

Chapter 1

If you drive up there near the state line, on the border of Tennessee and Georgia, you just might pass through my hometown, the Chattanooga suburb of Hixson. But you might not know you passed it, not unless you take the time to read the sign hanging near the highway. Most people only stop in Hixson for the cemeteries and the old Civil War battlefields around Chattanooga. I grew up thinking a trip to Soddy Daisy was living the high life. But it was beautiful country, no matter what Mama says. I remember the back roads mostly, and the trees. When I was small I'd spread my arms out as far as I could and I'd try to reach as wide as a tree's branches. I'd dance in the wind, partner to the limbs of the old oak and the sugar maples. Trees seemed to be all the poetry I'd ever need.

Country living in Hixson wasn't always peace and quiet though, with so many highways going every which way. But back where I lived, the back roads were all over. They were mysteries that flirted with my sense of adventure. I never could walk by one without wanting to follow it. There wasn't anything finer to do with an afternoon than walk a road. The narrow ones around Paradise were some of my favorite; they curved and twisted up into hiding places that I could keep hidden from everybody else. I'll always think of country roads like that, seducing me onto nature's unknown paths. Sometimes those country roads led me back where I began. Sometimes they took me so far away I'd have to hitch home.

I never could sit still when I was young. Why, I'd be damned if I didn't ruin the best pair of fruit boots I ever had running through Miles Canyon Creek, jumping over brambles that scratched the shit out of me and left my legs looking like I'd shaved for the first time and done one hell of a bad job. Nearly fell and broke my neck every time. And all just to get away from Horace Mooney, mean old man Horace "Toothless" Mooney. Goddamn son of a bitch almost caught me too. But I could outrun that skinny old man same way I could run circles around Tommy, my slower-than-molasses-coming-out-of-a-jar brother. Shit, for a girl, I could run one hell of an eight-minute mile.

Tommy and me were always getting caught stuffing old man Mooney's meat jerkys into our back pockets. Only time I ever had a well-done piece of meat back then is when I picked a jerky right out of Mooney's display. Hell, he used to have a whole jar of them sitting on the counter of Mooney's Market. He had boxes of the damn things in his back room. Seems he could have spared a couple for Tommy and me.

"If I catch you two looting my jerkys again, I'll string you up by your feet and hang you over the sinkhole by Cratson's Corners. You hear me?" old man Mooney would call out.

"I'm addicted to jerkys." I'd giggle and try to intercept Mr. Mooney as he made his way after Tommy. Poor Tommy would slide into the magazine rack and scoop up all Mama's favorites.

"We're good for it, Mr. Mooney," I'd say as I ran backward and zigzagged a bit so he couldn't catch me. "You have more jerkys than you need."

Mooney would be out there on the street shaking his fist, his face as red as Mama's nails. I still get a kick thinking back on it. Old man Mooney would come hollering to my daddy after he'd caught me and Tommy with our hands in his jerky jar.

"Your kids are up to no good again, Tim Place." Mooney's lips were as thin as thread and whenever he came by to complain his lips would disappear altogether.

But Daddy never paid him any mind. He knew how much me and Tommy loved our meat jerkys. And besides, Mooney needed my daddy 'cause he was the best damn mechanic in all of Hamilton County. Mooney drove a piece of junk that wound up breaking down every other damn week. Mooney would huff and puff and then he'd say, "You keep your kids away from my jerkys, you hear me, Tim Place?" And my daddy would say, "Yeah, yeah, Horace. I'll make ya a promise. I'll tan their hides for it. Sure enough." And that would appease the old bastard, and he'd go off in his jalopy. My daddy would crank his spark plugs for nothing but a quarter the next

time he pulled up in that hunk of tin he called “a classic.” A classic piece of shit, that’s what I called it.

Tommy pretty much went his own way once he discovered that girls thought he was hotter than fire. But by that time I had me my own distractions—more boyfriends than I even wanted—and not a damn one of those boys were worth any exploration of my secret garden. That all changed, though, when Lenny Bean and his mama moved into the Paradise Trailer Park in ’64. All those other cowboys went by the wayside along with my resistance. I always considered Lenny to be the taker of my virginity, but he really wasn’t. I lost my cherry long before, when my granddaddy Ellsworth stuck his finger up there and popped it.

There was another time, right before meeting Lenny, when I had me another lesson in deviant male behavior. I don’t like to think about that night but some things don’t ever become the memories too far gone to reach. It’s hard to forget when a good day turns bad. I was eighteen then, just turned, and I had graduated high school only weeks earlier. I started working in my daddy’s mechanic shop to earn some money, but Mama made short work of that. She didn’t like her baby girl covered in grease. She insisted I get myself something better suited to a lady. Hell, I liked working on those old cars but Mama just wouldn’t have it. So I found myself a job at Graves Motel on Highway 75. I was going to be waiting tables and taking tips from all those cheating sons of bitches who pretended to be on business trips.

It was supposed to be my first night on the job but it turned out to be the night I learned that things never turn out the way you expected them to. I was excited to be earning my own money even though I knew Mama had an ulterior motive for my loose change. I was nervous that night, though I certainly knew how to carry a tray and pour coffee, but working for strangers wouldn’t be at all like having Daddy’s greasy fingers showing me how to check oil or change a fan belt. Some people say luck is in the stars. Well, if that’s the case, I should have checked out the sky that night. If I remember correctly there wasn’t a damn star out.

“My car is acting forlornly, Daddy,” I’d said earlier that day, not wanting anything to go wrong with my new job. You might say I had a premonition.

“The car is fine, sweetheart. I tuned her up myself.” Daddy grinned and pinched my chin with his dirty oil fingers.

Wouldn’t you know, the damn car had a coronary that night right before I even got on to the highway. It sounded as dead to me as some old back-road graveyard. There I sat, stranded at a stop light on County Route 3, having myself an anxiety attack. Then, out of the blue, I hear all these honks and hollers and when I looked up, there was Jeb Oates coming to my rescue. Jeb Oates was the town creep, whistling at girls as though he didn’t have a wife up in the mountains living in one of those *House Beautiful* abodes with shutters on the windows and fake stone pigs on the lawn.

“What you doing out here on the road, pretty woman?” Jeb asked as he pulled up along side me and rolled down his window.

“My car died,” I cried.

“Well, don’t you fret,” he said as he got out of his Thunderbird and walked over. “Smells like a rabbit died in here.” He grinned as he leaned in.

I glared at him. “That’s my car deodorizer. You going to help me or not? My battery is probably dead and I can’t leave it here in the middle of the street.”

Jeb Oates was the very last person I would have wanted to be on a road with, needing his assistance and feeling beholden to be as polite as possible. In better times, I would have told him to take a swim in the Everglades.

“Jimmy John,” he called. “Come on out here and help me move this antique off the road.”

I stepped out of my car as Jimmy John approached. I stood off to the side watching Jeb watch me. It was getting real dark outside and there was hardly any traffic. Mostly, everybody was where they needed to be, but the son of a bitch had those eagle eyes and he saw me clear as spring water.

“Daddy said it was okay, but all of a sudden it stopped dead. I couldn’t start it back up,” I said. “I’m sure it’s the battery.”

“You sure know a lot for a girl, darling,” he told me. “I don’t have my hot wires... Can’t help you. Don’t know much about cars either. Don’t like getting my hands dirty,” he said as he held them up.

“I don’t have booster cables either,” I said, wondering how the hell I was going to get to Graves on time. Figured I’d have to hitch over there and have Daddy pick up the car in the morning. “You think it’s safe to leave it here?”

He laughed. “Nobody wants it but you, girl.” I could smell the beer on Jeb’s breath as he walked over and leaned in close to me. “You look like you have a hot date, Grace. You have a hot date? This put a damper on your plans?”

I watched as Jimmy John grinned at me. He’d been in my high school class and I wondered what the hell he was doing hanging out with Jeb. Hell, Jeb was probably over thirty. He might have even been as old as my daddy, somewhere around fifty.

“Evening Grace,” Jimmy John said. “You got a problem?”

“My car died,” I said.

I could see another guy leaning out the window of Jeb’s Thunderbird. “Hey, Grace,” he called. I gave him a wave. It was Joe Jack, another old high-school classmate of mine. Joe Jack was so gangly he couldn’t walk down the hall without his knees knocking or speak without there being spit on the side of his mouth that you were just dying to tell him to swallow back down.

“Hey, ya’ll, Grace,” he called again.

I watched as Jeb and Jimmy John pushed my car over to the side of the road, huffing and puffing and flexing their muscles like they were sweet on each other.

“Whew, didn’t think I’d be working tonight, Grace,” Jeb said and wiped his forehead with his shirtsleeve. “Tell your daddy where we left it and get him to come over here with Tommy and pick it up before they junk it.” He laughed.

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

“Bye, Grace,” Jimmy John said as he passed me.

“Hold up there, fella.” Jeb grabbed him by the arm. “You leaving a lady all alone to fend for herself on a dark road? What kind of gentleman are you?”

Jimmy John looked at him like it was a trick question. “Ah, no.”

“Where you off to, Grace? We’ll give you a lift,” Jeb said and tipped his hat.

I thought that old bastard had come to my rescue. I should have known that that loudmouth braggart wouldn’t help his own mother fry an egg without asking for a tip.

“I was going over to Highway Seventy-Five.”

“What on earth for?”

I peered over at Jeb’s fancy new Thunderbird and noticed they had room for me in the back, but something instinctual was clicking in that told me that the son of a bitch was up to no good. I could tell they’d just knocked off a few six packs. I was reeling from Jeb’s breath.

“I got a job at Graves,” I said.

“Do tell?” Jeb said as he walked to his car and got behind the wheel. “You got yourself an automobile full of friends with you tonight, Grace. Why, there’s me, Jimmy John and Joe Jack out here in the dark doing the gentlemanly thing for you.”

I nodded my head and tried to listen to the voice inside of it.

“Come on in, Grace.” Jeb looked into my eyes and something about the way he ran his tongue over his lips made me step back and tell him I had money for a bus.

“C’mon, Grace. Like I said, you’re among friends.” He laughed and pushed Joe Jack out of the front seat. “C’mon and sit next to your hero, Grace. I’ll take you to Graves.”

I made the biggest mistake of my life getting into his fancy Thunderbird—trying to take the easy way out, not using the sense I was born with. I knew they’d all been drinking. The car smelled like a Budweiser plant had exploded under the hood and those fools were the happy fish floating in the foam.

Jeb started up the car and turned to grin at me. I noticed he wasn’t using his turn signal.

“Where you going?” I asked when I also noticed he hadn’t gotten on to the highway, but was turning left, back in the opposite direction.

“I want to show you my hunting cabin,” he said.

“I don’t want to see your hunting cabin, Jeb. I need to be at Graves. I’m already late.”

“You got a minute to spare for a Good Samaritan now, don’t you?”

“No,” I said and watched as we got further and further away from Hixson. Joe Jack and Jimmy John were giggling like a couple of girls at a spin the bottle face off. I knew they were going to be useless to me.

“Let me out of this damn car,” I said through teeth as tight as I could clench ’em.

The next thing I knew Jeb had grabbed me by my neck and he was holding tight.

“I’ve had my eye on you for a long time, Grace,” Jeb said softly.

I tried to get out from the stranglehold he had me in but he was too strong.

“I’ll jump out!” I screamed.

Jeb laughed. “We won’t pass any more stoplights. You want to try jumping at this speed, pretty baby?”

“I’m going to report you to the Sheriff.”

“Nothing like young pussy,” Jeb said to the boys in the back, ignoring my threat. “Better than draft beer and Super Bowl Sunday.”

“Young pussy is tight, huh, Jeb?” Jimmy John laughed and leaned in from the backseat smelling like piss water. “That’s what you always say.”

Jeb released his hold on me and started playing with my hair. “You’re a sought after woman, Grace,” he said.

I watched as he grinned into the rearview mirror.

“Her breasts are like honeydew melons and her legs are long as a Texas mile.” He turned back to me and tugged on my hair. “I think I’d like a date with you, sweetheart.”

“I’d rather lie down next to a rotting corpse,” I said as I stared into his profile and almost leaned over to spit into that shadow of a mustache over his fat lips.

Jimmy John screeched out a laugh and punched Joe Jack on the shoulder.

“Graves isn’t safe for a young pretty woman like you, Grace,” Jeb said, scowling at me. “Too many stray dogs looking for meat. Wouldn’t you agree, boys?”

Un, uh,” those two fools said, like they were Siamese twins attached at the vocal cords.

I sat there trying to think of a way out of that car and hating myself for getting in it to begin with. I watched as Jeb pulled off the two lane route we’d been on and onto some quiet, dark road with nothing on it but night critters. We were going up a hill, and all I could see out the damn window were his headlights glaring back into my eyes.

“Get out of the car, boys...take a walk,” Jeb sneered as he pulled to a stop in the middle of nowhere.

“No,” I said. “Don’t you two go nowhere. Take me home, Jeb!” I screamed.

I'll never forget Joe Jack's eyes; they were big, big as a raccoon's. "He won't hurt you none," Joe Jack said. "We're just going up behind the trees to take a leak. We'll be back."

"No!" I shouted and started screaming. Those idiot boys did just as they were told and left the car and went running up into the woods. I kicked Jeb with my foot.

"Just a kiss, honey—that's all I want."

Jeb pulled me to him. I was wondering how hard I could bite his lip when he surprised me and sat back. He undid his belt buckle and burped. I took advantage of the longest burp I'd ever heard and leapt through that door like a deer reacting to gun shots.

"Hey, where you going?"

It was so dark I couldn't see two feet in front of me. I heard the car door slam and the next thing I knew, Jeb was running behind me. I paused just long enough to try and figure out what direction to go in, and in that dumb moment of reflection, Jeb grabbed me and forced me to the ground.

"Get off of me, Jeb!" I hollered as I moved my head back and forth, trying to avoid his mouth. "Please stop!"

The old bastard had a wang the size of an eggplant. I could feel the damn thing hard as steel, against my leg. I started screaming as he lifted up my dress and ripped my underwear right off my body. I felt his hand clamp down on my mouth.

"C'mon, baby," he grunted in my ear.

I could barely breathe but somehow I managed to bring my knee up right into his stomach, just as he was lifting himself up high enough to pull his eggplant wang out from behind his zipper. The son of a bitch fell back against the truck and slid to the ground. Shit, I was stronger than I ever dreamed I could be.

"I'm going to throw up, Grace," he mumbled. "What did you want to go and do that for?"

I could hear him puking as I jumped behind the wheel and slammed the door. I got out of there so fast that I might have run the bastard over, but I wouldn't have gone back to check out his sorry body. I looked up once in the rearview mirror. I could barely see Jeb on the ground puking his guts out and those two other fools sauntering out from behind the trees, looking all over for the Thunderbird.

Well, I always try and look on the bright side; I'm glad I never made it over to Highway 75 that night. Maybe, if I had, I'd still be there waiting tables and taking tips from horny fools. Of course, I never will get over what almost happened to me. I came home that night looking like I'd swam in the swamp with an alligator. I'd ditched the Thunderbird over by Cratson's Corners, as close to the sink hole as I could get it without falling into it myself. I walked the two miles home in the dark feeling like I'd brought this whole thing on myself and swearing to hate men for the rest of my life.

"Darling, that you?" Mama asked as I tried to sneak past her. I'd brushed myself off as best I could but I still looked a wreck.

"Yes, Mama. I'm going to bed."

Mama came to the doorway and stared at me.

"Are you all right? You look..."

"I'm fine, Mama. The car stalled out. I had to leave it by the side of the road. I'll take Daddy over there tomorrow to get it."

"Did you get to Graves?" she asked.

I shook my head. I knew Mama wasn't going to be happy. She wanted me to take that job at the motel so that I could save my money up for New York City.

"Did you call over there and tell them you'd be in tomorrow, honey?"

I shook my head again. "I'm not working there," I said. I think working over there would have always reminded me of that night, and I couldn't let myself think about it again. I felt so damn

dirty. It was a connection that wasn't ever going to transform into something I could stand looking back on. It was too much forever ugly.

"Why, honey?" Mama asked and came over to me. She brushed the hair from out of my eyes. Mama always knew me better than I knew myself, but I lied to her anyway, trying to keep my shattered heart from showing. But it was like pretending it wasn't raining when you were standing knee deep in a puddle.

"I don't want to be a waitress, Mama."

"Oh," she said and stepped back. She stared at me until I thought I'd faint.

"Where's Daddy?" I asked, just to change the subject.

"Jake's...gambling."

"And Granddaddy Ellsworth?"

"Preaching," she said.

I avoided her eyes. Mama walked to the window.

"How did you get home, sug?"

"Walked."

Mama smiled. "Why, my resourceful daughter. How far?"

"A couple of miles, Mama, that's all. I'm going to bed now," I said.

Mama came over and took my hands. "You'll find something else," she said. "My daughter is a wizard at survival. Isn't that right, sugar?"

She kissed me then and went back to the TV. I could hear music. It sounded a little like Judy Garland...probably was Judy Garland. Mama said Judy Garland's pain was transparent. Mama said that was the downside of genius, a soul not clothed by layers of inconsequential packaging was at the mercy of every vulture out there. Mama always said there were more vultures in life than real people.

I showered until my skin felt raw. Then I lay on my bed thinking about Granddaddy Ellsworth. That old bastard hasn't come near me for years, not after Tommy beat the hell out of him when he caught the old geezer coming out of my bedroom sniffing his fingers. Tommy finally got it out of me, how the old coot made me do all sorts of disgusting things, and then Tommy told me that the old man grabbed his crotch once and started fondling his privates, but Tommy punched him in the groin, and Granddaddy Ellsworth pretty much kept his distance after that. Tommy was only ten years old when he first started beating up on Granddaddy Ellsworth, but the old fart was so frail by then he couldn't even protect himself from my little brother.

We eventually told Mama about Granddaddy Ellsworth and Mama went and got one of Daddy's pistols. She held it to the old geezer's head and he threw himself on the ground and wept for mercy. If I told her about Jeb Oates, I wouldn't put it past my mama to shoot his genitals so far off his body he'd be walking on a cane before he ever found them again. I lay in bed feeling like the shower couldn't cleanse my spirit, or wash the grime from my heart. But then I thought of Mama's words: *my daughter is a wizard at survival* and I slept on a promise to myself that I kept. "I will not blame myself for this," I uttered in the dark. "I will not let this take me under."