

# RETURN TO CHEROKEE

## Sample Chapter

### CHAPTER ONE

The locomotive's lonely whistle echoed into the foggy night air as it slowed at the Hardy station. Ludwig Kruger, tall and gaunt, stood waiting at the west end of the deserted station. The creak of a boxcar opening jarred him and he turned his head. Two trainmen lowered a seven-foot wooden carton onto Ludwig's flatbed cart.

He wheeled the cart to his waiting truck in the empty parking lot and dragged the large box into the bed of his pickup with the help of a strong rope. Wiping a little sweat from his forehead, he drove off and headed down Main Street. No shops appeared open at this late hour and no persons walked up or down the street. At the only signal in town he turned left onto the highway toward Cherokee. Two miles later he turned right onto a wooded road toward the old house he had purchased before he moved from the east. The wind parted the fog and shook tree branches alongside the road. He switched his headlights from dim to high beam and slowed around the curves. Some of the night creatures, armadillos, possums, flashed ahead of him, but he did not hit any.

When he turned into his long driveway, the first raindrops hit. He pulled around to the back of the large house and parked by the cellar door. After pulling back the two wooden doors, he tugged the box off his truck and down the steps into the cellar. Outside, the wind howled; the rain poured down hard. Ludwig closed the cellar doors, turned on a light, and rested beside the long box. He patted the top. "You are home now, old friend."

He pushed the carton into a vacant corner of the basement and locked the doors from the inside. Upstairs, the house was dark and partially furnished. The main load of household goods had not arrived yet.

Ludwig bought the Cherokee Pharmacy after selling his drugstore in a small New England town. A string of murders where the victims had died from vicious attacks from some kind of wild animal prompted him to move westward. The police found no clues to the murders except that each person's throat was ripped open. The law questioned him about any drug abuser customers who used his drugstore, but Ludwig could not help very much. One detective returned every few days dissatisfied with Ludwig's answers, so he decided to sell his store and move on.

Lightning flashed outside, gave the old house an eerie feel until Ludwig found the light switch. He walked into the kitchen, made a cup of hot chocolate, and sat at the kitchen table across the room from a butcher-block island.

The cocoa soothed his nerves as he sipped from the cup. The Cherokee Pharmacy had been closed a month after the last owner sold it to Ludwig because he could not move west that quickly and the owner had to leave. *He'd have to really promote the pharmacy to get the business back. Hiring good people and paying them more than the going wage would certainly help restore the business.* He let a thin smile slip from his

lips. *He knew he could do it. He'd done it before. His old friend in the basement might have to help though.*

Thunder cracked, shook the house. Ludwig peered out the kitchen window at the storm. *It was his kind of night, wet, spooky, trees swaying. When he got settled, he'd go hunting on a stormy night like this.* He made another cup of hot chocolate and walked upstairs to his bedroom.

The next morning the sun popped up early and started drying the golden and red fall leaves that fell with the storm. Sheriff James Duke, in his new cruiser, pulled to a stop in front of Sarah's Diner. No other cars were in the parking lot. He walked inside and was greeted by the aroma of fresh coffee brewing. "Mornin', Sarah." No answer came and he did not see her.

A moment later, Sarah Crowley poked her head out of the kitchen. "Oh, Sheriff – didn't hear you come in. I was baking some fresh cinnamon rolls – you know the big ones you all like."

"I smell them now and that good coffee you make." He slid onto a stool at the counter.

She grabbed the pot and poured him a cup. "Nice fall morning out there now after that storm."

"Yeah – making my rounds a little earlier today, to make sure the roads are clear and there's no trees down."

"You didn't happen to see Sarge walking around town did you?" she asked.

Before he could answer a timer went off in the kitchen and Sarah rushed in to take the cinnamon rolls out of the oven. "I'll let them cool for a minute and then put the frosting on."

"I like lots of frosting." The sheriff sipped his coffee. "No, I didn't see Sarge. Too bad about you two. I thought maybe you had settled him down."

"I thought so too, for a while, but he got more and more involved with his troops and I just couldn't take it any longer. So, I kicked him out."

"Other people have called me. They see him every now and then just marching in the woods – yacking at his troops. He's harmless enough I guess."

"Yes, he's harmless, but in another world." She finished spreading the frosting on the rolls and cut a big one for the sheriff.

"So, are you doing all right now?"

"Yeah, 'cept I kinda miss the old gang who used to come in here every morning. Hard to believe it's been five years since Al Madison was killed."

The sheriff looked up from his food. "Doesn't seem that long."

"At least Diana and Lynne, the Perry girls are still here."

"How are they doin' since they bought the old Cherokee Inn?"

"Pretty good, I guess. They wanted to just cater to good-looking men, but found out the ones who booked their place were mostly gay. So, they accommodated anybody."

"That reminds me. I did get a dispatch that Donna Long was released from that Vermont prison."

"I wonder if she's coming back here?"

"Could be. Remember Curley Thompson went up there after her and stayed. He had deep roots around here, so it's a good guess they'll both be back."

Sarah poured the sheriff more coffee. "I always liked Curley. He was quite the handyman. And Donna – maybe she was justified in what she did."

"Justified or not, it was murder. Can't condone it." He ate the last of his cinnamon roll.

The door opened and Diana and Lynne Perry walked in. "Good morning, Sarah, Sheriff."

Sarah turned to them. "Mornin,' girls. Thought you'd be serving breakfast at your place."

"Well, we will be later," Diana said. "Just wanted to slip out and have coffee here this morning."

Sheriff Duke took a last swallow of his coffee. "So, how's it going, ladies? Any interesting news from the inn?"

"Not really," Lynne said. "Just getting into the fall season. We'll be busy and I'm sure there'll be a few special characters – I mean guests, who'll be arriving."

"Fine – as long as they aren't too special. This town's been pretty quiet for a while now."

Sarah brought the girls their coffee. Lynne took hers black, blew on it, and sipped it slowly.

Diana put sugar and milk in hers and let it cool a minute. "Sarah, have you heard if the pharmacy is going to open soon?"

"Haven't really heard. Maybe Sheriff Duke knows what's going on?" Sarah turned to him.

The sheriff tilted his cup toward Sarah. "There have been rumors – funny thing, since Al was killed, it seems nobody wants to own it very long."

"What kind of rumors?" Diana sipped on her coffee.

Sarah filled Duke's cup. "Yeah, Sheriff – what rumors?"

"Well, there's supposed to be a new owner coming to town. Don't know just when, but I hear soon."

Diana raised her head. "Is he young, old – in-between?"

"Now, Diana," Sarah said, "didn't you have enough of that with Al?"

"Enough of what?" Lynne butted in.

"I'm sure you know." Sarah put the coffeepot back on its stand.

The sheriff smiled. "What makes you so sure it's a he? Could be a woman pharmacist."

"A woman?" Diana frowned. "I never thought of that."

"Don't fret," Sheriff Duke said. "I'm pretty sure it's a man."

Diana relaxed. Lynne smiled. Sarah eyed both of them.

"Maybe he'll want to stay at our place until he gets settled," Diana said.

Sarah slapped the counter. "How convenient."

Lynne turned to Diana. "My, my, things are looking up."

The door opened. A tall, lean man in his late forties with dark penetrating eyes walked in. He glanced from one person to the other stopping when he met Diana's eyes.