

## Summer 1963 - Catawba, Florida

### One

Jodie Taylor hesitated beneath a canopy of sweet gum, hickory, and beech trees, and squinted into the sun's white glare. Ahead, the familiar clapboard house, bleached the color of oak ash, straddled the ridge like a well-worn saddle. In the dappled sunlight, the porch appeared to slouch away from the main house, evoking memories of the rank contrariness that had dwelled there. She picked up the battered suitcase and stepped from the shade's relief onto the lane's hot sand.

A murder of crows cawed down at her from their perch along the power line. The more curious birds swooped closer, appearing to memorize her face, and she wondered by what name they might call her. Crows as messengers of death was a superstition held by some, but not her.

She peered through the porch's rusted screen door and called his name, not in the hard-earned voice of the woman she'd become, but in a small way, borrowed from her childhood. As though neither the departure of Miss Mary nor the passing of time and distance had made her anyone other than his curse.

Hearing not as much as a guttural whisper, she walked to the edge of the porch and stared back along the empty road, her will trapped between her impulse to flee and her need to own the consequences of the way she'd run seven years ago.

She stepped across the scarred threshold and into the front room, a soft swath of sunlight falling across the heart of pine floors, dust particles swirling about her swollen ankles. The close room had retained its tight-fisted bearing and it was as she remembered. The maroon couch and side chair that had felt like sandspurs caught in a dog's fur against the backs of her youthful bare legs stood as they had, facing off against Red's radio/record player console, an identical twin to the one he'd given her mother. In Miss Mary's shrill madness, she had avowed that Ernest Tubb, Kitty Wells, and Hank Williams were merchants of evil, their honky-tonk lyrics of sex and hard living depraved messages from Hell. Red had turned up the volume and resettled, his forbidden shoe heels defiantly propped on the arm of the couch, mindless of the fresh doily.

Jodie tiptoed down the narrow hallway to the bedroom Red had shared with Miss Mary and pushed open the door. She peered into the near darkness, struck by the room's smallness. As a child she'd thought of it as huge and forbidden, filled with quarrelsome marital secrets.

The air hung stale, trapped in sweltering heat, and she covered her mouth against the sudden bitterness that swirled in her stomach, biting down hard on her determination. From the floor next to Red's bed, Buster got up on stiff joints, his large box-like head swaying on his thick neck. He came closer, sniffed her outstretched hand, and began licking her fingers. The pair had spent too many terrifying moments hiding for either to have forgotten the other. Red had called the breed mostly bulldog, and had justified the dog's presence as an obligation. She believed he'd done the same at her arrival.

Red lay still as death beneath a soiled sheet marked by overlapping circles of urine, a naked pillow drawn beneath his sweaty head. He was little more than a skeleton laboring to breathe, a mockery of his former self. The stroke's fury had split his face and slammed it back together in a bad realignment, his left eye rimmed in pus and the right lifeless, the color of congealed oatmeal. She worried it was he, and not the dog, who was blind.

“Red, it’s me.” Her words came out thin, as if her voice box suffered a leak.

He stirred.

His left eye fluttered behind a thin, bluish eyelid and he looked beyond her toward the hallway as though she was a stranger and he waited for something or someone who might explain her presence.

“It’s Jodie, Red.”

He struggled to rise onto his elbow, but sagged back onto the bed, a useless right arm curled at his side. He closed his eyes, and his raspy breathing and her hammering heart were the room’s only sounds.

Damn Red Dozier. It had taken her seven years to build a new life in which he no longer counted. Now, it was the very putrid scent of him, his weak, pathetic, wasted body that trapped her.

She pushed back hard against what she feared would become her undoing, and although she could not say why exactly, she decided to do what she could to ease his going out. But what did one do for a dying man?

She remembered the clean, white shirts and pressed trousers he’d worn daily. She would clean him up, do what she could to return him to his pride.

She went into the kitchen and put on a kettle of water to heat. When she’d gathered a chipped enamel washbasin, a bar of Ivory soap, and a washrag and towel, she returned to the bedroom.

Over his silent protest, she gritted her teeth and set about removing his soiled clothing, and when she’d washed away the worst of his stench, she changed him into clean pajamas. Rolling him off the bottom sheet, she stripped and remade the bed with fresh sheets she located in a hall closet. When she was done, she bundled the soiled bedclothes and pajamas, leaving him to rest.

She stood at the kitchen sink, running cold tap water over her wrists until her newest wave of nausea lifted, but she needed fresh air. She poured herself a double shot of bourbon from Red’s stash of Ancient Age she found in the cupboard. She smiled, remembering Red had told her that if she was going to drink, she should drink good

whiskey. Claimed it would never hurt her, but he'd been mostly wrong about that.

She took a seat on the back stoop and peered into the gathering darkness. The air was sweet with the fragrance of the tea olive shrubs at the corners of the stoop and, except for the scurrying retreat of a critter from the direction of the fire drum, the evening was still.

She cursed Silas straight through two quick cigarettes and a second drink before accepting that nothing he could have said on the telephone would have prepared her for the way she found Red. Silas had said he believed Red was knocking on death's door, but she'd known him since childhood as one whose words were often half or twice as much, his particular circumstances striking the balance. Still, in fairness to Silas, it was she who had taken solace in the absurd notion that Red would never die before having the last word between them. She'd always meant to come back, try settling things, but in her own time. She feared that she'd waited too long.

The liquor she'd drunk on an empty stomach fueled a return of her nausea, and she remembered she'd had no food since the stale donuts she'd eaten at the Selma bus station while waiting for the outbound bus. Red had to be hungry as well, considering the plate of uneaten, fly-infested food she'd emptied.

A more thorough search of the kitchen cupboards turned up a sack of grits, two cans of pork 'n' beans, a quart jar of peaches, and a sack of bug-infested flour. If Red still kept hens, then eggs were her best bet for a meal. She located a weak-beam flashlight and made her way along the overgrown path to the chicken yard. She gathered four brown eggs from the nests, counting on them being fresh and not some hen's notion of a setting.

Grits and eggs weren't much of a meal, and when she offered them to Red, he motioned toward Buster and turned his face to the wall. He still had not spoken a word.

The dog followed her into the kitchen and she fed him Red's rejected supper. Silas had lied when he said the old dog was unwilling to take food from anyone other than Red, but he hadn't exaggerated Red's condition.

When she had washed, dried, and put away the few dishes, she returned to sit in the rocker at the foot of Red's bed, and although he made no attempt to speak, she thought of herself as keeping him company. Again she wondered whether his silence was caused by his anger or the stroke had robbed him of his ability to speak. She considered asking, but right now she was unwilling. Instead, she felt it best she rely on their shared memories.

"Red, you remember the time that wild boar lit into Buster?"

He reached a slow hand and traced the jagged scar that ran the width of the dog's broad chest, and she wondered if he remembered the event the way she did.

He'd dragged the bleeding dog home on a rig fashioned from his best winter coat and two green saplings, and she'd held the lamp while he stitched the open wound. He'd bedded the dog down next to the kitchen's wood heater. She'd stayed, keeping him company through the night, while he tended the fire.

Red closed his eyes, his breathing still raspy, but slowed, and she believed he slept. When she had straightened the bedcovers, she went to sit in the swing on the front porch, the dog following her.

The scent of the honeysuckle growing along the fence hung in the humid air and mosquitoes droned. Back of the house, down along the creek, frogs croaked and rat-faced bats darted back and forth across the yard. From a distance, the clear yodel of a lead hound rode the wind currents, and the dog rose and sniffed the air. He eased down the porch steps and disappeared into the heavy broom sage, and her thoughts returned to the night she and Red had tended the injured dog, and a part of the memory she'd long denied herself.

She'd awakened to discover that Red had pulled her close, and with her head pressed to his chest, she listened to the sound of his big heart, wishing she might will her own heart to beat in rhythm with his.

She felt tears building behind her eyelids, and for the first time since beginning her homeward journey, she understood she was here because of that moment. For now, it was enough that he'd come for her when news of her mama had reached him. She'd stay and care for him. She owed him that much.

