

DEATH MOUNTAIN

by Sherry Shahan

CHAPTER ONE

*Do not go where the path may lead,
go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Erin kicked a rusty bottle cap across the two-lane highway in front of the bus station. Another string of RVs rolled by, blocking her view of the rugged Sierra Nevada Mountains. She saw two dirt bikes tied above one of the bumpers. If she had a bike right now, she wouldn't have to break her promise to her grandma about hitchhiking. If her bus ticket hadn't been stolen off her backpack, she'd be two hours down the road by now.

"If wishes were horses," Gram always said, "beggars would ride."

Erin stood on the highway feeling small in the bleak desert. It was my fault, she thought, raking her honey-brown hair into a sloppy braid. I shouldn't have left the ticket in plain sight.

From the moment the plan to visit her mom was proposed, Erin had fought against going. She didn't want to see her no matter where she lived. Not after what she'd done. Leaving like that, without even a good-bye. Just a stupid note saying "I can't take it anymore. I need to find peace . . . find myself."

"She must have been really lost," Erin muttered, glancing down the highway. "It took her a year just to find a phone."

She rolled her sleeves and scuffed along the gravel shoulder, nearly blown over by the RVs and trucks hurtling by. Across the road, not far from the bus station, a country store leaned in the wind. Heat waves shimmered like ghosts on the asphalt.

"Sorry, Gram," Erin said, sticking out her thumb.

Vehicles blasted by for an hour. Finally a sports car slowed beside her. Sun bounced off the polished hood. As the tinted window rolled down, Erin saw a tanned driver with a capped-tooth grin. "Where're you headed?" he asked.

Erin couldn't see the man's eyes. All she could see in the mirrored lenses of his sunglasses were two pathetically small images of herself. This guy wasn't from the area. His hair was sprayed stiff as his starched white shirt. Probably from the

city.

“Independence,” she lied.

“That’s south,” he said. “You’re walking north, toward Lee Vining and Bridgeport.”

Erin knew Independence was in the opposite direction of Lee Vining, an hour south of Bishop. She tried to look surprised and turned around, walking back the way she came. The car reversed. She clutched her pack straps, thumbs digging into ribs.

“I wouldn’t mind heading north,” the man called, “if you were sitting beside me.”

What a creep! Erin quickened her pace in a spiral of anger and fear, choking on the dust kicked up by the car’s tires. No way could she shake him on foot. Then she spotted a hole in the traffic and darted across the highway. The guy hit his brakes and swerved, tires squealing. Over her shoulder, Erin watched him peel off.

If the car had been an old dented truck with a posthole digger in the back and a tailgate crimped with baling wire, Erin wouldn’t have made up the story about Independence. She’d learned to rely on country people since moving in with her grandma.

From the other side of the road, the store had looked a hundred years old. Up close it looked even older. The front window was crowded with ads from who knows how long ago: a tattered sign announcing Buzz Buszek’s Fly Fishing Tournament, a cardboard placard showing a woman on a tightrope over Niagara Falls. The caption on the poster read, DREAM BIG -- DARE TO FAIL.

Inside, the store smelled like sawdust, pickled eggs, and fishing tackle. Local news spilled from a radio behind the counter “. . . rescue team organized by the U.S. Forestry department,” the announcer said, “to search for a ranger who’s been missing in the Sierra Nevada since . . .”

Erin opened the glass door to the cooler, letting the icy air wash over her. How had she let herself get in such a mess? The bus she was supposed to be on was rambling down the road to Los Angeles, a six-hour trip. From there it was another two-and-a-half hours to Camarillo, a town close to the beach. She’d looked it up on the map right after he mom had called.

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Erin had been sitting on the screened porch that buggy night, sorting leftovers for the worm bin. She wrapped the leftovers for the worms in a newspaper, knowing all traces of food and paper would be gone by morning. Red wigglers would eat anything, but she never fed them meat or cheese. It made the bin stink. Worm droppings produced the best fertilizer for the vegetable garden.

Gram strolled out, her silver gray hair hanging in waves like a loose shirt. “Varnish.” She eased herself down on the rickety steps. “That’s what these steps need.”

Erin smiled.

Gram had been talking about refurbishing the porch ever since Erin and her dad moved in last year. “Your dad’s pictures of Cuba are in *The Traveler*,” she said, handing Erin the magazine.

They sat side by side, flipping through the pages until they saw the words “photographs by Stephen Rowe.” Erin stared at the image of a wrinkled woman, a fat cigar in her mouth, and a young boy, his happy brown face smeared with ice cream.

That’s what she and Gram had been doing when the phone rang, looking at pictures of old cars and happy brown faces.

Erin followed her grandma into the kitchen.

“Lannie?” Gram whispered. She had a death grip on the receiver, her knuckles as colorless as her cheeks.

Erin stumbled backwards and gripped the counter. “It’s Mom?” Trying to get rid of that sick feeling in her stomach, Erin swallowed over and over. She strained to hear the voice on the other side, but only heard Gram’s clipped words and half sentences. “Doctor . . . checked into the hospital . . . medication.”

Erin leaned over the sink.

“Lannie, it’s been eleven months . . .” Gram said, looking shocked and relieved at the same time. “I don’t know about these things . . .”

Erin lost the last remark along with her dinner in the sink. She washed the mess down the drain and rinsed out her mouth.

“Where are you?” Gram asked Erin’s mom.

Gram was quiet for a while, listening. Then her face screwed up like a fist. “Wouldn’t the doctors let you call?” Her voice was tight. “So we’d at least know you were alive?”

What was going on? Erin couldn’t make sense of the conversation.

In the end, her grandmother said, “It isn’t up to me. I have to talk to Stephen . . .”

Gram hung up and placed a call to Erin’s dad in Guatemala, where he was on a photo assignment. Erin could tell the hotel operator didn’t speak English. Gram struggled to make him understand. “Señor Rowe! Stephen!” Then she said, “Lannie called . . . She sounds fine . . . She wants Erin to come for a visit . . .”

Silence filled the kitchen, like a held breath. Gram listened, rubbing the deep crease between her eyes. Then she hung up and sighed.

“Your father thinks you should go,” Gram said.

Erin flared like a struck match. “Why should I?”

Gram moved to the kitchen counter and stood next to Erin. “She wants to see you, little bird.”

“Yeah? What about all the times I asked to see her?”

“This is different,” Gram said, firm as a cast-iron skillet.

“How?”

“She’s your mother.”

“Yeah.” Erin felt cold inside. “She hatched me.”

“You have to go.” Gram looked pained. She fiddled at the stove, making herself tea. She left the bag in the cup, as if she needed the extra strength. “Life isn’t always fair.”

Erin had no doubt about that.

“You have to go,” Gram repeated. “So you’ll know.”

“Know what?”

Gram blew a ripple across her tea. “I promised . . .”

Erin stared at her grandma’s unsettled eyes. Finally Gram shifted uncomfortably. She walked away, her sheepskin slippers silent on the worn pine floor.

Later that night Erin lay awake in bed. She fidgeted restlessly on her side, then on her stomach. She had gotten used to Gram saying things without talking. But that didn’t mean she always understood what Gram meant.

Know what? she wondered, trying to fall asleep. What kind of sickness makes a mother leave her family for a year?

Maybe not knowing would be better.