

Chapter 2

Arkansas, 1955

Stepping off the bus was like walking into a steam bath. Catherine had been warned, but she could never have imagined the intensity of the heat that assaulted her as she left the stifling atmosphere of the bus for the even more oppressive air of the terminal yard. Suddenly it was clear why so many of her memories of her grandparents' farm involved playing in sprinklers and pitchers of lemonade.

It had been many years since she'd visited or even spoken to her grandparents. She had last seen them the summer she was nine, so her memories of both her grandparents and their farm were fading. She had a hazy memory of picking strawberries and feeding them to a tortoise that lived in a wide open yard. She remembered trees with stringy moss hanging from the branches, clothes lines with laundry blowing in the breeze, and playing with the children of a black woman named Sally, who cooked and did chores for her grandmother. A string bean of a boy named Jimmy figured prominently in her memories, and she recalled playing school with a couple of shy little girls whose faces she'd forgotten. The children had come and gone in a rickety horse-drawn wagon, and Catherine remembered feeling envious of that old wagon, which looked to her like a big adventure.

The death of her grandfather was the reason that Catherine was finally returning to Arkansas. She had not gone to the funeral. Not even her father had gone to the funeral. Her family had been estranged from her grandparents since the summer of their last visit. But Catherine's father was here now, and since Catherine was home from college for the summer, she

was joining him to help him assess his mother's situation, and, if necessary, move her off the farm—to an Arkansas retirement home, probably, though there was some discussion of bringing her back to their home in San Diego.

Catherine's parents were never specific about the fight that had led to her father's alienation from his parents, but it was no secret that her grandfather had been a hateful man, and had taken a particular dislike to Catherine's mother, who was not one to kowtow to an ignorant old drinker who treated his wife and everyone else with disdain. Catherine's grandmother, or *Mama Rae* as she was known by most everyone, had been more or less caught in the cross-fire. She was now in her seventies, and her health was fading, so Catherine's father had it in his mind to patch things up—or at least try, now that her "Lord and Master" was dead.

Catherine was just noticing the *Whites Only* sign on what appeared to be the main entrance to the bus station when a red-faced version of her father stepped up to meet her. "Sweltering enough for you?" Ben asked, planting a kiss on her cheek. Catherine smiled, then gave her dad a sweaty hug.

The bus driver began throwing luggage from under the bus onto the hot pavement, and Catherine and her father had to jump out of the way to avoid being hit. "I can't believe how hot it is," Catherine said, wiping her hairline with a handkerchief that her mother had given her for the trip. "But to tell you the truth," she added, lowering her voice, "it wasn't much better on the bus. With all the fanning that was going on, it was like being in a windstorm of hot B.O. Some of these people are in serious need of deodorant."

Ben laughed and grabbed Catherine's suitcase, then steered her towards a nearby truck. "You don't smell so great yourself," he said, throwing the suitcase in the back. "When we get to your grandmother's house, the first thing I'm going to

do is point you to the bathtub. Later tonight it'll cool down. And just wait until you see the fireflies."

Ben rumbled the truck to a start, and suddenly they were moving down a dusty Main Street that stirred memories of a diner with a checkerboard floor, a movie theater, and a hardware store in which the proprietor had erected an elaborate electric train set.

Soon they turned off the main drag and were on a two-lane highway that headed out of town. "Besides the windstorms of hot B.O., how was the bus ride?" Ben asked. "Did you manage to stir up any controversy?"

Catherine was preoccupied in an attempt to un-stick her exposed lower thighs from the seat of the truck. "It was mostly pretty uneventful," she said, placing her hands under her legs as a buffer between her skin and the seat. "But I did give the bus driver a dirty look in some hick bus station when he pointed to the three Negro passengers on the bus and told them, '*It's time for y'all to move on back now. We've passed into Texas.*' Then, sure enough, he put up a sign on the back of one of the seats that said *Whites* on one side, and *Colored* on the other."

Catherine's father had told her about seeing signs like this appear and disappear on trains while traveling with his family between Northern and Southern states, but seeing it played out in real life—bearing witness to the humiliation of the passengers—had made Catherine feel sick to her stomach.

"Welcome to the South," Ben said.

After a few miles they turned left onto a narrow road that led them up into some low hills. They passed a couple of ramshackle houses, saw horses grazing in a green field, and finally came to a large pond that Ben identified as *Granddaddy's fishing hole*. Suddenly Catherine had visions of worms on hooks, red and white bobbers, and a snapping turtle that reportedly ate small children. Ben pulled off and parked under some trees.

"I can't believe I'm back here again," Catherine said. "We used to fish and catch tadpoles here. And I remember Granddaddy had an old rowboat he'd take us out on."

They got out of the truck and walked to the edge of the pond. The area was lush with greenery, and alive with birds and buzzing insects. "When I was a teenager, we had a rope swing over on the other side," Ben said. He pointed across the pond, where, in addition to a large stand of trees, there was a skinny pier that Catherine remembered.

Catherine kicked off her shoes and stepped into the water. Her feet sank into soft, slippery mud, and she made a face. "The bottom's slimy."

Ben smiled. "It's better farther out. Maybe later in the week we can come back and go swimming."

"It's beautiful here," Catherine said, looking around to take in the surroundings. She bent down and splashed water over her bare arms and legs. "The water's not real cold, but it feels pretty good." She stepped cautiously into deeper water. "Are there really snapping turtles, or was that just a tall tale?"

"You remember that, do you?" Ben said. He took off his baseball cap and wiped his brow with a bandana pulled from his back pocket. "Your grandfather was big on terrorizing children."

"What happened between you and your dad, exactly?" Catherine asked. "I know something happened that last summer we were here, but I was never clear on what it was."

"We can talk about that another time. For now, I just want to enjoy the place."