

Chapter One

The charm of fly-fishing is that it is the pursuit of what is elusive, but attainable -- a perpetual series of occasions for hope

Anonymous

The river was spawned high in the Appalachian Mountains formed of sedimentary rock and primordial ocean floor. Fed by rain and melted snow, rivulets of cold, clear water gush over boulders and between rocky ridges to lace the mountainsides. Thousands of miles of freestone streams run unchecked, cascading down to form the mighty rivers.

Mia Landan followed the river as it wound its way in a serpentine manner deeper into the woods. To her right, the sienna hued wall of rock was dotted with patches of bright green moss. To her left, the river raced on, rushing forward in a confident current. She reached over the passenger seat of her car to clutch a wrinkled sheet of paper from under a torn road map. Scribbled across the page of directions she read: *Follow the river.*

“I am not lost,” she said aloud, though she doubted her words. She was following the pebbles in the river like Hansel and Gretel, believing that they would lead her through the dark forest to a safe haven. Except Mia Landan no longer believed in fairy tales.

Thunder rolled overhead, threatening rain. Back home in Charleston, South Carolina, the spring rain had already given way to scorching heat and humidity. Here in the North Carolina mountains, however, the air was still cool and the forests aflame with

wildflowers. Around each bend in the road she encountered a cluster of rhododendrons blooming scarlet or white. A little farther on, the paved road ended to become a rutted bed of dirt and gravel, as worn and filled with holes as a pauper's coat.

A few fat drops of rain splattered against the windshield, turning the dust to long streaks of mud. She turned on the windshield wipers and her heartbeat matched the metronome click. She leaned far over the wheel, clutching it tight, peering through the sudden deluge at the sliver of road ahead. Where was the cabin? she worried as she peered through the rain and fog. Could it be this far off the beaten track? Just when she thought she should turn around and head back, the river tumbled over a ridge of rocks to a large pool. Beside it on a high bank, nestled between a pair of towering hemlocks, sat a rustic log cabin.

Mia released a ragged sigh, slumped her shoulders and loosened her grip on the wheel. She had found it. It had been a grueling drive with directions that had been scribbled in haste. But she'd made it. Her wheels hit soft grass and mud as she parked as close to the cabin as she could.

Turning off the engine she was immediately immersed into a deep mountain silence. The miles still raced in her veins. Her clothes clung and the car seat was littered with empty water bottles and candy wrappers. The stale air reminded her of hospital rooms. She lowered the window enough to let the fresh air awaken her after the long journey. The rain sprinkled in and she lifted her face to it, tasting its cool sweetness.

Mia looked again to the cabin. It perched, isolated and foreboding, under the canopy of the trees and mist. The woods seemed to close in around her. She felt a shiver of loneliness. But hadn't she wanted a far away, secluded place? A sanctuary? Rolling

up the window she cast a worried glance at the clock on the dashboard. It was half past six. Belle had told her she would pick up supplies and meet her at the cabin no later than seven. There was no where to go. The cabin was locked and the rain came down in sheets. She was trapped in this car, in the wilderness, to wait as the night closed in around her. Relentless rain coursed tracks down her foggy window, mirroring the tears flowing down her cheeks. Mia brought her hands to her face and wondered how she got to this place?

It had all begun with fly-fishing. She'd never had any interest in the sport. She was a public relations director for the Spoleto arts festival in Charleston. Though she lived by the ocean and mountains, she didn't have any connection to either. Her idea of a good time was drinks and dinner at a restaurant with friends. If she went on a boat, it was docked for a party. A trip to the mountains meant a few days at a ski lodge. Nonetheless, her sister, Madeline, had signed her up for a three day fly-fishing retreat designed especially for breast cancer survivors. Casting for Recovery provided spiritual and physical therapy and Madeline believed Mia needed both.

So Mia had driven hours from her home in Charleston to the Casting for Recovery retreat in the foothills of North Carolina. She'd only agreed to go to keep Madeline from nagging. Some of the women at the retreat were still early in their treatments for breast cancer. Others were ten, twenty or more years post diagnosis. At thirty eight years old, Mia was the youngest. She was reticent at first but Belle would not allow her to remain aloof.

Belle Carson was their fly-fishing guide and the leader of the retreat. Belle was a tall, straight talking, sensitive and big hearted woman who had chucked an academic

career at the University of Virginia to move to Asheville, North Carolina and open her own fly-fishing business. Belle gently coaxed Mia out of isolation into group discussions and taught her how to cast a dry fly. Mia was drawn into the group by force of the women's brutal honesty and their wise understanding. It was an intense three days that felt like three weeks, so much had transpired. They laughed, they cried. They were sister survivors. By the end of the retreat she'd joined their feminine solidarity formed by a shared history.

But it was in the river that Mia felt the first glimmer of life since the shock of her diagnosis had left her heart as numb as the white scar on her chest. Belle Carson had taken Mia to the river and taught her how to cast a thin line from a rod onto the shallow waters of the Davidson River. To her amazement, she found hope rising in thin wisps of speckled silver. She might not have believed in fairy tales but she believed in that spark of life she felt at the other end of the line.

Eager to share her new excitement with her husband, she'd hugged the women farewell and drove back early to Charleston. Closing her eyes, Mia saw again the lurid image of her husband and that unknown woman lying on *her* marriage bed. She'd stumbled down the stairs, climbed into her car, and started to drive, her eyes blind and her mind numb.

Mia Landan of two years ago would have stood her ground and confronted them. Then she was confident in her career, her beauty, her self. *That* Mia would not have run to the mountains with her tail between her legs. But two years ago Mia had not yet found the lump in her breast.

The wheels had hummed beneath her on the highway. The green road signs passed in a blur as she put miles between herself and her husband's infidelity. She'd driven for forty five minutes before she realized she didn't know where she was. When at last she focused on the signs she saw she was on Interstate 26. Her instincts were acting as her compass, guiding her north, back to the mountains where she'd felt safe.

By the time she'd returned to the retreat, the sun had lowered far to the west and the placid water of the lake had darkened to a deep purple. A few dimples disturbed the glassiness. *Rises*, she'd learned they were called, were created by trout when they rose to the surface to sip an insect. She drove past the wall of tall firs and hemlocks that surrounded the lake to the row of cottages that she'd shared with the eighteen other women at the retreat. Now they all stood empty and quiet. One by one, each woman had returned to a husband, a family, a partner. For them, life had gone on post-cancer. At that moment, Mia saw with clarity that she was not a survivor.

She couldn't go back to Charleston. She could not start the engine and drive. She had nothing and no one waiting for her. She brought her trembling hands to her face and began to sob.

Perhaps if she hadn't felt such hope on the river, she could have maintained the hard shell of apathy that had sustained her for the year of treatment and recovery. But the spirit of the river, the rhythm of the cast, and the tenuous connection to life at the end of a thin line had broken through her shell. It had filled her with radiant light, lifted her up and made her feel whole again. To lose that now...

Belle Carson had been walking down the road and saw Mia crying the hoarse, ragged sobs of a desperate woman. She opened the car door.

“Mia? What are you doing here? Are you all right?”

Mia swung around, lifting her face. “I can’t go back,” she cried in a broken voice.

Belle leaned over, her long braid slipping over her shoulder, and asked more urgently, “What happened?”

“He’s left me. I have nowhere to go.”

Belle took Mia’s arm, then gently but firmly drew her from the car. “Come with me,” she said, putting her arm around Mia’s shoulders. She guided her inside the lodge which, mercifully, was deserted. Belle treated Mia like she would an injured animal, gently and with a calm voice, giving her time to settle until the panic faded from her eyes. She offered Mia coffee then rummaged through the camp fridge to prepare a plate and set it before her. When Mia sat slump shouldered and looked at the food with a dazed expression, Belle didn’t nag at her to eat it. She’d sat across from Mia and waited while the sun lowered and the geese honked by the lake, calling their young. When the grief trickled out, Belle handed her tissues, and later, when it gushed, she listened patiently before asking questions.

It was Belle’s very dark brown eyes that Mia remembered more than anything she’d actually said. They were calm waters, like the lake, and in their depths she’d felt hope rising.

Then Belle offered Mia what she needed most—safe refuge.

“I have a place,” Belle told her. “A cabin not too far away. It’s not much. It’s been abandoned for years and I haven’t checked on it in months. But it’s yours, if you want to stay there.”

So Mia had returned to her car with Belle's hastily delivered directions and found her way to this remote cabin. And here she was, still sitting in her car, waiting once more to be rescued.

Thirty minutes later the rain dissipated and from the distance Mia heard the sound of tires and the hum of an engine. She stepped out of the car to see an old green Blazer emblazoned with the words Brookside Guides roll to a stop beside her.

"Belle!" she called out, leaping from the car.

Belle Carson stepped out of the truck wearing a green rain jacket with her company's logo over the pocket. She was somewhere in her fifties but still as narrow in the hips as a girl. Her red hair fell down her back in a long braid under her forest green baseball cap.

"Hey," she called. She bent to grab a large box from her truck and hurried up the pebbled walk to the porch with the same sure footed steps she'd taken in the rushing stream earlier that day. Once under the porch roof they shook the rain from their jackets. They stood eye to eye and Belle surveyed Mia's soaked clothes dripping from her thin frame. Strands of reddish blonde hair plastered across Mia's forehead.

Belle's lips twitched. "You look like a drowned rat."

"I feel like it."

"Let's get you warm and settled, Belle said as she handed Mia the large box. "See you found the cabin all right." Belle pulled out a key affixed to a yellowed, water stained paper tag that had the name *Watkins Cove* written in an old fashioned script. "This here is the original. I'll have to make another copy so take good care of it."

Mia thought she had never heard a more beautiful sound than the click of that lock turning over. Then, taking a deep breath, she stepped inside the cabin. Instantly she was assailed by the scents of wood smoke and mildew and she wrinkled her nose. Her hand fumbled against the wall, groping for a light switch and praying some animal didn't dart at her from the dark. "Thank God," she whispered when she heard a click and yellow light poured from a hanging fixture that looked like a converted kerosene lamp.

She laughed out loud. All that was missing was a bunch of old men and their fishing gear. She could almost smell the tobacco. It was a compact space with one main room dominated by a fireplace made of river rocks. The dark wood walls were bare. She imagined this was where fish stories were shared on cool nights as unshaven men smoked pipes and clustered around the fire in the rocking chairs.

In the pale light the room appeared ghostly with sheets covering heavy pieces of furniture and threadbare curtains loosely draped around heavily paned windows. Motes of dust rose in the stirred air and her boots left muddy prints across the room. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was disturbing the peace of the ancient anglers that still hovered here. When the door clicked shut behind her she startled in the tomblike room.

"Well, let's take a look," Belle said, grabbing the box from Mia and setting it down on the table across the room. She turned around slowly, lips pursed as her gaze swept around. When she faced Mia again she set her hands on her hips and shrugged. "Could be worse." After cracking a wry grin she shook her head. "But not much. I told you it hadn't been used in years."

"It's not that bad," Mia replied, but her voice lacked conviction. "Mostly it's just dirty."

“It’s filthy. A haven for spiders and mice, looks like to me. I’d understand if you changed your mind. It’s too late to head back to Charleston but you can stay at my place tonight.”

“Really, it’s ok.”

Belle looked at Mia with the same intensity as when studying the waters. With her voice ringing with concern and doubt she asked, “You ever spend time up in the mountains? Alone?”

Mia shook her head no.

Belle rubbed her jaw struggling with her reply. “Let me show you around. You haven’t even seen the whole place yet. It’s pretty rugged. There’s no central heat, not to mention air conditioning.” She turned and walked to the small kitchen. “This is an add-on to the original cabin. At least they made the ceilings a little higher,” she said, craning her neck to look at the wood trusses and beams. “I don’t imagine those old codgers gave much mind to cooking back when this place was built. It was updated in the 1930s, I figure. Electricity was added, gas, some more modern appliances. All relative, keep in mind. Look at this old stove, will you?” she said, walking to an antique cast iron and enamel stove. “This has to be an original.”

Mia warily eyed the 500 pound black iron behemoth that dominated the small kitchen. “Is it safe?”

“This thing? As far as I know it’s in working condition. No warping or cracks. This one was taken care of, you can tell. Though it sat here for a long while.” Her face softened and she spoke with a tone of reminiscence. “My mama had a woodburning stove in our house in Virginia. We also had a modern one, of course, but she had a soft

spot for the old ones. She used to claim a biscuit tasted best when baked in an old cast iron stove. I'm kind of partial to them myself. Nothing better to keep a house warm on a cold night. I intend to keep this beauty. It's a collector's item." She patted the cast iron and said, "They just don't build 'em like they used to."

Belle opened the enamel oven door then let it slam shut with a grimace. "Looks like some mice and critters took up residence in there. Just needs a good cleaning out. This oven will burn with some dry wood."

"I'm never cooking on that thing."

"Never say never. When the electricity goes out, and it will with every big storm, you'll be glad to have this old wood burning stove around. This here gas stove might only have two burners but it'll do the job for you. Same with this old fridge."

She pointed to a small enamel fridge with rounded edges. Both it and the stove looked like they were bought after the war. Which war, Mia didn't dare guess.

Belle opened the door. It was heavy but swung easily. The inside was clean. "It's a bit rusty. But it's cold. A guy I know comes in to check on the place to make sure everything is in working order."

"With my cooking, it won't make much of a difference. But I *am* curious about the bathroom."

"You mean the outhouse?"

Mia's face froze.

Belle laughed. "Sorry, it was too easy. It's over here."

The small room had only one undersize window and was hardly a place for a luxurious soak. The porcelain commode was minuscule, the tiny sink had a nasty crack,

and the claw footed tub was badly stained. “There’s only cold running water. That’s spring water. So when I say cold, I mean cold.”

“As long as I can pee without something coming up to bite me in the ass, I’ll manage.”

“I hear that.” Belle shook her head and chuckled. “I’m installing a new hot water heater. I’ll prod George to get going on that right away. Until then, you’ll have to heat water on the stove. Ok, let’s see what we got in here.” She moved on to the small room next to the bathroom and opened the door.

Perhaps it was the whisk of wind from the opened door. Or maybe it was the pale white linen against the window, but something made the hairs along Mia’s neck to rise when she stepped into the bedroom.

“There should be a light switch somewhere,” Belle said, fumbling along the wall. Finding none, she walked to the small bedside lamp. “There, that’s better,” she said as soft light filled the room.

“Why, this is a *woman’s* room,” Mia said, surprised. She’d expected to find rotting waders and boots, red and black checked wool blankets and other masculine items. Instead the black iron bed was made up with a floral quilt and shams boldly embroidered with flowers and the dark green initials K W. A jewel toned hooked rug lay beneath the bed and over a long mahogany dresser was an elaborate Venetian mirror that was out of place against the rough cabin walls.

Belle’s face was sober. “It was.” She turned on her heel and walked out. “Let’s see what’s upstairs.”

Mia had a thousand questions lingering on her tongue to ask about the woman who loved fine, feminine things but lived out here in the wilderness. But she refrained from asking even one and instead, silently followed Belle up the steep, narrow stairs. This was a gaunt room, barren of furniture save for a window seat under a row of dingy, small windows. At one end sat another fireplace, smaller than the one downstairs. An old wooden toy lay beside it. Curious, Mia went to pick it up.

“It’s a toy caboose! Someone carved it from a single piece of wood. It’s beautifully done.” She handed it to Belle. “Odd that it’s here in a fishing cabin.”

Belle took the toy and lifted it in her hand as though weighing it. “Back when, this would have been a garret where they put the bunks for fishing trips.” Then, handing the caboose back to her, she added, “But my mother was raised in this house, so I guess it’s likely she played in here.”

“Your mother grew up in this cabin?” It seemed impossible that any child would be brought up in such a remote place.

“That’s right.”

“Was that her room downstairs?”

Belle shook her head. “My mother married young and left Asheville soon after. She never came back. I never knew my grandmother. That was her room.” Belle spoke through tightened lips.

When they returned to the main room Belle appeared restless. She walked around pulling the sheets off the few pieces of furniture. The Victorian pieces were large and cumbersome, more fitting a grand room than a small wood cabin. An ornate, blue velvet sofa was badly faded and worn. The pedestal mahogany dining table was too large for the

small space even with all the leaves removed. Most imposing of all was an enormous armoire adorned with the carving of the head of a stag with antlers.

“Wow,” was all Mia could say.

“They look ridiculous in here.”

“They’re beautiful. Just... out of place.”

Belle scowled as she looked at them. “Everything about this place is, well, never mind.” She rolled up the sheets with a punching motion. Then she turned to face Mia.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have offered this place to you. It’s really rough and I’m worried whether you’re up to staying this far out on your own. This isn’t some romantic get away. You can’t pick up the phone and order room service. I care about you but I’m not going to be able to be at your beck and call. I’m going out of town soon and I won’t be here to look out after you.”

“I’m not asking you to,” she replied defensively. Though in her heart, that was exactly what she hoped for.

“This part of western North Carolina has high mountains, small towns and a lot of wilderness in between. Your cell phone is unreliable if you have an emergency. If you get a lot of rain you’ll need a 4 wheel drive to get out. You’re probably stuck right now. And what are you going to do if the power goes out? It gets cold up here. Do you even know how to start a fire?”

“I was a girl scout. And I’ve got matches.”

Belle’s hand slid to her head and she scratched it. “Can you shoot?”

Mia laughed lightly. “A gun? Good God, no.”

“It’d be better if you did. What are you going to do if some animal comes knocking’ on your door?”

“Human or other?”

“I’m serious. I’m not just talking about little raccoons. There are bears and venomous snakes to deal with. Maybe a sick or rabid animal. They’re dangerous and you’ve got to know how to recognize them and deal with them. And you have to know your way around. You can get lost in these mountains and no one would know.”

“Are you trying to scare me?”

“I’m trying to tell you what’s real up here. Nature isn’t always pretty. It can be damned heartless.”

Mia’s heart began pounding as a knot of pressure caused her throat to tighten. “I know about cruel and heartless.”

Belle shook her head and looked at her boots. “Shit. Mia, I didn’t mean that.”

“I know what you meant.” She hated the tears that were welling in her eyes.

“Belle, I know I’m not a mountain woman—far from it. I’ve got a lot to learn. But hey. You called me a survivor. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“Mia, it does. Of course. But be realistic.”

“I am. My reality is pretty harsh. I’m thirty eight and I’ve lost my left breast, my hair, my job, and my husband. I haven’t any money to rent a place. This is my only chance! I have to stay. Belle, I have to find out what the hell am I surviving for.”

She was embarrassed for the flash of pain in her eyes that compelled Belle to turn away. She lowered her tone but her voice still trembled. “So much has happened so fast I haven’t had a chance to make sense of what’s happened to my body...to *me*. A

survivor? I've never felt so lost or afraid. But I'm more afraid of going back home than anything I might face here."

Belle shifted her weight and crossed her arm in thought. Mia knew that as a guide Belle took inexperienced men and women into the wild every day. She'd seen some pretty stupid things damn near get folks killed and it made her cautious. Mia also knew that Belle saw her as weakened, damaged. It would be against her nature to leave someone wounded and inexperienced alone in the wilderness.

"Please, Belle. Let me stay."

Belle looked at the rain splattering the glass. When she turned again to Mia, she saw that the woman's mind was made up.

"You'll have to return home someday, you know. You can't hide out here forever."

Mia took a breath, unaware that she'd been holding it. "Even Sleeping Beauty had to wake up sometime."

Belle returned a commiserating smile. "This is a far cry from a palace. But it's a start." She took a deep breath, resigned to her decision. She leaned against the table and uncrossed her arms. "Mia, I inherited the cabin only last winter after my mother died. Like I said, she and my grandmother had a falling out and didn't communicate, not once in my lifetime, so I never came up here, never saw the place." She stopped. "Truth is, I never wanted to come." She pursed her lips, holding in words.

"After the funeral I got the deed and the keys," Belle continued, her dark gaze sweeping again the cabin, "I felt duty bound to take a look. It gets pretty cold up here in the winter. The roads were icing up and I didn't spend much time. It was really nothing

more than a walk through. Maybe it was grief that blinded me, I don't know, but it didn't look so bad back then. My plan was to clean it up this summer, maybe get the place rewired, make a few improvements, and add that water heater. Get it ready before the fall hunting and fishing season kicked in. Then I figured I'd rent it." Belle looked at her boots. "But I don't have money to pour into it and I'll be in Scotland most of the summer."

"But that's our deal. I'll clean it for you in exchange for rent."

"I think I'm getting the better end of the deal."

"Doesn't matter. You're a lifesaver. And I'm a hard worker. I'll get it done."

She smirked. "Even that old stove."

Belle whistled softly, acknowledging the battle that task would be. She walked over to the box and pulled out a bottle of white wine. "You're going to need this."

"Bless you."

Next she took out a down blanket, fresh sheets, several candles, a big bar of soap, white towels, rolls of bathroom tissue and lastly a bag from a fast food restaurant. The scent of greasy French fries and hot coffee wafted into the air. When she was done she turned to Mia, studying her again.

"This isn't some wager, Mia. You don't have to prove anything to me. I don't want you to think you're failing if you decide it isn't working for you up here."

"I won't," she said, and felt enormously grateful.

"Tell you what, friend. Let's take it a week at a time. No commitments. You might get antsy up here all alone, or come face to face with a bear and commence running."

“I just might. Week by week it is.”

“And you know I have to rent it in the fall,” she said in warning. She put the cigar in her mouth. “If you want to stay longer, it’ll cost you.”

“One summer,” Mia agreed. “Right now, that feels like a lifetime.”

Before leaving, Belle had helped Mia put the fresh sheets on the bed and lit a roaring fire that warmed the cabin and took the edge off the stark sense of isolation. Belle also gave her a local map of Asheville and its surrounding areas and marked the location of the cabin with a big X. Then she drew the unmarked road that would lead her from the cabin to Watkins Mill, the nearest town.

Belle turned at the door and hugged Mia fiercely. “I care about you, kiddo. Fighting demons is all fine and good. But sometimes you just have to have a good time. Be good to yourself up here. And remember. Trout live in beautiful places.”