

“It falls to every generation to leave their world a better place for the next. If you aren’t doing something to improve conditions, you are missing the purpose for which you are placed upon this earth.” Frank Taylor, Sweetgum Baptist Church, February 1928

Chapter 1

Late spring, 1930

An ear-shattering gong of a huge brass bell splits the quiet morning. My sister Annie screams, Sarah, our cook, shrieks, and the bowl of cold, baked potatoes in my hands falls to the floor with a crash. Mama cries, “Dear, God, no! Please don’t let it be another child.”

I freeze, unable to move. Tremors quiver through me, as my heart cries, *“Not Tommy! Please, Lord!”*

There’s an accident at the cotton mill.

The horror I feel reflects on Mama’s face. “Go, Genessee.” She shoos me out. “Find out who it is.”

She’s already picking up the potatoes and whispering prayers as I race out the door. The mill lies no more than one-hundred-fifty-yards from the hotel entrance. I run up the road as fast as my legs can move. Slamming through the front door, I follow the sound of the screams coming through the stairwell from the floor above. I fly up the steps. Normally, noise from the machinery obliterates every other sound, but when that bell clangs during work hours, most of the machines stop.

When I reach the second floor, I skid to a stop outside the spinning room, bend and put my hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath. I’m not sure I want to see what’s on the other side of this door.

“Out of the way!”

I jump aside as two medics carrying a stretcher run past me. Slipping through the door behind them, I stand with my back against the wall. The air is thick with cotton fibers, making a deep breath difficult. How do people work in this?

A crowd parts around one of the machines for the medics. A small girl lies in a bloody heap on the floor. Oh, dear Lord, it’s Ruthie Ralston. She’s barely six years old. A belt is cinched around the upper part of her arm.

There is no lower part.

I turn and flee down the stairs, and pushing through the outer doors, I gulp deep draughts of fresh air. Somehow, I manage not to spew my breakfast. I wipe the tears from my face with a balled fist and turn my feet toward home.

There is nothing I can do.

Coattails flapping as he runs, my father rushes toward the mill. When he spies me, he pauses, hugs, and then releases me, and hurries on his way. Mrs. Ralston most likely saw the accident happen since Ruthie works beside her.

Heading home, I walk backwards for a few steps, looking at the block-long, two-story mill, the color of weathered cement. How can a place give hope and destroy it at the same time?

I turn around and settle my gaze on home—the Sweetgum hotel. Its white front porch beckons me. Red brick rises three floors—four if you count the attic. My sisters and I spent hours in that attic playing dolls when we were little. Poor Ruthie. Will she ever play dolls again?

When I reach the hotel, Mama meets me at the door. I shake my head and lean into her arms. She holds me, rubbing my back. The circular motions soothe.

“Who is it and how bad?”

“Ruthie Ralston lost her arm.”

With a sharp intake of breath, Mama nods, then puts her hands on my shoulders and peers at me. “Are you all right?”

Am I? I twirl a strand of my hair, golden brown like Mama’s. I’m a carbon copy of her, so everyone says. “Yes, ma’am. It shook me up a little at first, but I’ve seen so many—”

“Don’t let yourself become hardened, Genessee, not if you want to continue helping people. Keep your generous heart tender.” She pulls off her apron and hands it to me. “Go see what Sarah needs. I’ll tend to Mrs. Ralston with your daddy.” She plops her hat on her head and hurries toward the mill.

In the kitchen, I retrieve the bowl of potatoes needing peeled. I pick up a knife and get to work. The mill workers who make their home here at the hotel will expect their dinner to arrive at noon. No matter what, life goes on in Sweetgum.

Used to be we’d take the dinners to the mill in baskets, but as the number of lodgers swelled, along with a few short-term residents, we didn’t have enough basket girls. Now we tie

up each dinner in a napkin and load those in baskets. That way, each of us can deliver a half-dozen dinners in a single basket.

Sarah keeps one eye on me, so I smile—or try to. Our cook since I can remember, the widowed Irishwoman has always been a wise confidant for me. She lives with us in our family quarters and knows all of us inside out.

“Methinks your daddy will be off to Rome to speak with the legislators this week, aye?”

My knife gouges out a potato eye. “How many children have been maimed or killed already this year? And it’s only May. Ruthie *should* be looking forward to school letting out at the end of the month. Instead, she’s now facing life with one arm—if she survives.”

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With a few precious minutes to spare before we take dinner bundles to the mill for our lodgers, I go out front to collect the newspapers from the front porch. As I turn, I catch a glimpse of our town’s namesake, the sweet gum tree. Just seeing it makes me feel better. Tommy and I fell in love beneath that hundred-and-fifty-year-old tree. It sits smack dab in the middle of the town circle.

I know. Most villages have a town *square*. New Orleans has Jackson Square. Savannah has Johnson Square—and several others. Not us. In Sweetgum, Georgia, it’s a town circle.

Tommy and I meet there nearly every evening. We talk about our future and spoon a little if no one’s out and about.

“Get him!” Annie, our budding thespian, screeches from inside. We never know whether her dramatics are real or if she’s acting.

“I can’t reach him. He’s gone under the bed.” My bib sister Lillian’s voice floats out the window. What “*him*” are they referring to?

I sigh and hurry inside, the *thwack* of the screen door adding to the chaos. Life goes on.

“There he goes!” Annie races across the hotel lobby just missing me. At seventeen, she’s the most athletic of us three girls. Her wavy, dark hair ends at her jawline, framing her pixie face.

Lillian follows hot on her heels, strands of her long hair escaping her jellyroll. She’s always so put together. What is the cause of this commotion? She hollers over her shoulder. “We’ve gotta stop him before he scares anyone.”

My heart slams against my ribs. Could *he* be a hobo? There have been a lot down by the river recently. It's not out of the question that one could have slipped in the door, looking for a meal. I drop the newspapers on the front desk and hurry into the dining room.

Lillian peers beneath a table still littered with the remains of breakfast, while Annie races to the kitchen.

I catch my breath. "Who are we looking for? And when are you bussing the tables?"

Annie stomps back into the dining room. "He's not in the kitchen. How can he move so fast with a cast on his leg?"

That can only mean one thing. She left the cage open, and the ferret escaped our family quarters. I ball my fists on my hips. "He's got three *other* legs."

A flash of fur streaks out through the dining room doorway.

"Get him!" Annie spins.

We dash after my wounded rescue, across the lobby, and skid to a halt outside the parlor, where he slipped inside. Lillian puts her ear to the door, then turns to me in wide-eyed horror. Annie snickers at the dramatic turn of events.

I frown at the little troublemaker. "Who's in there—"

A loud scream answers. I cringe.

Annie's snickers grow into giggles. "Old lady Grundy. See ya later, sis." She swivels away.

Catching her collar, I stop her. "Oh no you don't. You're the reason he's loose. You're coming in with me."

I grab her wrist as I push open the door and yank her inside. Before the ferret can escape, I quickly close the portal. Mrs. Grundy, a hotel resident, teeters atop an ottoman. For a woman in her fifties, she's remarkably spry. Why is she here and not at work? Cowering in a corner beneath a side table, the young ferret looks as frightened as her.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Grundy. He won't hurt you." On my hands and knees, I stick my head under the table and scoop up my furry patient into my arms. He immediately starts shivering and snuggles against my chest. "He's just a baby."

She clambers down, her face pinching in a glare. "Humph. Last month it was a raccoon." She sniffs. "And you still haven't found my wedding ring that critter stole. It's all I have left of

my William.” She holds a hankie beneath her nose, then turns an evil eye on me. “You’d better find it. And soon.”

Behind her, Annie rolls her eyes. I have to agree. Mrs. Grundy is as dramatic as my sister. “It won’t happen again.” I raise an eyebrow at the culprit. “Annie has promised not to open anymore cages without me there.”

Mrs. Grundy harrumphs. “You said that last time.” Now Annie is the recipient of her evil eye. “I ought to report you to Mr. Spencer.”

No! My stomach roils and my hands grow clammy. “Please, Mrs. Grundy. Don’t do that.”

Mr. Spencer owns the mill and a good portion of the town, including this hotel. We only manage it. And live here. If she reports us, we could be out, without a home or jobs. Daddy’s salary from the church isn’t enough to keep body and soul together. And if Mr. Spencer tosses us out, he would fire my father from the general store he also manages.

Mrs. Grundy peers at me through squinty eyes. Her finger wags with each word. “You keep that thing and any others outside in the barn. They don’t belong in the hotel.”

I briefly close my eyes. “Yes, ma’am. He won’t bother you again.”

Annie, the ferret, and I make a hasty retreat. After I return the now-snoozing baby back to his cage, I go in search of my sisters. Annie is sorting the mail behind the lobby desk. She stuffs an envelope in Room 203’s slot.

“Where’s Lillian?” I want to jerk her tail.

Annie snaps her thumb over her shoulder. “Left for the Five an’ Dime.”

“Well, she should have stopped you.” At nearly twenty-four, Lillian’s the eldest and is supposed to know better. “And please don’t open the cage again without me there.”

Annie hangs her head. “I’m sorry, but he looked so sad, and I just wanted to pet him.”

I soften. It’s hard to stay mad at Annie. “I can’t find fault with your intentions, Little Sis. But we’ll get into big trouble if Mr. Spencer hears of this.”

My gaze shifts to the still-dirty tables in the dining room. Well, it can’t be helped. Even though this morning’s accident at the mill has left us at odds with our emotions, work goes on. Lillian’s work at Norton’s dime store often forces her to leave this task undone, and she depends on Annie and me to pick it up. She does my laundry if I have to bus tables for her. It’s not too bad of a trade-off. Most importantly, she adds some cash money to the family with her job.

I let out a sigh. “Come on. Let’s get the tables bussed.”

She wrinkles her nose. “I swear, Lillie always skips out on her work.”

“One, ladies don’t swear. Two, don’t let her hear you call her Lillie.” She hates the nickname—says it isn’t dignified. Our Lillian is all about keeping up appearances with an air of dignity—not an easy task in a mill town where everybody knows everyone and their business. “And three, remember she shares her paycheck with all of us.”

In the dining room, we remove the dirty dishes, loading them on trays, pushing through the swinging kitchen door, and leaving them by the sink for the kitchen girls to wash. Mama, Sarah, and the staff of four young kitchen girls—Grace, Glory, Beulah, and Delilah—keep busy with all our lodgers and short-term guests. I swanney, the hotel stays full because of Sarah and Mama’s cooking.

Mama stands at the marble baking counter, kneading dough. Someone is always mixing up another batch of bread. The sunlight streaming in the kitchen window shines on her curly, golden-brown hair. Though she’s forty-five, my mother doesn’t have any gray. Not like Sarah, who’s been the cook for as long as I’ve been alive. Plump as a proper cook should be, her hair is mousy-brown and silver. She always wears it pulled back in a serviceable bun, but there are forever shorter frizzles that escape the hairpins and fly around her face.

I return to the dining room with a bucket of warm water and two dishrags.

Little-sis grabs one. She dips it in the water, wrings it out, and attacks the first table. “If’n I ran out without doing my chores, Mama’d take a switch to me.”

Annie always makes me laugh with silly fabrications. “You’ve never been switched in your life, little girl.” She’s a coddled baby. Well, not a baby anymore. Though the youngest, at seventeen she’s become a lovely young woman. A frown ends my laughter. I only wish she’d get the flicks, as she calls them, out of her mind. She talks movie stars day in and day out. She itches to be in the movies.

Moving to the next table, she flashes a sassy grin. “I’d love to see Lillian switched.”

“You wouldn’t really. You’d cry.” I rinse my dishrag in the bucket and attack another table. “Your heart’s far more tender than you pretend.”

Fifteen minutes later, clean tables gleam in mid-morning sunlight. “Here.” I extend a stack of napkins. “Put these on the tables, then go help in the kitchen. I’ll finish this.”

Annie blows a kiss. “Thanks.” She tosses a stack of four napkins on each table and runs into the kitchen.

Not quite what I asked. I sigh. Setting tables is her least favorite chore, and I don’t mind, but it takes a good bit of time. I carry the tub of flatware to the first table. We have twenty-nine lodgers right now. We’re not at full capacity yet, but we will be soon. The tub gets lighter after each table, until it’s finally empty and I lay down the last setting. Fourteen-year-old Grace and her sister, Glory, carry in a container of newly washed flatware and put it below the serving station.

Back in the kitchen, Sarah stands at one the two large stoves, stirring a pot. Mama lays a towel over another bowl of dough, placing it on the other stove’s warming shelf to rise. Those will be rolls for supper and loaves for tomorrow morning. Annie helps Mama measure out flour for another batch of bread.

I snatch an apron from the rack and check the staging table to see if the kitchen girls have all the napkins laid out for the dinner bundles. I count twenty-nine. Good. Delilah lays an apple on each napkin while Beulah warps cookies in wax paper. I’m glad the ferret didn’t get into them. Oh, before I forget, I’d better tell Mama about him and Mrs. Grundy.

“I’m going to take a cot and sleep in the barn tonight.” The little ferret still needs a feeding during the night.

Mama pulls a bowl of pastry dough from the icebox and hands it to me to start rolling out for meat pasties. “Now why would you want to sleep in the barn?”

At the baking counter, I pick up the rolling pin. “The ferret got into the parlor while Mrs. Grundy was in there.” I sprinkle a little flour on the marble surface. The dough drops onto it with a thump.

“Oh, Genessee. You know you need to keep your animals in cages.” She tilts her head and studies me. “Ahh, I think I see. Annie let it out, didn’t she?”

I don’t know how my mother figures these things out. Then again, maybe I do. Little-sis has always run headlong into trouble. I nod and roll out the dough into a large square. “In her defense, she didn’t mean to let him go, just love on him a little.”

Using the back of her wrist, Mama pushes an errant curl away from her eye. “The weather is lovely, so I don’t mind. How’s the little fellow’s leg coming along? Will you let him go soon?”

“His leg isn’t as well as I’d hoped. It was badly mangled by that trap, and Dr. Adams says he’ll remain lame. I can’t let him go. He won’t survive in the wild on his own.” I shiver, thinking what could happen to him. With the dough rolled out, I search the drawer for the six-inch circle cutter amid a tangled mess of utensils. I need to reorganize this drawer.

Mama washes and dries her hands. She always thinks things through first, so once her decision is made, she won’t change her mind. “You’ll have to keep him away from the lodgers. Not everyone has your love of animals, sugar. But I don’t think he needs to be banished to the barn.”

“I’ll put a strong padlock on the cage and wear the key on a string around my neck.” I cut the dough into rounds, pondering what to name the little ferret. Annie’s good at names. I’ll ask her later.

Sarah lifts her head from her work and chuckles. “A padlock won’t be stopping our Miss Annie if she gets it in her mind to play with the wee critter.” She hands me a bowl of filling for the pasties. I portion out the contents—which appear to have a little leftover pot roast and a lot of carrots, peas, and potatoes—onto the pastry rounds. When the bowl is empty, Sarah and I fold the dough over the filling, pinch the edges, and brush them with a little egg wash. She slides the pans into the ovens of both stoves.

I’m wiping down the baking counter, when she leans her head toward me and whispers, “Did I tell you Annie brought the ferret in here the other day? I gave him a wee piece of mincemeat. After he ate it, he investigated me apron pocket, curled up, and napped.” She glances to make sure Mama can’t hear. “He’s a peach, he is. Me brother had one as a pet when we were *bairns*. He hunted rabbits with his.” She winks at me. “I do love a good rabbit pie.”

I toss her a thankful grin. Maybe I could teach this little guy to hunt rabbits. Daddy’d like that.

By the time the meat pasties have baked, the kitchen girls have the napkins loaded with an apple and a wax paper-wrapped sugar cookie. Our lodgers eat better than most of the mill workers, who take sandwiches like mashed potato and hotdog or peanut butter and mayonnaise. One little boy eats a peanut butter-stuffed onion twice a week. My nose wrinkles as I glance at the kitchen clock. Ten minutes till noon.

“Come along girls.” Sarah and Mama slip a pasty onto each napkin. The kitchen girls tie the bundles and place six in each basket. We all pick up a basket and leave. The hotel is less than a five-minute stroll from the mill.

The moment we open the door to the mill’s entrance, the noon whistle blows. “Right on time.” We disperse, each going to where we will find our lodgers to give them their meal. They empty the bundle, handing back the napkin. The girls have instructions not to leave until they get the napkin back. Otherwise they’re left in the mill. We can’t afford to replace them all the time.

On my way to distribute the dinner bundles, I search the cavernous space but don’t see Tommy. My heart flutters. How did I get so lucky to have him fall in love with me? After this morning, I yearn for a glimpse of him now, but I guess I’ll have to hold my horses until he comes by the sweet gum tree tonight. I pray nothing happens to stop us meeting.

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