

"I was completely charmed on
my trip to Cold River."
—New York Times bestselling
author Stephanie Evanovich



A Cold River Novel

just fine with caroline

Annie England Noblin

Author of *St! Stay! Speak!*

P.S.
INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE...

CHAPTER I



CAROLINE O'CONNOR LOVED TO FISH. HER favorite tree sat on the bank of the Cold River, just perfect for leaning against with a fishing pole in her hand. She relished casting a line as the fog lifted sluggishly off of the water.

The best time to fish was during the early summer—when it was already hot, but too early for the summer rush of river rats. She would come in and open up the Wormhole, her family's bait and tackle shop, and then sneak off for an hour or two to visit the river and her favorite tree. In fact, that tree was her favorite spot, not just on the river, but in all of Cold River, the river's namesake and the town where she lived.

Cold River, Missouri, a town of about 8,000 people, was nestled in the heart of an area of the United States known as the Ozarks. At any given time you might hear residents of this southwestern part of Missouri refer to themselves as Southerners or Midwesterners, but neither one was entirely true. The Ozarks, a place of rolling hills and flowing rivers, was a place where a person could disappear for days, months, years, or forever. The

rugged terrain was rivaled only by the rugged people living there, a people happy to be tucked away from the rest of the world.

Everybody fished in Cold River.

Caroline's father taught her to fish when she was six. He hadn't wanted to. It had been an argument for days between her father and mother, something that she remembered even at that tender age. Caroline had known, since she was old enough to ask about the "boy in the pictures," that she had a brother in heaven, at least, that's what her mother told her, and her daddy didn't fish anymore. But he wanted to, she could tell. He sometimes looked at the fishing poles in the hallway closet, shoved to the back behind the winter coats. He sometimes pulled a tackle box from off the top shelf and looked inside of it for whole minutes at a time and yelled at her when she asked if she could play with the toys inside.

That was when her mother started asking her father to "please take Caroline fishing."

The first time he took her it had been a disaster. He barked orders the entire time and they didn't even catch a fish. But the next week was different. They caught fish and her father smiled. More fish brought more smiles, and over the years, it became the bond she and her father shared.

She was fishing with her father less and less since her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Most of his free time was spent taking care of her or taking extra shifts at the free clinic so he could have a break from her. His gear sat dejected in one of the hallway closets, and his waders had long acquired cracks.

Caroline shook her head. It was too early for thinking. And she was starting to sweat. That meant it was time to pack it in and begin her trudge back up to the shop. As she walked, she noticed a car parked out in front of the old Cranwell Station across the road.

The “For Sale” sign had been sitting out in front for months. Over the years, the Cranwell family used the store for many different purposes. It had been a gas station in the beginning, a lively meeting spot for summer visitors to the Cold River during the 1920s. It had also been a beauty salon, a five-and-dime store, a used car lot, and a pet grooming facility. Caroline’s parents had owned the little bait shop across the street from Cranwell Station since before she was born, and in the twenty-five years since she’d been alive, the place had been all but empty. There just wasn’t enough traffic to the river anymore, especially since the new highway routed most tourists around the town of Cold River completely. When the eldest Cranwell brother died, the building began to sit unoccupied and unkempt, a source of hot debate for the remaining Cranwell family members, all four of them, none of whom wanted the responsibility of maintaining the property. They stayed to themselves down at Cranwell Corner and rarely came into town. Caroline couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen any member of that family.

She watched as a man got out of the car and proceeded to walk up to the door of the station. It was a man she’d never seen before. He was wearing khakis and a crisp white button-up shirt that made his dark hair and tan skin stand out against the sunlight even more than they already did. He placed his palm against the glass and began to rub at the thick coating of dirt. After peering inside, he began to pull on the door handle.

Surely he’s not trying to break in, Caroline thought. *Who robs a place in broad daylight wearing khakis?* Besides, Cranwell Station looked like it was about to fall in at any moment. Maybe he was just lost and looking for direction. He sure looked like he was from the city, and people from the city began to panic when they cruised outside city

limits and towards the river. These two buildings, Cranwell Station and her bait shop, were the last stop before leaving civilization.

She continued to watch him from a safe distance as he walked around the station, kicked at loose boards on the porch steps, and pulled at the door handle some more. Once, he went back to his car and pulled out a cell phone, but realizing there was no reception, shoved it into his pocket and commenced cursing at the air. It wasn't until he picked up a rock and started towards one of the windows that Caroline made a move.

"Hey!" she hollered, charging towards him with her fishing pole. "What in the hell do you think you're doing?"

The man stopped when he heard her voice. He turned to face her, the rock still clutched in his hand. "Who are you?"

Caroline stared at him. He looked familiar, but she couldn't put her finger on it. "Who are *you*?"

"I asked you first."

"Why don't you put that rock down?" Caroline asked. "Ain't nothin' in that place worth stealin'."

"What?" The man looked down at the rock in his hand. He began to chuckle. "It would be hard to steal from myself."

"Are you lost?" Caroline wanted to know. He wasn't making any sense. Maybe the heat was getting to him.

"I don't think so," he replied. His eyes were every bit as dark as his hair. "Not if this is Cranwell Station."

"It used to be."

"Good." The man set the rock down on the porch and stuck out his hand. "In that case, I'm Noah Cranwell."

"Cranwell?" Caroline's mouth dropped open. "You're a Cranwell?" There was no way she could have heard that right. "You're related to the Cranwells who own this place?"

"I am the Cranwell who owns this place," he replied. "But the damn keys don't work."

Caroline squinted at him. She'd heard rumors about Noah Cranwell her whole life. Now, here he was, standing in front of her while she pointed her fishing pole at him. No wonder he looked so familiar.

"Anyway, I just flew in from New Jersey."

"New Jersey?" Caroline cut him off. "You're a long ways from New Jersey."

"Don't I fucking know it," he grumbled.

Before Caroline could respond, she heard a snarl and saw a flurry of black-and-tan fur, followed by a ripping sound, and Noah began hollering a string of curse words Caroline had never even heard uttered out loud or together.

"It bit me! It bit me!" Noah, said, stumbling back. "That damn . . . *thing* bit me!"

Caroline saw her huge, three-legged Tibetan mastiff in front of her with a piece of cloth hanging from her mouth—a piece of Noah's white shirt. "Yara, NO!"

Of course, it didn't matter how loud Caroline hollered, Yara couldn't hear her. In addition to having only three legs, she was also deaf as a post. Four years ago, Caroline found her tangled in a barbed-wire fence a few miles down the road, filthy and her coat full of mats. It took two veterinarians and a horse tranquilizer to get her cleaned up, and one of her legs had been badly mangled and needed to be amputated. Now she was a 120-pound dog with a serious attitude problem. She barked her indignation at Caroline, and then dropped the piece of cloth at the man's feet.

"I'm—I'm so sorry." Caroline bent down to pick up the scrap of

shirt. "She thought you were going to attack me. She's deaf, and she doesn't like strangers."

"I cannot believe I left Hoboken for this," he muttered.

"I'm so sorry," Caroline repeated. "She doesn't have rabies or anything. I mean she's been vaccinated. She's just a big baby!" Caroline never thought she'd see the day where *anything* looked more out of place than her tripod Tibetan mastiff in the Missouri Ozarks, but now here he was—Noah Cranwell in the flesh . . . and khakis.

Noah looked up at her from his tattered shirt. He didn't look angry to Caroline. He looked more amused than anything else. "Well, she's the biggest baby I've ever seen."

"I've seen bigger."

"Who are you, anyway?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm Caroline." Caroline dropped her fishing pole and stuck out her hand. "Caroline O'Conner. My family owns the bait and tackle shop across the road."

"I went over there about twenty minutes ago," Noah replied. "The door was wide open, but nobody was there. I could have robbed you blind."

"I doubt you would have robbed me unless you wanted a trunk full of night crawlers," Caroline said. "Besides, that's what Yara is for."

"She was in there?"

Caroline nodded. "I admit she's not very good at her job, seein' as how she can't hear a damn thing."

"I beg to differ." Noah pointed down at his shirt. "I guess this means we're going to be neighbors."

"I reckon so." Caroline headed back over to her side of the gravel road, with Yara at her heels. She noticed Noah still

watching her as she threw her bait and tackle into the back of the truck.

“You just going to leave that dog on the porch?” Noah called, pointing to Yara.

“I am.” Caroline threw a glance back at Yara, who was leaning lazily against one of the posts on the porch. Her tongue lolled in and out of her mouth. “Why? You afraid she might attack you or something?”

“*Might?*” Noah asked. “Pretty sure she already did.”

“She won’t do it again,” Caroline replied. “She didn’t seem to like the mouthful she got the first time.”

Noah gave Caroline a wry smile before continuing, “So she lives here?”

Caroline sighed. What didn’t he understand? “She lives here,” she said. “She won’t even get up into my truck. The motion scares her.”

“That’s an odd dog you’ve got there.”

“I’m aware.” Caroline grinned at him. She couldn’t help it. There was something charming about his persistence.

“Well, I better, what was it you said? I *reckon* I better head back out to my grandfather’s and get this key situation figured out.” Noah gave her a wave.

“It was nice to meet you.” Caroline locked eyes with him, and it startled her that he held her there just a bit longer than was polite. When he finally broke his stare, he turned and ambled over to his car, started the engine, and roared off, leaving her alone, just exactly as she had been before, but at the same time utterly and completely different.

CHAPTER 2



IT WAS A TWELVE-MILE TRIP FROM THE RIVER back into town, and that was just enough time for Caroline to relax before she got home. She'd been making the drive regularly for years, but it wasn't until she moved home four years ago that she began to appreciate the quiet passage into Cold River. Tonight, she was running late. She'd spent too much of her day staring across the gravel road at the newly purchased Cranwell Station.

In truth, she'd been staring at Cranwell Station since before she could walk. The place had an air of mystery that even at twenty-five, Caroline couldn't ignore. Her whole life, rumors circulated about the family and their business, but the Cranwells were notorious for keeping their mouths shut tight and people shut off from Cranwell Corner, the place where all of the surviving Cranwells resided. She tried to remember the last time she'd seen a member of the Cranwell family. It had been a long time, at least a year, since she'd seen hide or hair of any of them. It had been at the free clinic where Caroline's father volunteered. Jep

Cranwell came in for his chronic emphysema, which caused him to need an oxygen tank much of the time. She could tell he'd once been a strong and strapping man. In fact, now that Caroline had met Noah, it occurred to her that Noah and his grandfather Jep looked quite a bit alike. But the years had not been kind to Jep Cranwell. Both his body and his disposition had withered. He'd berated the receptionist because he'd had to wait, and then when he'd found out that Dr. O'Conner would be treating him and not his regular doctor, he refused to be seen and stormed out of the clinic, oxygen tank in tow.

Caroline shivered just thinking about it. She wondered how the nice, clean-cut man she'd met at the station today could be related to the likes of Jep Cranwell. It just didn't make sense.

Caroline rested her head against the window as she drove. It would be nice to come home to peace and quiet. Instead, she knew just exactly what she'd find. Her mother's nurse would be frantic to get home to her family and would scold her like Caroline was a child. Then Caroline's father would call after she'd fixed supper and she and her mother had been waiting half an hour for him and say that he'd be another half an hour and to just go ahead and eat without him. Even in retirement, Max O'Conner couldn't slow down. After that, Caroline would spend another twenty minutes convincing her mother to take a bath. Just as Caroline would be settling her mother into bed, Caroline's father would come home and make so much commotion that she would give up on the entire night and retreat to her room, leaving her parents to themselves.

Of course, it hadn't always been this way. Caroline had been referred to as a "menopause baby" her whole life as her mother had been forty-five when she'd given birth. Even as a child, Caroline

knew that her parents were older than the parents of her friends, but it hadn't been until an ogre named Alzheimer's invaded the body of her mother four years ago that Caroline truly understood what it meant to be the only child of older parents.

Her father couldn't run his medical practice and the bait shop and take care of his wife, so Caroline moved home two semesters shy of graduating with her BS in History Education at Missouri State University. At first her father had been angry, arguing with her into the wee hours of the morning about the importance of her education, but by now he'd come to depend upon her. Even though he'd retired from his practice two years ago, Max O'Conner was still one of the best doctors in Ozark County, and probably the only one who still made house visits out to the hills and hollers. He worked two days a week, and during the summertime, which was the busy season at the bait shop, a nurse came to look after Maureen O'Conner. So that left Caroline to pull into the driveway of her parents' house on 222 Polk Avenue two nights a week, wishing she could just take a nap instead. She was surprised when she saw her father's truck pull into the driveway just a few minutes later.

"Dad?" Caroline asked. "What are you doing home so early? I haven't even started supper." They both waved goodbye to Allison Hood, Maureen O'Conner's day nurse, as she hurried out the door with a stern look and not so much as a word to either of them.

"I didn't have any appointments scheduled," her father replied, rolling his eyes to Allison's back. Neither of them dared cross her. She was a severe woman in her early fifties with little patience for anyone other than Caroline's mother, which was the only reason Dr. O'Conner put up with her. Allison was from Germany, and

with what little English she spoke, insisted upon both Caroline and her father calling her nothing but “Nurse.”

“Hi, honey,” Max O’Conner said, bending down to kiss his wife once he and Caroline were inside.

“Hello,” Maureen replied. She didn’t look up from her knitting.

“I’m fixing your favorite tonight—mashed potatoes and green beans,” Caroline said to her mother, also bending down to kiss her.

“And meatloaf for me?” her father asked hopefully.

“And meatloaf for you,” Caroline said once the nurse was gone. “Might as well go get cleaned up. It’ll be a while yet.”

As Caroline turned to walk towards the stove, she felt her father’s presence still behind her. He wasn’t moving towards her and he wasn’t talking to her, either. She turned back around to face him. His face was twisted up, his eyebrows knitted so deeply together that they nearly touched his nose. “Is something wrong?” she asked him.

“Pam Brannan died today,” he said. The name came out of his mouth with a rush of air. “She was tired. She was ready to go.”

Caroline felt her heart drop into her stomach. “I haven’t heard from Court all day.” It was the only thing she could think of to say. She’d known this was coming. They all had. Still, she hadn’t been ready to hear it. “I need to call him.”

“He was with her at the hospital in Saint Louis when she went. His father called me. Thought we might want to know.” Max O’Conner engulfed his daughter in a hug. “Give him some time. You know he’s going to need you to be there for him.”

Caroline gripped the can of green beans she was holding so tightly that she could feel the metal grooves underneath the paper label. Pam Brannan, Court Brannan’s stepmother, had been bat-

ting cancer for years. First it was breast cancer. Then last year, it spread to her liver. Caroline was there at the Brannan house when they found out about the breast cancer, almost three years ago.

“I’m sorry, kiddo. I know this is hard for you in more ways than one.”

“I should have gone up there to see her,” Caroline said, tears welling up in her eyes. She wiped furiously at them. “I should have been there.”

“Pam knew you loved her, and you know she wouldn’t have wanted you to close the shop or leave your own mother for her.”

Caroline nodded, pushing her face further into her father’s chest. She’d stopped saying out loud when things weren’t fair long ago, but she couldn’t stop herself from thinking it. Pam Brannan had been one of the most wonderful women she’d ever known, and she’d taken care of Caroline like she was her own child when she married Court’s father when Caroline and Court were in junior high. In some ways, she’d been a better mother to them than their own mothers had, and it just wasn’t fair that they were both losing her. “I’m okay,” Caroline said, finally. “I’ve got to get back to supper before it’s ruined for all of us.”

To CAROLINE’S RELIEF, her mother was eating everything placed on her plate. It had been difficult, even in the beginning, to deal with her mother’s illness. But she took pleasure in little things, like the way her mother would still eat three platefuls of mashed potatoes.

“How does it taste, Mom?” Caroline asked.

Maureen looked up from her plate and at her daughter. She smiled. “It’s very good. Thank you.”

Max O’Conner winked at his daughter. “How was your day, kid?”

“It was interesting,” Caroline replied. “We got ourselves a new neighbor.”

“Oh really?”

Caroline nodded, her mouth full of mashed potatoes. “Noah Cranwell,” she replied once she’d swallowed. “Apparently he’s bought Cranwell Station.”

“Noah Cranwell, eh?” her father asked. “I don’t reckon I’ve seen that boy since he was a toddler.”

“Well, he’s not a toddler anymore,” Caroline replied. “It was kind of strange to see him, you know, given all those rumors about his mom and dad and, well, his whole family.”

“Those rumors are a bunch of poppycock.” Her father snorted. “They always were. Nothing but vicious lies to make Nora look bad for leaving town after Alistair Cranwell died.”

“Nora is Noah’s mom?” Caroline asked.

“And Alistair Cranwell was his father,” Max O’Conner finished. “Ali died the way he lived—reckless and stupid. He didn’t care for anybody or anything except himself.”

“Didn’t he die in a duel or something?” Caroline probed. She’d heard lots of different stories about how Alistair Cranwell had died, and she’d always thought the duel rumor was the best one. As a general rule, her parents refused to talk about it, and she’d been shushed more than once out in public when she dared to ask questions about the Cranwell family.

“In a bar fight not two days after he got out of prison,” her father said. “There’s nothing glamorous or exciting about that and nobody but the Cranwells blamed Nora for getting out of town like she did.”

“I don’t understand why they would be mad about her leaving.” Caroline pushed at her meatloaf with her fork.

Max O'Conner sighed. "Nobody crosses Jep Cranwell. Alistair was Jep's only son, and Noah was, and is, his only grandson. I reckon Jep felt mighty slighted when Nora ran off, warranted or not."

"Then I guess he'll be glad to have Noah back."

"Jep Cranwell is never glad for anything," Maureen O'Conner interrupted, looking up from her plate.

Caroline and her father looked at each other. Sometimes Caroline's mother broke into conversations with astounding clarity.

"How come, Mom?" Caroline wanted to know.

"These potatoes are good. May I have some more?" was all her mother said.

"Sure." Caroline picked up her mother's plate and headed back into the kitchen.

"Don't give me too much now," her mother hollered. "Make sure that you save enough for Jeremy when he gets home."

Caroline's breath caught in her throat. She didn't want to turn around and look at her father because she knew the pain would be written all over his face. "Okay, Mom!" she said, trying to sound cheerful. "I'll make sure and leave enough for Jeremy."

Jeremy, Caroline's older brother, had been dead for nearly thirty years. He'd died in a car accident when he was seventeen, five years before Caroline was born. Lately, Maureen O'Conner talked about Jeremy like he was still alive. Max O'Conner warned Caroline that something like this was likely to happen, but it didn't make it any easier for either of them when it started to become a daily routine, and Caroline's father became sullen, oftentimes retreating to his office to "read a book."

Tonight was no different.

"I think I've had my fill," he said, pushing his chair away from

the table. "I'm going to go to my office for a bit." He gave Caroline and his wife quick pecks on the cheek. "Caroline, if you'll just leave those dishes, I'll take care of them later."

Caroline smiled up at him. She knew darn well he wasn't going to be doing any dishes. He wouldn't come out of his room until it was time for him to take his wife to bed. "Okay, Dad."

"Love you, kiddo."

"Love you, too," Caroline replied. She watched him disappear into his office. Then she turned back to her mother who had gotten up from the table and returned to her knitting on the couch. Caroline finished the rest of the meal alone and pretended to be grateful for the silence.