

Chapter 13

I sat on the hard-packed red dirt floor of the barn, watching the ray of morning sun cut through the cracks in the ancient temple like structure I had been hiding out in. The dust and tiny bits of hay were playing in the light-defying gravity and entertaining me. It took my mind off the current situation that I found myself in. I was no longer in a panic. I felt the worst was behind me—that I'd never have to see Church Camp again nor those Horrible Hooligans.

I was thinking clearly for the first time in days. But no sooner had the calmness set in that it started to fade. The sadness of being away from home started to hit me. I missed my parents, even though they argued violently and viciously with one another, they were the only thing in the world I had to hold onto. I imagined that they must be terribly panicked about my disappearance. But then I began to wonder if the nincompoops at the camp even noticed or cared that I was missing. Again, I tried to calm myself down. I would just wait for this girl to come back to the barn. I would then get her to take me back to her house and then I'd call my parents.

She was only gone for about half an hour. She came inching back in through the barn door. She was holding a large bright orange Tupperware bin in her hands. She walked up to me, sat down, moved around some hay bales into a table and bench arrangement and placed the Tupperware container on the middle bale of hay. She pointed to one of the other bales. "You sit there," she demanded.

I sat down. She sat down on the third bale, took the lid off the containers and said, "I bet you're still pretty hungry even though you ate all those peaches. Peaches will go right through you; they don't stay with you for long. So, I went and fixed us some lunch. I got all kinds of sandwiches here. I got peanut butter with jelly, ham and cheese, and pimento cheese. Which ones do you want?"

I paused, my need to give into hunger pains stronger than any urge to figure out how to get back home. I finally said, "I'll take the ham and cheese"

She handed me the sandwich, a bag of chips. She then took a small bottle of coke out of the container, pried off the cap with a bottle opener and handed that to me.

"Thank you," I said. I sunk my mouth into the sandwich.

She began talking. "I live here with my Paw-Paw. It's just me and him."

I swallowed half a sandwich in a gulp and said, "Angela, you didn't say where I am, you just said I was a long way from home. But you didn't tell me where we are."

"You're in Mississippi, Mister! And what was your story again? That you ran away from church camp in Texas. Well, I still don't believe that. But if you are from Texas, you are a long way from home then. Like three or four thousand miles away from home.

Mississippi. That was a long way from home. I knew it wasn't as far as three or four thousand miles away, but I knew it was far away enough to know that I was in pickle, for sure.

"Do you have a phone I can use to call my parents?" I asked.

"Well of course we have a phone. What do you think we are? Some kind of back woods redneck trash? And of course, you can use it to call your parents in Texas, it that's where you are really from. But at least you can sit here and have a nice lunch and conversation with me first. You were staling our peaches, you peach thief. Or should I get my Paw-Paw down here right now with his twelve gauge?"

"No," I assured her, "No need for the shotgun, we can eat first. No hurry."

She took a huge gulp of Coca-Cola and continued. "Well, like I was saying, it's just me and my Paw-Paw. My daddy is dead, and my mom is just a hippy who never lives in one place for too long or with one

man for too long. She can't even take care of herself, much less me. So, she dumped me here with my grandparents. Oh, she stops by a few times a year with trinkets to give me from her travels. Paw-Paw says she's no good white trash and wasn't good enough for their boy, Johnny"

"Johnny was your father?" I interjected.

"Yes, I never knew him. He died when I was just a few months old. He got killed in The Vietnam just shortly after I was born." She pulled out a photo and showed it to me. It was a photo of a young man in his formal military attire. He had military issue glasses on and was wearing a beret. He was holding a little baby in his arms. I assumed that little baby was Angela.

"I'm so sorry. " It was all I could offer up. "It must be hard having no father ever." My mother's brother had been in The Vietnam. She had told me that he'd never been 'right in the head' after coming back from that miserable dirty little war.

"Oh, that's OK," she said, "Me and my Paw-Paw get by just fine."

"What about your grandmother, "I asked, "Is she dead?"

She began to speak in a rapid-fire manner, not even pausing to take a breath between thought or sentence. "No, my Maw-Maw is in the state mental hospital. The day she learnt about my Daddy's death a horrible silence fell over her and she ain't talked again since then. Ain't talked in ten years. So, they put her in the state hospital in Jackson. We drive up there every Tuesday morning, watch "The Price Is Right" with her in her room, Paw-Paw feeds her and talks to her, but she just stares into space. I've never even heard her say one word in my whole life. And now I'm noticing that you don't talk much either do you, David." She pointed at me.

I squinted trying to make out the finer details of her face in the sunray lit barn. "All the boys were really mean to me at the church camp. I don't even know why. I didn't even look at them or talk to them. They just started beating me up. I wasn't even aware that I

was running away, Angela. Something just overtook me and possessed my body. I felt like I was a puppet on a string and some force was pulling me along to escape that place. I never want to go back to that place again"

"Man-oh-man." She said slapping her knee. "That sounds horrible. That sounds so horrible, sounds like you might be telling me a whopper. Are you telling me a whopper?"

"Uh...what's a whopper?" I asked.

"You know," she said. "A whopper is a made-up story, a lie, a tall tale."

"No. No whopper. I promise. It's the honest truth. I just need to get to a phone to call my parents.

"You promise it's the honest-to-god-swear-on-your-granny's-grave-cross-your-heart truth are telling me?" she prodded again narrowing her eyes at me suspiciously.

"Promise." I proclaimed nodding my head.

"Shake on it, scout's honor!" she said and extended her right arm.

I stuck out my right hand, squinted so that I wouldn't miss the handshake, grasped her hand and said, "Scout's honor!"

"OK, then" she said. "I believe you, and why are you always squinting like that?"

"Oh," I said. "The Hooligans at church camp-they took my glasses from me, smashed them and threw them away. I'm not totally blind without them. But they sure make life a lot easier to make out small details." I finished the chips, coke and said "Thanks for the food Angela. I appreciate it."

"You are very welcome." She said. She started putting away the remains of our lunch. She stuffed everything back into the large Tupperware crate neatly. "Doesn't sound at all like anything a church

camp should be to me! I would think church camp would be all lovey-dovey holding hands and singing 'Kumbaya' together."

"Well, I think it was supposed to be Angela, but something went severely wrong with the one I was shipped off to."

She started talking quickly again. "I don't know nothing much about church anyway. We never go. Paw-Paw told me he quit going after my Daddy got killed in The Vietnam and my grandmother lost her mind. He says it's not that he doesn't believe in God no more, because he does. But he figures he'd just rather go out to his Peach Orchard, pick a peach and eat it on Sunday morning while watching the clouds float by in the sky. He says there's a lot of ways to commune with the All Mighty and one man's Peach Orchard works just as good as another man's Church."

"Well, "I said, "He does grow a good peach out there. I'm not much on fruit, but they had to be the best I've ever had."

"He sells them at the Farmer's Market every day in Yazoo city. Also sells them to people who drive by the house and see the 'Peaches for Sale' sign we have out at the roadside. They stop by, buy his peaches. They say stuff to him like 'Haven't seen you in church lately, Walter' or 'Tell Clarisse we're praying for her.' Paw-Paw just grunts and wishes them a good day."

"That's your grandparents names then, Walter and Clarisse?"

"Yes, that's his name and my poor old sick Maw-Maw's first name. C'mon now, David. "She said taking one of my hands, "Let's get you to the house so you can try calling your parents back in Texas. She picked up two peaches with her other hand and gave one to me. "Here..." she said, "Eat a peach, it's on the house."

I grabbed it and sunk my mouth into its cool succulent flesh.

She led me out of my temporary barn refuge, back through the orchard or perfectly straight rows and columns. We turned down a dirt path and I could see a house no more than two or three football fields down the road