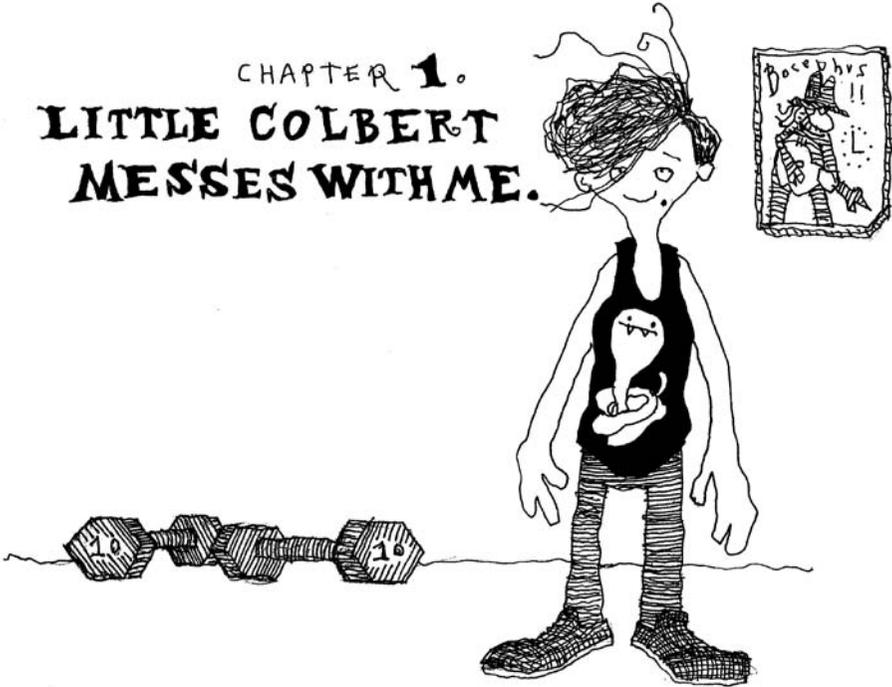


CHAPTER 1.
**LITTLE COLBERT
MESSES WITH ME.**



NICOLETTE

I sat by myself on my great-uncle Hubert's blue velour sectional, eating cornbread and buttermilk for breakfast. It was a school day, middle of February, but the Canard County Schools were closed. Eastern Kentucky'd been snowed under all January, but that day the sun was out bright as prison lights. The only snow lay like gauze patches at the edges of Hubert's gravel yard. The trail was full of puddles clean out to the blacktop. The bare-branch woods sparkled like somebody'd shot a leaf blower full of glitter at them.

Hubert Jewell was close to a grandfather as I had. He lived out Long Ridge on top of the second-highest mountain in Kentucky in a house they'd added onto a hundred times. Some of it was brick. Some of it was plywood. Some of it was Tyvek and tar paper. The roof was a mishmash of red, blue, green, and tan metal sheets. All the doors had hung somewhere else, which suited that side of my mother's family, cause the Jewells never let go of

anything, and you never knew what was behind the next whopper-jawed door wouldn't latch right.

But that day, Hubert hadn't fooled with his own house in months. Hubert was a quarter mile down the trail, putting a kitchen in one of his new tourist cabins. They were coming to shoot a movie in Canard County, and Hubert was wanting to get some fat rent off them Hollywood people.



I DIDN'T HAVE TO BE AT HUBERT'S.

I could have been at my dad's in Kingsport, Tennessee. He worked in a chemical plant, sometimes drove a forklift, sometimes drove a truck. My high school there had a better culinary program, and I had a grandmother there who backed me in whatever I did, but it can get hard to breathe in Kingsport, and not just because the smell coming off the chemical plant and paper plant and other plants they got.

I could have been with my mother. She was holed up at my dead Granny Cora's out the Ridge past Hubert's cabins. Mom was hiding out from life, weighed down by grief and stale honey buns. Sat on the computer all day commenting her life away. I could have been with her.

But I was at Hubert's. Watching a man-cook yell at a bunch of young woman-cooks on Hubert's humongous flatscreen. Man-cook thought he knew how to run a place, how to get people to do. I'm not sure he did. I'm not sure all his hollering and ugly talk helped the food taste any better or get done any quicker. But I watched him, trying to learn how a chef does, because that's what I wanted to be. A chef.

I'd finished my breakfast and was doing curls with a ten-pound weight when my cousin Colbert came in the house, stood in front of the television.

Colbert was a cop down in town, thin-skinned and sensitive as the bottom of a baby's foot, the last person needed a badge. Colbert stood there, massaging his biceps, his pickled-egg head perfectly blocking my view.

I said, "Why don't you get out of the way, Little Colbert?"

He said, "Shut your dyke mouth, Nicolette."

I said, "Takes one to know one, Little Colbert."

He jerked me up off the couch, jammed me against the paneling next to Hubert's gun safe, knocked Hubert's laminated Bocephus clock off the wall, and stuck the long bone in his arm up in my throat.

He said, "Call me 'Little Colbert' again. I dare you."

I'd of taken Little Colbert's dare in a heartbeat, but I couldn't with my throat pressed shut like it was.

Little Colbert run his hand up under my belt, lifted me off the floor.

He said, "Maybe you'd like me to make a woman of your skinny ass right here."

He got my belt loose, yanked it out of my pants with one hand. When he done that, I dropped that ten-pound weight on his foot, hit him square across the toes. He let go of me and I run out the door, darted sock-footed through the trucks and four-wheelers in the muddy front yard the quarter mile out Long Ridge to where Hubert was.



HUBERT LAY under the sink, and when I slammed the cabin door, he banged his head off the sink pipe.

He cussed, said, "Why aint you in school?"

I said, "Snow day."

He shook his head and went back to plumbing.

I told Hubert what Little Colbert done.

He stopped working, lay there on his back, his belly pulsing like a jungle snake trying to digest a baby tiger.

I said, "What you going to do?"

He said, "You go see your mother."

I said, "What about Little Colbert?"

He said, "Do what I tell you."

I said, "Dang," and started for the door.

Hubert said, "Nicolette."

I said, "What?"

He scooted out from under the sink and sat up. He rubbed his raw red hand over his onion scalp.

He said, "Bring me a pop."

I got him a Pepsi out of the cooler in the kitchen and turned to go.

He said, "Nicolette."

I said, "What?"

He said, "Put you on a pair of them," and pointed to a pile of boots next to the door.

I rubbed his head, put on the boots, and went to find my mother.