



Chapter Three

*"If you dream about crossing water, there will be trouble in your family."
(Appalachian Folk Belief)*

The water was rising a little bit each day in the creek. The snow from the high country was just about melted, the runoff trickling into Big Creek. The water was muddied, but the frogs, salamanders, and turtles didn't seem to mind. It wasn't warm enough yet for rattlesnakes and copperheads. Emie loved the swinging bridge, but somehow the water called to her. Like the willows, the creek seemed to have a voice.

The rocks were sharp at the creek bottom. Emerald wished that she'd left her shoes on, but fear of muddying and ruining her only pair had caused her to reason at the bank. The water was cold – so cold that the first step had taken her breath away. She usually liked to dawdle in the water, but today she hurried.

Just as she reached the opposite shore, Ernest appeared from the orchard, his head and shoulders covered with blossoms. Earlier, Emie had dreamed of being a princess. With her dream now faded, she saw Ernest as royalty, not herself. He looked like a prince, or better yet, a groom waiting for his bride. She often asked Ernest why he hadn't found a girl yet. He only smiled. "No one would have me with a sister like you."

"Girlie, I was just comin' to fetch you. How's Auntie?"

"Fine. She was expectin' you. Made you cornbread, but don't worry none, I ate your share," Emie said in a sassy tone.

"I bet you did. Honey or buttermilk?" Before Emie could answer, Ernest shushed her, "No wait, let me guess." Ernest then moistened his index finger with the tip of his tongue and wiped sticky honey from the corner of her mouth.

"I'm gettin' too old for this," Emie said while waiting impatiently for her brother to finish. Ernest had been giving her spit baths since she was a baby.

Emie sat down on a log next to the creek and put her shoes on. She hoped her brother wasn't in a hurry. She had some questions that needed answering, and Ernest wasn't shy about telling her the truth.

"Ernest, what does it mean when a girl has her menses?"

At first Ernest looked surprised, then he started to chuckle, next came the belly laughs. He barely got the words out, "Emie, the things you ask."

"Brother, I'm serious. Mama said that girls get married after they start their menses. I'm a

girl, and I don't even know what that is." Emie took a deep breath. She wanted Ernest to see that she wasn't fooling.

Ernest pulled Emie up from the log, and started walking toward the meadow. "Menses means that a girl can have a baby. Garnett and Ruby are old enough to have babies, so they're ready to be gettin' married."

"Mama also said that girls have to be through eighth grade to get married."

Ernest started to laugh again, "They also have to be too old for spit baths, and not have the bossy toe."

Tradition in the hills said if a girl had a second toe longer than the big toe that she was bound to be bossy. Emie was the only girl in her family with the bossy toe. Daddy had bossy toes, but like so many other things in the holler, it was okay for a man, but not a woman.

Emie rolled her eyes at Ernest and shook her pretty blonde head.

"Emie, did I ever tell you about the piglet who rolled her eyes? She had big blue eyes just like you. I think she even had a few blonde hairs comin' out her snout."

Emie tried hard not to laugh. Ernest always had crazy stories about the hogs.

"She rolled them eyes back in her head and they never came down. It was a sight, alright. Sight for me to see, and that poor pig could barely see a thing. She tried to suck her mama's tail – thought it was a teat to latch onto."

As they traveled the meadow together, Ernest continued to make Emie laugh. Being with Ernest was like being at home. Not home where Daddy was yelling, Mama crying, and the little ones fussing – but home without fear, and where love and joy were plentiful.

"Ernest, the outhouse stinks," Emie declared loudly. "I need to do a big job and can't stand the thought of sittin' in there."

"Emie, I've been too busy birthin' pigs, milkin' cows, and feedin' chickens to worry about the shitter. Now, if you've a mind to help me tomorrow, I'll work on the outhouse. 'Til then I reckon you'll have to wait or sit in the stink."

Emie with her voice raised, headed toward the house. "Mama, Ernest is needin' my help tomorrow. Can you spare me to work outside?"

Mama met her at the back door leading to the kitchen. "Girlie, since when do you enter my house yellin' like something's on fire? We have company, and I need you to mind your manners. Garnett and Ruby went back up the holler. Put coffee on and slice and butter some of that sweet bread. Pastor Eugene is here visitin' with your daddy."

Emie wondered why her mama hadn't already put the coffee on and gotten the bread sliced and buttered, but the stern look on Mama's face told her now was not the time for questions. Emie got busy, but not so busy that she didn't notice Mama sitting outside the curtained-off room, listening to Daddy and Pastor Eugene talk. Mama was wringing her hands again – a sure sign that trouble was brewing, brewing like the coffee Emma had placed in the worn, porcelain, speckled pot on the back of the wood stove.



The girls' room was a small curtained-off area toward the back of the run-down mountain home. Through the curtain and to the immediate right was Daddy and Mama's room. The tiny central room was where Ernest and Lester slept. It was still cool enough at night that Ernest had built a small fire in the wood burner. The curtain that separated the rooms was thin and worn, so Emie could see the glowing embers. Sleep wouldn't come to Emerald.

The bed was crowded with her and four of her sisters. The girls slept sideways on the bed. Mama said that it didn't matter if their legs hung over the side. "It's the way of the mountains. You use what you have and are thankful for it."

The twins, Garnett and Ruby, had fallen asleep giggling about the Houston boys. Between Emie and the twins lay Coral and Opal.

Emie had tried to explain once to Mama that coral wasn't really a gemstone. "It's formed at the bottom of the ocean by tiny sea animals," Emie clarified. "Coral's name doesn't fit with the rest of the sisters."

Mama had shook her head and hushed Emie. "I saw coral once in a store window in Charleston. It was lovely. All my girls is beautiful, Emie. Don't be tellin' your sister she don't fit. She has enough trouble being sandwiched in the middle of all of you."

Mama was right. Coral was smashed right in the middle - the middle of the bed and the middle of the Ashby family life. Emie sometimes forgot she was even there. Coral was so quiet. Often on the walk to school, she wouldn't utter a word. She seemed to blend with her surroundings and become invisible. She hid in the shadows like a mouse who only came out at night and scurried close to the walls.

The two youngest girls, Sapphire and Pearl, were sleeping on a pallet on the floor, both clutching rag dolls that had been passed down from sister to sister. Emie could hear the boys sawing logs - that's what Mama called their snoring.

Just like Daddy, Lester was loud even in his sleep, and Ernest was, well, just Ernest. Even in sleep, he seemed serene. Emie somehow found reassurance in Ernest's heavy breathing.

The west wall of the girls' room separated their sleeping quarters from the kitchen and eating area. Emie could still smell the residual odor from the fried trout her family had for dinner. At dusk, Lester had come home with freshly caught rainbows. His surprise had distracted Mama from questioning his whereabouts. Emie had wondered if that was Lester's plan all along. He disappeared a lot these days. Not that Emie minded. Her brother was difficult at best, and the sisters had all grown tired of his bossiness. He reminded Emie of a volcano she'd read about in school. It had erupted without warning, killing the living and destroying nature. The red molten lava hadn't discriminated between young and old, wicked and wise, or beautiful and ugly. Like Daddy, Lester's temper would be his destruction, and the destruction of those around him.

Emie heard her parents whispering in the dark. Their voices were hushed, yet their words were intense. She then heard her mama's quiet crying, and her daddy's slightly raised voice, "Alma, it's our way. Eugene and I agreed. There are too many mouths wantin' food. She ain't a boy that can carry his weight."

Her mama answered, "She ain't ready yet."

"Alma, you didn't act like this about the twins. Daddy's voice was raising slightly more in volume.

"They're goin' together, Ahab. They're older. It's not the same."

"Now, Alma..."

Mama interrupted, "Leave me be. I need to grieve."

All grew quiet. Emie tried to focus on Ernest's breathing, but comfort wouldn't come. She hadn't heard her name, but sensed the conversation had been about her. Sleep eluded her until the wee hours of the morning when exhaustion and worry laid their claim.