

Chapter One

Eagle Valley, California. Easter Week. Dawn.

The fisherman huddles deep inside his jacket beside Groman's Creek. The pole in his left hand jerks, then bobs. He takes hold with confident hands.

"Wait for it, Johnny," he whispers. Words his father used to say.

Then the pole goes slack and the fisherman heaves a heartfelt sigh.

It should be getting light, but heavy clouds hold back the dawn like his Granny holds back treats when he fails to bring home good grades from school. The air freshens into a light breeze as cool air slips down the mountains, carrying along the stench of fresh cow pies and dust from the corrals at his back.

From those same corrals comes a low moan and an answering cry; the rustle of restless hooves as cows and calves find each other after a night of broken sleep. He glances back as the ranch house lights flicker to life.

Old man Bennett'll skin him alive if he finds Johnny fishing in his fields. Don't make sense what with the cows locked up and all.

Johnny feels the creel empty against his hip.

Just one more try. After this morning the cows will be back in the field and that'll be the end of his fishing, at least in Groman's Creek.

He tunes out the bawling calves and feels his way through the barbwire fence. The sky's lightening just enough so he can see without using the flashlight tucked in his pocket.

Mountains rise like black shadows from the valley floor. He ducks down flat as headlights slash along the road and a car roars by on its way out of town. The road circles the valley like a protective snake, weaving in and out of small diversions, meeting up with State Highway 79 in the middle of Morgan's Crossing, then continuing on north to where State Highway 10 cuts through the mountains east to west.

Johnnie loves this time of morning, when the sun rises like a curtain on a stage, lighting first the peaks and ridges flanking the western side of Eagle Valley, spreading across circles of alfalfa waiting to be cut, then slipping over nursing calves and their patient mommas, across the ponds filled with migrating birds (long-necked swans and sandhill cranes were some of his favorites),

and finally, touching his own home.

There won't be much of a sunrise this morning, not with the clouds and all. Kind of unusual for this time of year, but then the weather had been kinda strange all winter. First hot, then cold, then dry, winding up with a bunch of cold, wet storms and making the hay ranchers anxious about their first crops.

Johnny scrambles to his feet after a quick glance at the ranch house and works his way toward the culvert.

Just one last try, he promises himself. But it'll have to be fast.

The big pipe running under the road is no-man's land as far as his Granny is concerned, but Dad always used to say the best fish hide out in the weeds around the culvert's mouth. Johnny slides another worm on his hook, squinting to see in the gloomy dark. His flashlight would make things easier, but only sissies use flashlights, so he grits his teeth and finally manages to get the squirmy worm skewered on the hook.

A quick flip of the wrist sends hook and worm plopping in front of the culvert's yawning black mouth. The stream gently burps, then settles back into a soothing burble. Mud squishes beneath his feet as he moves a bit closer. No breeze down here where the bank rises steeply up to meet the highway. Somewhere among the reeds a frog tries out its morning voice. A second frog joins in and then another and another until the air fills with the chorus intended to greet a sun on the rise.

The pole bobs, sending shock waves through Johnny's arms. He hauls the tip up, up, up until he just can't lift anymore.

Whatever's on the end of the line is big. Maybe the biggest he's ever caught.

Water drips off the fishing line with a soft plop onto the scattered rocks at his feet. He tips the pole forward, waits for the comforting zing as nylon line whips through the reel, telling him his fish is on the run, telling him it's time to play. Johnny's heart pounds in his chest, his hands slip on the cork and rubber grip. He can't let go, not now. Letting go means giving up and a Jacobson never gives up.

The line whirs and stops, whirs and stops. Johnny's heart sinks. That's not the way a fish moves. He grits his teeth and starts to reel in. Each turn of the handle is lead-heavy; hauling dead weight through water always is.

Then the line refuses to budge.

The air sings as he whips the pole one way, then the other, trying to dislodge the hook from whatever refuses to let it go.

Probably water weeds or a piece of trash. One time he even hauled in a dead squirrel. Just thinking about that experience makes Johnny feel like he's standing in the middle of the local graveyard at midnight on Halloween.

Johnny holds the pole tight in his left hand and works his way closer to the culvert, keeping the line taut so he can see where it leads. It's barely light enough to see the silvery strand disappear around a dark form bobbing in the shimmery water.

Not stiff enough for a log.

His heart moves into his throat and for a moment he thinks about just cutting the line. But his father wouldn't have been afraid. His father was never afraid.

Johnny sucks his lower lip, swallows hard, puts his hand on the line, sets his pole on the bank, and moves forward. Mud sucks at his boots, threatening to drag them from his feet with each step. Taking a deep breath, he yanks on the line. Maybe this time the hook will pop free.

Nothing.

Now Johnny pulls out the flashlight hidden deep in his pocket and flicks the light on. The nylon fishing line glistens white before it disappears into what looks like a wet blanket. He gives the line another yank. The thing at his feet rolls toward him with a soft splush! and a pale, bloated face stares up into the morning gray.

A face he recognizes.

His shriek splits the air, an agonized cry filled with fear and horror. Johnny scrambles backwards, but the mud holds him fast and he falls to his side, his face inches from the glazed eyes.

Johnny's throat aches with the force of his screams. The stench of decaying flesh oozes into his nose and down his lungs. Screams turn to heaves and the biscuit he munched on the way out this morning ends up in the water.

He scrambles through the mud and up the gravel bank onto the road, no longer a self-assured fisherman. Just an eight-year-old boy too scared to spit.