

CHAPTER ONE

Henry Dane hunkered down by the old wood stove, and rubbed his calloused hands together while he watched the frost on the kitchen window melt beneath the warmth of the rising sun.

A cold front had buried the spring grass beneath several inches of snow. Wind now carried off the last of the apple tree blossoms, dropping pink petals all the way from the orchard to the stables, where a dozen horses snorted out angry clouds and stamped the ground.

Henry turned back to the fire, staring past his hands and into the flames.

He hadn't slept well last night, tossing and turning, finally waking up to a chill that he could feel in every one of his sixty-year-old bones. He had pulled on his long underwear, stumbled to the kitchen and got the fire going.

As the warmth seeped into his hands, he remembered how as a boy he had hardly even been aware of the weather. He could remember his mother's wagging finger and her pinched brow. Her mouth moving in angry shapes whenever he had come in from outside without a coat or mittens. He could not hear the sounds, so he had to read her face. All he could do was nod and hope that she would not tell his father.

His father would angrily point to Henry's hands, red from building a snow fort. Or to Henry's pants, soaking wet from splashing in rain puddles, then shake his head and reach for the paddle. But no matter how hard he tried to remember and understand what they expected of him, he just never figured it out. They did not know sign, and he could not hear.

When they finally sent him away, he was sure it was because he had been so unable to learn, so stupid.

It was the end of summer, not long after his seventh birthday, and he was playing with his new boat in the creek that ran near the house. He had been unaware of his father until he saw him reflected in the water, standing behind him. He turned and smiled, but his father did not smile back.

He crooked his finger for Henry to follow, and walked away. Snatching his boat from the water, Henry ran to catch up.

He began to imagine the worst. Had he been stupid again? He had played in the creek before without them getting mad. He caught up to his father and tugged on his hand, but he pulled it away and kept walking - never looking down.

Something turned over in Henry's stomach and he began to cry, even though he knew his father would only get angrier. To his surprise, his father just kept walking. By the time they'd gotten to the house, Henry was so upset he could barely breathe. Soon, his father would take the paddle from the wall and spank him. He was sure of it.

But Father didn't go in the house. Instead, he went around to the front and stood by the car in the driveway.

Maybe he was not in trouble. Maybe they were going to town!

Henry wiped his eyes and started for the car, then remembered the boat in his hands. He could not take it. He held the boat up for his father and pointed to the house. He shook his head and waved Henry over to the car.

His father opened the door and climbed in the front seat. Henry was uneasy, for some reason his mother was not there. He held the boat on his lap, water soaking into his pants as the car bumped along the road. His father stared out the front window, emotionless. Henry scanned his face, tried to pick up some clue as to where they were going.

They drove for so long that the water on his pants dried. They did go to town, but they did not stop there. They drove past all of the shops and busy streets and houses until they were out into the country again.

As they turned a corner something glinted from the backseat. A latch on a suitcase.

One of the ones they used when they went to see his grandparents. Henry liked visiting them, even though they always made sorry, baby faces at him like he had just hurt his knee or something. He didn't think they were going there.

The road dipped down and he could see they were headed into a valley at the base of the mountains. He had never been this close to the mountains before. He watched a hawk floating on the breeze high overhead as if hypnotized. He was afraid to look at his father now, afraid to read what was in his face.

The car began to slow. Several large buildings the color of rust stood at the end of the road surrounded by ancient evergreen trees. A large rock sign marked the entrance, but Henry couldn't read it.

Abruptly his father parked the car, got out and yanked the suitcase off the back seat then yanked Henry out too. He left the boat, not sure if he should bring it. His father retrieved it, still never meeting his eyes. They walked toward the largest building, entering through a set of immense double doors.

A pretty young woman all dressed in yellow greeted them. She seemed happy to see his father. She smiled and gently took Henry's hand. Tentatively he shook it, fearfully clutching his boat with his other arm.

His father set the suitcase beside a bench and motioned for Henry to sit. Then he disappeared into the room where the young woman had come from.

Hesitantly, Henry looked around. The place was overwhelming. It looked like castles he'd seen in books. The hallway was twice as long as their whole house, with lots of mysterious doors. He hoped they would not be here long.

A shaft of sunlight worked its way across the floor as he swung his feet back and forth beneath the bench. It creaked with each sway, but he could not hear it.

Something moved in the shadows at the end of the hall. He turned to see two older girls walk around the corner. They didn't even notice him, pale and huddled on the bench. They were too busy looking at each other's hands.

Henry stared in disbelief as their fingers twisted and turned, moved across their faces, darted around their bodies. He was mesmerized. The girls stopped when they saw him staring. Smiling, one of them waved to him and reluctantly he waved back. Then she touched her fingers to her ear and made a questioning face. Embarrassed, his face flushed red and he turned away to hide it. When he looked back a moment later they were gone. One of the doors down the hall fell shut.

He did not like this place. He was contemplating going through the door his father had gone in when it opened and his father stepped back out.

Henry jumped eagerly off the bench with his boat, ready to leave. But his father took his hand and sat him back on the bench, kneeling down in front of him. He held Henry by the shoulders and looked him in the eyes, shaking his head. Henry thought he looked funny, almost like he was going to cry. His father looked at the ground for a moment. Henry could feel him tremble slightly, and then his father nodded to the woman without another look at him.

She took Henry's hand and held him close while he watched his father jog back to the car. The image blurred through a veil of tears. He felt a pain in his chest he was sure would never heal.

The fire flared and sparked, bringing him back to the present. The sun was higher and he still hadn't fed the horses.

He went to his room and dressed, then slipped on his thick, woolen jacket and went out into the morning.

As he braced himself against the wind, he noticed a piece of paper sticking out of the snow as he struggled to shut the door behind him. He knew what it was before he picked it up. The face of Boulder County's Number One Realtor leered up at him from a cheap business card.

Sometimes Henry wished he'd never learned to read.

The bastard must have come by while he was in town picking up feed yesterday. The man would not take no for an answer, he even brought an interpreter with him a few weeks ago to make sure Henry knew "what an incredible opportunity he was missing". Henry Dane had learned to read faces long before he had learned to read letters, and he could tell everything he needed to know from this man's face.

As he walked he studied the mountains. Where the snow lay in the higher elevations it was pure white, but down along the Front Range it was dirty yellow. When he was a boy all the snow had been white. Now there were too many people, too many cars.

Just fine for people selling real estate.

The wind was worse than he thought. He retrieved his aged leather work gloves from his pockets and pulled them on. Henry had never liked wearing gloves, but he found it even more disagreeable after he learned sign language.

As much as he thought he was going to die the first few weeks at the Boulder School for the Deaf and Blind, he not only lived but thrived. Within weeks he had begun to learn sign - the forbidden language that all the children used in the dorms and playgrounds and all the secret places the hearing teachers could not see them.

It was not like it was now. Back then the deaf did not have what they have now. When he was going to school, you could count on getting slapped with a ruler on the knuckles for using signs instead of speaking. But it didn't matter. Bruised or bleeding, children's hands spoke across classrooms and schoolyards and even in the moonlight after lights out. He and his friends would not wear gloves even on the coldest days - the learning, the knowing, the sharing was worth the risk of frostbite.

He was genuinely excited when his parents came back to take him home for that first Christmas holiday, but by the third day he longed to be back at the school where he could talk, and be heard, by others like himself.

All he could remember of holidays away from school were weak smiles and nodding heads. The only communication between

himself and his parents being short notes passed back and forth. After a few years some sort of unconscious agreement was reached. They would write and ask him if he'd like to come home and he would reply that as much as he would like nothing more, there was actually a play or game that he had to practice for.

He hurried inside the stables, grateful for relief from the wind that had already numbed his ears and cheeks. He had a knot in his stomach. After he fed the horses he would feed himself. He opened the bin where he kept the grain and was momentarily perplexed at seeing it still empty. Then it dawned on him that he had never unloaded the grain from the back of the truck because Oren McConnell and his daughter had been there waiting for him.

It was probably better he had left the feed in the truck, he thought, now he could just throw a bale of hay in the back and drive the twenty yards instead of walking.

He grabbed a bale of hay and walked out to the old '49 Dodge half-ton, feeling the snow give beneath his boots.

He tried not to, but found himself looking over at the small boulder he had placed beneath the closest apple tree yesterday evening. He had hoped it had just been a bad dream, that the stupid dog had gone off chasing a fox or coyote and simply gotten lost.

Henry dropped the bale of hay on top of the snow-covered sacks of grain in the truck bed, then hunkered down in the cab and pumped the gas.

When he came home last night he was relieved to see Oren McConnell and his daughter A.J. waiting. His dog Lady was in the back of their truck, lying down.

Lady was one of four pups the McConnell's dog had given birth to, in the one and only litter she'd ever had. Oren had given two of the pups away, and kept one for A.J. They'd given Henry the fourth puppy, not long after Henry's wife had passed away.

And Michael left.

It still pained him to think about the last time he had seen his son Michael. He would have liked Lady.

When Oren and A.J. climbed out of the cab of the truck Henry could see A.J.'s eyes were puffy and red. She cried as she signed the words.

"Dad found Lady by the road a couple hours ago. He paged me, and I drove over there right away. I didn't even finish shoeing the Donnelly's mare. No blood, but I think she got hit by a car. I'm so sorry, Henry."

He nodded, solemnly lifting the golden retriever's body out of the truck, and shook his head no when they asked if they should stay.

Henry turned the key in the ignition. He felt the starter turn over, but the engine didn't engage. He pumped the gas and tried again. Nothing. The battery was dead. He got out and walked back to the stables. He found an empty five-gallon bucket and took it back to the truck. Opening the tailgate, he dragged one of the bags to the edge and pulled out his pocketknife.

Just a couple years ago he could have carried the whole sack on his shoulder over to the corral, but now he was beginning to sweat just doing this. He set the bucket beneath the sack, cut a hole and let it fill up. He grabbed the bale with his right hand and picked up the bucket with his left and set out.

The horses jostled each other as they saw him approach and caught wind of the grain.

Easy. I'm coming.

The wind turned the sweat to ice on his face, and a hard ball formed in his stomach as he moved along the fence. Feed the horses, then feed himself and maybe read a book by fire with the dog curled up beside-

He stopped and took a few deep breaths, pretending he wasn't looking back to see if the dog was following along behind him. Nothing.

She's gone.

He began walking again.

He had tried to leave her inside the house a couple times when the weather was like this, but the scratches on the door and the torn up rug let it be known she would not allow it, even if she limped the whole way. She'd been kicked by one of the colts years ago, shattering her back left leg. Henry didn't think she would ever be able to walk again but A.J., just out of veterinary school up in Fort Collins, managed to put her back together again, even though it meant the metal pins would cause her to limp every time a cold front rolled in.

He had never realized how much a part of his life the dog had become. She woke him up in the morning. She let him know when the coffee pot was done. Let him know when someone was at the door or the phone was ringing. The dog had been his constant companion for the last seven years.

His vision blurred and the ground seemed to shift beneath him. He needed to stop thinking about the dog and get this done. Only ten yards to the corral.

He took a step, then froze. A metal band seemed to suddenly wrap around his chest and begin to squeeze. He let the bale drop and steadied himself against the fencepost.

Damn.

A.J. had been the one who made him go to the doctor six months ago when she saw him rubbing his chest while she was giving the horses their shots. He insisted it was just indigestion, and thought that was the end of it. He should have known better when she asked if he would help her load up some feed in town the next day. They went to the granary, but not to get feed. Knowing she never would have gotten Henry to see a doctor, she had talked one into meeting them at the granary.

At first he was angry, but once he saw that the doctor was genuinely concerned, and after he took the tests, he realized the girl had been right. She had probably saved his life. All he had to do was take the nitroglycerin tablet twice every day and see the doctor once in a while.

And take it easy.

His vision seemed to clear and he pushed himself away from the fence and started back to the house. Then the band became a fist and squeezed around his heart until he dropped to his knees. The pain shot down his left arm and up his neck until even his teeth hurt.

No.

He could barely breathe now, and pain was moving down his right arm. The sweat from his face dripped onto his jacket and formed frozen teardrops.

His jacket.

He had put some pills in his inside pocket. Just have to get one and pop it under my tongue.

His right hand froze halfway, refusing to obey the signals from his brain. He forced it to his face, his body now nearly paralyzed and his vision a blur. All he had to do was get the glove off and then he could reach inside his jacket and get the tablets. Craning his neck out, he pulled the glove off with his teeth. He cried out as he forced his hand into his jacket, down into his pocket and got hold of one of the tablets between his first two fingers. The sleeve wanted to catch on the zipper.

So close.

He pulled his hand free and somehow managed to get his fingers to his mouth. The pill dropped onto his tongue and he let his hand fall. He let the pill slide under his tongue and prayed it wasn't too late.

He could have sworn he had taken his medication this morning.

Yes, before he started the fire.

He was sure of it.

Henry knew in that instant what had happened, and who had done this to him. He had one last dragon to slay to make things right, but it slayed him first.

His ears began to ring and he slipped beyond the pain. His mind was flooded with images. Images of the children who had come over on bright yellow busses from the Deaf school and helped him pick the first crop of apples from the orchard he had planted the year after his wife had died.

His wife - laughing as they swam in the lake behind the school and she taught him a second language with her hands.

His son - fumbling his first signs through his tiny hands as he tugged at his mother's dress and asked for a bottle.

His wife - laying in the hospital dying.

His son - his face contorted in anger after they got home from the funeral.

His wife. His son. Seven years since he had seen them.

As the cold claimed the last of his consciousness, Henry William Dane hoped only that his wife would still love him.

And that his son could somehow forgive him.