. Maybe years."

"Oh!" my mother said suddenly. "But those bruises, Annabelle. I almost forgot about those."

When I pulled down the neck of my shirt, Dr. Peck could see that I was black and blue.

"That's not from the lightning," he said, watching my face.

I looked from him to my parents and back again. "The lightning knocked me out cold. And I woke up when someone was punching me on the chest. He stopped when I opened my eyes."

They stared at me. "*He?*" my father said.

I thought about that. "I don't know. Maybe she. But I felt a hand on my cheek, and it was rough. Like yours," I said to my father. "So I thought *he*. I thought you . . . but it wasn't."

He shook his head. "I went searching for you when we got back from Ambridge, and I found you lying at the top of the hill." His face was pale with the memory of it. "I didn't know at first that you'd been struck by lightning."

"And something else, too," the doctor said. "*Someone* else. Though in a good way." He sighed through his nose. "Likely started your heart again. Saved your life."

I swallowed. “So I wasn’t just knocked out?”

He shrugged. “Even if it doesn’t do much other damage, lightning can easily stop a heart. Something has to get it started again.”

When he left us, he told my mother to bring me in for a checkup in a day or two. “Just to make sure all’s well.”

Which split me evenly between the desire to go back to “all’s well” and a building hunger to learn what was new about me.

Fighting Betty and losing Toby had taught me that nothing stays the same. And now the storm had proved it once again. In the blink of an eye, my world had tipped on its axis, but this time I was curious about the changes in me. A little scared but excited, too, by how I fizzed and crackled, as if I were still full of lightning.

I felt like I’d been given a chance to become stronger. Smarter.

Trying to save Toby had been my best deed, but the lies I’d told along the way had been my worst mistakes, and they were at the root of the what-ifs that now followed me through my days.

Perhaps, if I’d been full of lightning at the time, I’d have known more, understood more.

And maybe been able to save him.