

Chapter 1

When the moon rides low in the night sky, like the biggest pumpkin in October's frostbit pumpkin patch, folks here about call it an outlaw moon. I call it the same. You would, too, if you'd been lucky enough to hear the tales I've heard.

Once the Ozarks were the home of many an outlaw band. The James Gang, the Daltons and the Doolins all had hideouts hereabouts or down the road a wander. Every family I know can tell you about one of them, or about Belle Starr, the outlaw queen.

There are caves in these hills where fugitives could hide until the law got tired and the moon got full. Then, by nothing more than moonlight, they could find their way to freedom.

There's an outlaw moon hanging on the horizon as I write this. I can almost hear the whispering of the James boys' horses as they ride along my riverbank to Missouri.

I wonder how the men in prison at High Ridge feel on such a night? Does the moon stir their blood as it once stirred the blood of their brothers? Do they wish that they, too, were following the river? Or do they sit patiently in their cells counting the days until they make parole? Is the outlaw moon shining through their bars only a sign that they are one month closer to freedom?"

"Not for one man, Millard." Tate Cantrell closed the leather-bound journal and spoke her thoughts out loud— although there was no one to hear them. "Just the day before yesterday one man at High Ridge got tired of crossing off days on his cell wall and slid out a window, instead. Jesse James would have been proud to know him."

She hugged the journal to her chest for just a moment as a shudder passed through her. Either the crisp air of autumn, the pumpkin moon just clearing the horizon, or the folk legend

recorded in her father's painfully neat handwriting had precipitated the chill—not that it mattered which.

Tate set the journal on the kitchen table beside her half-eaten supper and went to look for her wool jacket. She would make a fire when she came back in from her evening chores. In the meantime, she would bundle up and force the chill away. There was no reason to warm the house for anyone else. She was alone in an Ozark mountain cabin with only her father's written musings and one cinnamon-colored hound dog for company.

And that was all the company she needed—maybe too much, if she counted Cinn.

After a search of the cabin she found the red-and-black checkered jacket hanging from a wooden peg on the back porch. She remembered she had hung it there after her last trip to the outhouse. She shivered again before she could button it. The jacket had belonged to her father. She had never seen Millard Carter, hadn't even known his name until recently. Now the jacket was just one more piece in the puzzle that was the man who had sired her.

For a moment she stared at the orange moon and considered what she'd learned about him since the day three months before when she'd been told that the man she had long since ceased to wonder about had died and willed her everything he'd owned.

She knew that he had been a huge lumberjack of a fellow. The jacket she was wearing hung just inches above her knees, and the first time she'd put it on, she'd had to roll the cuffs half a dozen times to get them to her wrists. In addition to size, she had an idea of what he had looked like. There had been three photographs of him in the cabin when she arrived. One was of a young man just about her present age of twenty-one, one of a middle-aged Millard accompanying a newspaper article headlined "Ozark Folktales Kept Alive," and one of him in his coffin.

The last had given her nightmares for a week—until she realized it hadn't been left there to horrify her. Mountain Glade and the surrounding area overflowed with people who claimed to be Tate's kin. They were a silent lot—though not disapproving, exactly. "Watchful" was a better word. But although it was clear that the members of the Carter clan weren't sure how they felt about her, their feelings about her father were clear. They had respected Millard Carter, and the photograph was a mark of that respect.

Tate had put that final photo away and concentrated on the others. From them she had discovered that her black hair had come from Millard, along with her pointed chin. She wasn't sure about her features. It was difficult to look at the two-dimensional photograph and compare noses, brows and lips. Eye color was a mystery, since the photographs were black-and-white.

One thing she was sure of, however, was how her father had felt about the land stretching down from this porch to the river, a quarter mile beyond. Millard Carter's slice of the Ozarks had been his whole life. He had lived and died on his five hundred acres, and he had left them indelibly stamped with his personality.

Cinn chose that moment to howl. In the month Tate had been living on her father's land, she had never seen any real display of energy from the lop-eared hound. Yes, he breathed. And sometimes he slunk from shade tree to shade tree when the afternoon sun changed positions. Once she had even caught him lapping at a mud puddle—as if the bucket of fresh water she provided was permanently out of reach instead of ten yards away. But now he was howling.

"Thatta boy, Cinn. Liven the place up a bit, why don't you?" she called.

The noise, coming from somewhere in the distant shadows, ceased abruptly.

"Blew your cover, didn't you?"

Her only reply was the noise of wings as the small flock of geese that made their home in the pond behind the barn rose as one into the night sky.

Tate debated between going back in the house to finish supper or taking care of her chores so she would have the rest of the evening free. The chores were few, the meal meager. She decided to finish the first before the second. Then she could eat what was left of supper in front of a warm fire.

The outlaw moon had risen a notch. Tate thought about her father's journal entry as she walked along the path toward the barn.

The journal, begun just months before his death, was one of the only personal things of her father's that she had found. She was reading it slowly, gleaning Ozark folklore and history, as well as a picture of Millard Carter. It was odd that she had chosen the outlaw-moon portion to read with supper. Odd because tonight's moon so closely fit his description, and odd because there really was an outlaw on the loose. A federal prisoner named Carl Petersen, computer criminal and murderer, had escaped from High Ridge Penitentiary, twenty miles away, just two days ago.

A battery powered radio, Tate's only link to the world, had been full of details. Petersen was known to be armed, dangerous and wounded. He was thought to be headed back home to Houston—which was just fine with her, since Houston was far south of the prison and Mountain Glade was due east. There had been two reported sightings south of High Ridge and, this evening, one unconfirmed story that Petersen had been seen hitchhiking out of Little Rock.

Tate felt a twinge of sympathy for Petersen, who seemed to have the whole state of Arkansas on his tail. From experience, she knew what being on the run was like. And a man like Petersen, a man reported to know everything about computers and nothing about life, probably

wouldn't have a prayer of staying free. High Ridge wasn't rumored to be a place where "forgive and forget" was a popular motto. When Petersen was returned to prison, his life would be hell. He would probably never see daylight again.

Of course, he had brought his troubles on himself. According to the radio he was a former bank official who had neatly embezzled a cool 1.2 million using a complicated wire-fraud scheme, then killed the man who tried to turn him in. And even though the murder charge had been plea-bargained to second-degree, he was still guilty of taking a life. She hoped that he wouldn't take more before he was captured.

Tate stopped just short of the barn door and took two metal buckets off a set of pegs. One of the things she definitely knew about her father was that he was a man who had eschewed creature comforts. "Simple" was itself too simple a word for the way Millard had chosen to live. The cabin had no electricity, no running water or plumbing of any kind, and no telephone. The drive leading from the unpaved country road back nearly a quarter of a mile to the cabin was nothing more than a parallel set of ruts etched from hillside and forest.

She didn't mind the austerity or the isolation, but there were times like now, when she was dead tired and needed a bath, that hauling water uphill seemed an injustice. Still, chastising a dead man was a waste of time.

Tate carried the buckets a few yards down the hill to the rock-lined basin where a galvanized pipe spurted pure mountain spring water to the rocks below. She set first one bucket, then the other, below the pipe, emptying them as they filled into a small wooden rain barrel mounted on a makeshift wagon. When the barrel was nearly full, she would trundle it up the gentle slope to her back porch, where two more buckets waited to empty it. And when she finished with that, there

was still wood to bring in for the fireplace and cookstove, as well as geese and one stupid hound dog to feed.

As she worked Tate wondered why Millard Carter, the father she had never known, had struggled so hard to stay off the twentieth-century path of progress. At that moment, with the outlaw moon bearing down on her and a day's worth of strained muscles crying out for reprieve, the nineteenth century seemed anything but romantic.

She was halfway up the path with the rain barrel before a more obvious question occurred to her.

Why exactly was *she* living in the middle of nowhere, following inch by inch in Millard Carter's footsteps?

Inmate 94729 regained consciousness slowly. One moment the sun had hung heavily on the horizon, refusing to sink into oblivion, the next the sky was black except for a huge amber moon leering behind a patch of pine and sassafras. The hours in between were a blur of pain and thirst.

He opened his eyes wider and slowly increased his field of vision, turning his head from side to side as he tried to remember where he was. "Why" he was there was impossible to forget. He remembered too well sliding through the warden's window and the minutes afterward when he had blended into the shadows, watching for the slim possibility that someone might have returned to one of the towers. There had been a sweet moment of victory when he had known for certain that he wasn't being watched.

He remembered the fence he had climbed, too. Not one of the insurmountable Cyclone fences; he wouldn't have made it halfway up one of those without being seen. But the grassy area outside the warden's window had led to a lower fence, marking the entrance to a staff parking lot.

There had been no need for scrupulous security here. Every window in the warden's wing was barred—except for the one that had held the air conditioner. And prisoners were only allowed in that wing under armed escort.

Good luck had run out abruptly at that point. His escape wouldn't have been detected except that at the same moment he scaled the fence top, a guard who was either late for his shift or coming back for something he'd forgotten had driven into the lot and seen him.

After that moment of discovery, his memory was mercifully blurred. He had run toward the woods. There had been gunshots, but none from his own gun, because it would have slowed him down too much to draw. There had been a siren and searchlights. There had been the realization, after endless minutes of plunging through the forest, that his leg had been hit by a bullet some undetermined distance back, and he was losing blood at an alarming rate.

That discovery had marked the beginning of brief moments of lucidity alternating with moments when he hadn't been sure of his own name. He had bandaged his leg with a piece of his shirrtail, and despite excruciating pain he had stumbled on in the direction of the river separating High Ridge property from the nearest town. He had known that come daylight trackers would be after him, if they weren't already. His best chance of remaining free was to float downriver as far as he was able, until he could be sure his scent was lost to the hounds. Then and only then could he rest and recover his strength.

He had followed his own plan, and it had almost killed him. Finding the river had taken most of the night. Once there, the water had been numbingly cold and the current faster than he had expected. With the vines of wild muscadine that he had sawed with the warden's letter opener, he had tied himself to a log he found at the water's edge. Then he had pushed himself out to the middle of the wide stretch of water and begun the long trip to freedom.

Sometime later, hours, days, years perhaps, he had washed ashore like a beached survivor of a shipwreck. The log had broken into pieces; his shoes were gone, Jim Cooney's uniform sodden and tattered. Somehow, before he had bound himself to the log, he had found the presence of mind to strap the gun belt to a branch on the log rising high out of the water, and it had endured unharmed.

Inch by inch he had dragged himself into the shelter of the brush-covered riverbank. Shivering and half dead, he had clawed a hole in the coarse silt, pulling what he displaced back over himself, along with branches and pine needles, until he fainted from the effort.

His own moans had awakened him sometime later, followed closely by the sound of men's voices. He had been rational enough to force himself to lie quietly and wait. He had expected recapture. Instead he had gradually realized that the men were farmers, working on the far side of the slight ridge along the riverbank. As the day progressed and the sun warmed him, he had listened to the sound of their farm machinery and their occasional shouts. He had grown so hot he had dared throw off his makeshift cover; then he had grown hotter still, until the cold water yards away was a torment.

After the men had gone home and the sun had gone down, he had dragged himself to the river to wash and drink. The strength he had hoped to recover was as elusive as the miles he had hoped to gain. The wound in his leg throbbed incessantly, and the flesh around it was swollen and angry.

Through sheer determination he had found a better place to sleep that night. An abandoned hay barn just over the ridge had sheltered him until the first light of his second morning of freedom. Then he had made his way to the woods behind the barn, leaning heavily on a branch

he used as a cane. His first taste of food since the escape had been a handful of black walnuts, husked between two flat rocks. His stomach hadn't been able to handle them.

He had wandered, after that. The woods were thick, the land surrounding him harsh and wild. He had stopped to rest often, once in a shallow cave, once under a pile of brush. He had drunk from a shallow stream whose water tasted of decaying leaves, and his stomach had rebelled again.

He knew he had covered no more than a mile before the sun began to sink in the sky once more. And he had known, somewhere in between the chills and fever that constantly racked him, that he was going to die if he didn't find food and warm shelter. The night promised to be colder than any he had yet experienced. And the infection in his leg was raging out of control.

He had begun to find his way out of the woods, then. Where before he had stayed in the densest part of the forest, now he moved toward a section that had been recently cleared. His plan had been to find a house and wait until night to forage for food, clothes, money. He had weighed his chances and known just how slim they were. But he wasn't a man to give up. Hope just wouldn't die. There were people who could help him—Aaron could help him, if he could just get to a telephone. He still had Jim Cooney's gun. If he had to hold someone prisoner to save his own life, he would do it.

He struggled on, using two sticks as crutches. Gauging the sun's position, he guessed it was near five o'clock when he reached the forest's edge. There were hills beyond, some planted in neat rows of evergreens. The land zigzagged like a crazy quilt of forest and field. But beyond the last stand of trees was an old log cabin with a wide front porch. Far below it was a blue ribbon of glistening water, the river that had carried him this far.

He had backed into the forest and begun to follow its edge until he found a better position for reaching the house. Then, after watching as carefully as he could for the cabin's inhabitants, he had taken a gamble and crossed the first field. The effort had cost him everything, and he had sunk into oblivion in the cradle of a leaf-filled pit. He had awakened later to watch the sun hover on the horizon.

Now the sun had been replaced by the biggest moon he had ever seen. There were details about his odyssey that he would probably never remember, but from this point on his task was to bring it to a conclusion. Somehow, he had to get into the cabin, find a change of clothing, first aid for his leg and food his body would tolerate. He would not die here, in some godforsaken hillbilly county, immersed in pine needles and fallen leaves.

He sat up slowly, pushing himself with both hands. The moon revolved in fiery comet streaks; the skeleton forms of the trees danced a bizarre tarantella. He waited, breathing slowly to force his dizziness away. His makeshift crutches lay on the ground beside him, but finally, with their aid, he was standing and moving toward the cabin.

There was no sign of life inside, only a dull glow from the back of the structure, like a night light, perhaps. There was no smoke from the chimney despite the rapidly falling temperature. There was no car or truck parked outside, no pack of dogs clustered on the porch, no farm animals begging to be fed. If he was lucky, truly lucky, the cabin's residents were away for the evening. He could break in, find what he needed, even call Aaron in Memphis, perhaps. He could give Aaron the phone number, and Aaron could find out just exactly where this place was. Then he could find a safe spot to wait until Aaron could get to him.

If he was lucky.

He used the tree line for shelter, until he came to the best spot for making a break for the cabin. He started across the clearing, his skin soaked in sweat despite the chill night air. Once his leg twisted beneath him, and only stern self-control kept him from giving in to the agony and falling. Each inch between him and the porch seemed a mile, each step a relentless torture.

He had reached the porch steps when he heard a dog's howl. He stumbled, falling forward to the bottom step, and the world went suddenly dark. Nausea gripped him, and bells seemed to clang in whirling frenzies of sound. He held onto the wooden plank and hung his head. From somewhere far away he thought he heard a shout.

It was a minute before the mists began to clear. He listened intently, but everything was silent. The shout was a mystery, perhaps real, or perhaps only a voice from his fever-riddled brain. Whichever it had been, he had to move on.

The steps seemed as numerous as the stars breaking out in the night sky. He dragged himself up them, one by one. On the porch he rested, too exhausted to continue, too relentless to quit. After a moment he clawed his way up the porch post until he was standing once more. Lurching unsteadily, he reached the door.

There wasn't a lock he couldn't pick, but he didn't relish trying this one with hands that shook like poplars in an autumn windstorm. He turned the knob, and the door swung in with a creak. Silently he blessed the trusting souls of country people.

Inside, the cabin was larger than he had expected and more rustic. There had been no attempt to cover the massive logs and mortar with wallboard. Abe Lincoln would have felt right at home.

A quick scan uncovered a doorway to his far left and told him that the cabin had at least one more room. The majority of the space wasn't divided by walls but by the placement of simple

furniture. Opposite the front door was a round oak table, beside it an old-fashioned wooden icebox, a counter and sink. A cast-iron wood stove separated the kitchen from the living area to his right. A massive field-stone fireplace covered that wall, with a sofa and chairs placed in front of it. Opposite the fireplace, above more chairs and wall-to-wall bookcases, was an open loft with stairs leading to it.

The dim glow he'd noticed from outside came from a kerosene lantern burning on the table. By its light he recognized the obvious. The cabin had no electricity. More important, a kerosene lantern needed tending. No one left a lantern burning, without staying nearby. Particularly not in a firetrap like this.

And there was food on the table beside it.

He leaned against the door and drew his gun. There was no one in this room. He was still alert enough to know that. But there was at least one room to his left, and a loft. As quietly as he could, he hobbled in that direction. He determined to try the room. Surely if anyone was in the loft he or she would have made a sound when a half-dead stranger dragged himself through the front door.

The room beyond the doorway was medium-sized, obviously a bedroom. There was a large ornate iron bed made up with a patchwork quilt. No one was in it.

He stumbled to a closet and opened it to see men's clothing, overalls, mostly, and plaid flannel shirts. He grabbed one of each, then rummaged in the chest of drawers by the bed for socks and underwear. Two of the drawers yielded only women's things, but the third produced what he needed. Encouraged that he had made progress so quickly, he searched the near-darkness for a telephone but found none. Out of the bedroom, he made his way across the room to the table.

Half a sandwich stared back at him from hand-thrown brown crockery. Most of a glass of milk sat beside it. His stomach lurched as he imagined trying either, but he forced himself to lift the sandwich and take a bite. He chewed slowly, willing his body to accept nourishment. He had to be strong, and he had to eat if he was going to survive.

He tried the milk next, but he could only manage a sip. Nausea and dizziness overwhelmed him, no matter how hard he tried to fight. He slid into the chair and used what remaining strength he had to lift the glass chimney of the lantern and blow out the flame. His head slipped to the tabletop, and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Later—he didn't know how much—he came to again at the sound of a mournful whistle and the shuffle of footsteps. His fingers closed on the butt of his gun. With what failing strength he had, he pushed himself upright and struggled toward the back door.

The lantern had gone out. Tate stopped whistling as she glanced toward the window that had framed the outlaw moon at supper. She was surprised. She didn't think the lamp had been low on kerosene, and despite the cabin's one hundred-plus years, it was surprisingly draft-free and cozy. Still, kerosene lanterns weren't exactly high-tech. At least the preposterous pumpkin moon was high enough to light her way until she could get the wick burning once more.

Maybe she would light the other lamps, too. Kerosene wasn't expensive, not when she figured what she was saving on utility bills. There was something about this night that called out for light. She would start a fire right away, as well. She might even toast marshmallows and make s'mores. She had missed Girl Scouts and slumber parties as a teenager, but later, thanks to Kris and Jess, her adopted parents, and Stagecoach Inn, the home for runaways that they had founded, she had regained a little of those lost years.

Kris and Jess were sold on s'mores, she remembered fondly. They squashed toasted marshmallows and graham crackers and chocolate bars into sandwiches on autumn nights, as if they were a special remedy guaranteed to heal the saddest or most rebellious adolescent in Stagecoach Inn's care. And sometimes, s'mores—or maybe the love that went with them—even seemed to help.

Tate climbed the back steps, her arms filled with firewood. Some of it was from an apple tree, and she looked forward to the scent of applewood filling the old cabin. Simple pleasures, s'mores and applewood, but oddly comforting on a night such as this one.

She balanced the logs against her chest, leaning backward as she reached for the doorknob. She whistled to herself again as the knob turned. The song was one she had heard last week at a Mountain Glade hootenanny. She couldn't remember the title, but the words had told the story of the murder of a faithless wife. So many of the songs of the region had survived the trip to America from the British Isles virtually unscathed. And so many of them were about murder and mayhem. She remembered that this one had been sung by a long-faced old woman with the husky-voice of a New Orleans chanteuse.

The door swung open an inch before she had to grab a falling log. She settled the wood firmly in her arms again and pushed the door with her knee. The door was heavy and handmade, and it moved only a foot. The whistled folk song changed to a softly voiced curse. She pushed the door with her elbow, and it swung a little wider.

She stepped into the cabin and started toward the fireplace. The cabin seemed colder than when she had left it, and strangely desolate. She would set her wood on the hearth and light the lamp closest to it. Then she would start a fire. By the time she returned with the next load, the room would be...

"Stand right where you are."

For just a moment Tate was too surprised to feel fear; then it set every nerve in her body twanging. She didn't move, but she wasn't sure whether it was the harshly voiced order or shock that made her stand so still.

"That's right. Now turn around slowly. Very slowly. I've got a gun, and I don't mind using it."

She forced herself to do as the man's voice commanded. She moved slowly, still clutching the load of wood. Finally she faced the door she had just entered. It was still open, and a man's figure was silhouetted in front of it. He was tall, and his hair and beard glinted gold in the light of the outlaw moon. He was wearing a tattered blue uniform and a gun belt, but the gun itself was in his hand and pointed at her chest.

She had never seen his photograph, but Tate knew the identity of the man who was standing in front of her. Carl Petersen—who had not, after all, headed straight for Houston.

"You're a woman." He sounded surprised.

"Last time I looked." Her eyes were drawn to the gun. Her life seemed to depend on its whims.

"Who else is out there?"

In fascinated horror she watched the gun barrel waver. "Nobody."

"Don't play me for a fool. You don't live here alone."

She debated the wisdom of telling the truth. Perhaps the threat of someone else would force him to leave. "You're right," she lied. "I've got family coming home any minute. If you're smart, you'll run while you can."

He gave a derisive laugh. "I'm not running so well about now."

The gun barrel did a right side step, then a left. "Take what you need and get out of here," she said as calmly as she could while she still watched the gun. "I've got no reason to report you. Whatever you've done is no concern of mine."

"This is a democracy, lady. You *are* your brother's keeper. Or didn't that lesson make it to the Ozarks?"

"I've got food and money. You can have as much of both as you can carry. But if you stay, you're going to be caught." She improvised. "My father won't take kindly to you being here."

Carl Petersen stepped forward. The gun barrel continued its unsteady dance. "Let's deal with you first, then we'll worry about your father."

Regrets flashed through Tate's mind. She wished she had been better about telling Kris and Jess that she loved them. She wished she had searched for her father while he was still alive. She wished she had made more friends, done more good, made love to a man. She was twenty-one, and life had seemed endless.

Carl Petersen took one more step. The gun wavered.

Tate hurled the pile of logs just as he took step number three. Then, as the firewood slammed against his chest, she turned and fled.