

Chapter One

We crept toward the old shack on our bellies, crab-crawling over moss and oak leaves. Elsbeth breathed softly to my left, just out of sight. Siegfried took the lead, several feet ahead of me. Behind us, the horses stood tethered to maple saplings, their tails swishing against deerflies. Our equine friends munched steadily on sweet leaves with a rhythmic, crunching sound that anchored our daring antics with the sound of home. “Do you think anyone lives here?” Elsbeth’s whisper glanced off the air, soft as the breeze that rustled overhead. I pressed a finger against my lips to warn her. “Shhhh. I think I heard something.” I was glad I’d left Shadow at home. He would have betrayed us, running all over the woods, baying at every new scent he found.

Siegfried raised a hand signaling us to stop. He’d heard it, too. It was a keening of sorts, a high-pitched wail that was speech but not speech, closer to song, but with no melody I recognized. Ice crawled down my spine and tingled in my toes. My heart sped to a staccato beat, pounding against the soft earth beneath me. I chanced a look at Elsbeth, whose eyes had gone wide with what some people might think was fear. But I knew better. Excitement lurked behind those big brown eyes. She didn’t scare so easily now that she was eleven. A puff of wood smoke escaped the chimney in a lazy tendril, spreading into gray softness that filled the air with the aroma of campfires and cold winter mornings. Whoever lived inside this remote, ramshackle cabin had just started a cooking fire, for the scent was soon followed by the clanging of a cast iron pan and the distinctive aroma of bacon. Siegfried glanced back at us, motioning toward a tumbled down stone wall. He hopped to his feet and scrambled, chest tucked tightly to his knees. Although I was a full year older than the twins, I often let Siegfried lead. He was the one with the compass and the navigational skills, and had taken us on several excursions into the forests behind the Ambuscade. We’d learned in history class that

George Washington sent John Sullivan and his men to defend settlers against the Indian raids in 1779. Lt. Thomas Boyd and his scouting party were ambushed by British allies, the Iroquois Indians led by Chief Joseph Brant, where fifteen men were brutally slaughtered. Lt. Boyd and Sergeant Michael Parker were captured and tortured in Little Beard's village, the current day Cuylerville which lays across the valley toward the west. A plaque stood in the park, marking the spot where they were tortured. Now, in 1965—a hundred and eighty-six years later—I stared at it in fascination whenever my father drove us past it on the way to Letchworth State Park. I trusted Siegfried like the brother I never had, and there was no jockeying for position between the three of us. No one was the leader all the time, and our natural gifts led us into the roles we were meant to have. The important thing was Siegfried always brought us out safely from our deep woods adventures. Elsbeth, who lay snug against me behind the stone wall, nudged me in the ribs and whispered so close to my ear it tickled. “Someone's in there!” A conversation had started up inside the cabin. I strained to hear it, trying to calm the heartbeat in my ears that pounded over the words I couldn't make out. One side was definitely a deep male voice. Gruff and playful, he seemed to be discussing plans for the day. The other side was silent. Either his wife or child had a really soft voice, or he was talking on the telephone. I scanned the area. Siegfried noticed and followed my gaze. No telephone poles or wires. No electricity. Unless he had one of those walkie-talkies like they used in the war, he must be talking to either a deaf mute or a very soft-spoken person.

Siegfried started to crawl around the edge of the wall. We followed as he crept closer to the eastern side of the shack. Aside from the front door, there was one window per wall. Nothing fancy, just a plain old four square window with two cracked panes. The frames may have been painted at one time, but they were bare now. The front door looked solid enough, made from rough planks, but the roof dipped and waved near the chimney and I imagined when it rained, it probably dripped from the ceiling into buckets. Globes of tar and different colored shingles were plastered over the roof in various spots.

A beat up old Ford pickup stood silent under the trees in the back. We reached the window, and were able to hear better. The man's rumbling voice gave me chills. "Why *don't* you want me to go?" Silence. "Okay. So come with me. What's the big deal?" More silence, then a groan from the man. "Nobody will see you. You can wait outside." I exchanged puzzled looks with the twins and tried to get a little closer to the window. The deep voice spoke again. "What? Who's outside?" I tensed. Siegfried's eyes grew round as fireballs. Elsbeth grabbed my arm and squeezed. Heavy footfalls thundered across the floor and the window overhead flew open. The atomic blast of his voice came seconds before his head poked out the window. "What in tarnation are you kids doing?" Frozen in place, we stared at the man whose grizzled old face twisted in fury. The white tangled beard hung six inches beneath his chin, resting on a red-and-white checkered flannel shirt. Black suspenders looped over his shoulders, and his gnarled hands batted the air in front of his face. He yelled louder this time, making three crows caw and abandon their perch in the giant cottonwood overhead. "Well, speak up! What the hell's going on here?" Elsbeth spoke first, shocked into her native language. "*Es tut mir leid.*" When the man squinted his eyes in confusion, she recovered. "Um. Sorry, sir. We didn't think anyone lived here." We scuttled backwards on our hands and feet, our backsides scraping the earth like bouncing bulldozers. Siegfried jumped up and pulled his sister to her feet, and I stumbled back to the stone wall, where my spine rammed against stones. I winced, then scrambled to my feet and stared at the ground. "We're sorry, Mister. We were looking for a fort." The sound of a rifle cocking made me look up again. A long barrel poked out the window, aimed at my chest. "If you kids aren't gone by the time I count to five, you're dead meat. Now scat!" I didn't know if he actually counted or not. The blood rushed in my ears and drowned out all sounds, including those of the three of us racing to our horses, swinging onto their backs, and galloping through the woodland trail to safety.

Chapter Two

When we reached the clearing near the Ambuscade monument and park, I dismounted and flopped to the ground beside my horse. I dropped Pancho's reins on the grass and the black gelding began to munch grass next to my head, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. I rolled onto my back, breathing hard. "I've never been so scared in my life." Elsbeth slid from Golden Boy's back and tied him to a fencepost. Sig did the same with his piebald, Frisbee, and the two of them joined me on the grassy hill. "*Mein Gott!* How did he know we were out there?" Elsbeth propped herself up with one elbow and turned to me. "And who was he talking to?" Siegfried was quiet for a moment, but I could see his brain working furiously behind half-closed eyes. "Maybe he has a prisoner in there. And their mouth was gagged. That's why we couldn't hear their answers." I sat up. "But *he* heard the answers, right? He was really talking to someone." Sig's mouth twisted. "*Ja*. I guess so." When Elsbeth turned on her stomach, her dark brown curls fell forward, nearly obscuring her face. Her cheeks still flushed pink from our gallop to safety. "I think it was a psychic child. His only daughter who can read minds and make spoons bend. She sensed we were outside and told him. Maybe she told him in his head. She didn't even need to talk." Her eyes flashed with excitement, even though Siegfried seemed to dismiss the theory with a half headshake. "It could be." I rolled onto my stomach beside her, finally feeling my breath come under control. "Or maybe he was talking to a ghost. What the heck was that weird singing sound, anyway?" Siegfried snorted and ignored my question. "Let's face it. It's more likely he was delusional. He imagines a friend is with him. He's so lonely he had to make one up. And he has conversations with them on a regular basis."

"That would make him nuts," I said. Siegfried looked at me as if I were a slow student. "*Ja*, precisely." Elsbeth combed her hands through the deep grass, looking

for the elusive four-leaf clover. “There’s just one problem with that idea.” Sig sat up and challenged her with his shocking blue eyes. “What? It’s a perfect theory.” She pulled her knees close to her chin and narrowed her eyes as if she were about to reveal a secret. “If he’s crazy, how’d he know we were out there?” Siegfried and I exchanged a glance. I sat up and brushed dirt from my knees. “She’s right. He came right over and found us. And we hadn’t even made a sound. We were so quiet.” “Maybe he had a trip wire somewhere. We might have crawled right over it and set an alarm off inside.” Siegfried was reaching now, and his hesitant words betrayed his doubt. Elsbeth knew she had him. “*Nein*. We were sitting under that window listening to him talk with whoever it was for quite a while. We didn’t move, remember? And it took at least five minutes for him to realize we were there.” I looked at Siegfried, who had gone silent. “She’s right. But I still don’t get it. Ghosts don’t exist, and I’m not sure even psychic people are real.”

Elsbeth jumped to her feet and headed for Golden Boy. She untied his reins, grabbed a fistful of mane, and swung onto his broad back. “We’ll find out next time, anyway.” Siegfried got up and headed for Frisbee, who skittered away from him for a few feet. Even he seemed nervous. “Next time?” “*Ja*. When we go back to investigate.” I chuckled and vaulted onto Pancho’s back. Although I didn’t relish the idea of returning to the shack, I wasn’t surprised at her bravado. She’d been showing signs of feistiness over the past few months that made my heart swell with pride. “Come on. We’ll be late for dinner. Race ya to the road.” I turned Pancho’s head and squeezed his bare sides with my legs, leaning forward to urge him into a canter. We covered the ground where Boyd’s men had been slaughtered, and I almost thought I heard the screams of the men as they were ambushed by the Indians and Brits. I kicked his sides faster and pushed my steed into a gallop. I didn’t want to linger where ghosts walked.