

Chapter One

Spring 1946

Scots Ridge, Tennessee

Rain pounded the tin roof. Slamming like a sledge hammer threatening to wake the baby and his mother. Olive curled her toes around the front door frame bracing herself. She had decisions to make. It was now or never. It was up to her. It always had been. She whispered shameful prayers ignoring what was right and what was wrong. The time for Sunday school thinking had long since passed. Too many choices made in the heat of the moment. Too many years of playing the good sister while watching everything she ever wanted, everyone she ever wanted, going to Beatrix. This time was different. Olive was certain of it. She would see to it.

Standing in the doorway, she watched like so many times before for Tinkum to rise above the hill at the top of the hollow. See him with his slow and easy gait, saunter down the winding road. Hear him whistling a tune. Something he had heard on the radio looping over and over in his mind. That delicious mind of his always churning out some new scheme, some new seduction, some new something that would pull Olive closer to him. As if she could desire him more.

Olive was never one to give compliments and she was even less likely to be impressed with anything anyone did but, she appreciated her daddy giving Tinkum Price a job. She expected him to be attracted to Beatrix. Everyone was attracted to Beatrix. It's just the way of the world. Men and women alike tend to lean in the direction of the beautiful and sweet. Olive knew early enough in life to adjust her thinking and expectations for the leftovers, the scraps, she would glean from others that had had enough of Beatrix's weak mind and body. Olive was strong. Strong in ways she had yet to realize.

Grabbing the door frame and leaning out, stretching the length of her long arms, Olive watched as the flood waters rose higher and higher. A water moccasin slithered through the muddy water undisturbed by the pounding rain. The swelling water rushed down the hollow with the sound of a thousand voices. Thunder pealed and lightning split the dove gray sky with its electrifying rip cord that shook the atmosphere from the hand of God.

She prayed one last pleading prayer. The water was rising fast and there was no sign of anyone coming over the hill. "Mud Flatts" Olive said with a hiss. The words as filthy as the silt on top of the muddy flood waters. She hated the place.

As if God had heard her complain yet again, the rushing water, a force too fierce to underestimate, pulled at the worn porch and its supports. With a clap of thunder, the porch let go of its grip on the old sharecropper's house with a moan and burst in two as the water claimed it. Olive's knees buckled but she quickly recovered too stubborn to let the flood or Tinkum's absence get the best of her. She was strong. She was sure. Sure of herself, if no one else.

Determined, Olive stayed in the doorway. Muddy water lapping at her bare feet. Forcing its way into the house. Just as she had done for days she watched and waited. Waited for her brother-in-law, Tinkum Price, to return. She needed him. She was ready to admit it. She wanted to give in to the fear but being afraid would be too easy and an unfamiliar luxury compared to what she was facing. She laughed thinking of how many times she had said it was just water under the bridge. Her excuse for doing the things she had done. Never willing to apologize. Now it literally was water that was rushing her to decision. To action. She would worry later. She was too far gone to be second guessing herself and her intentions.

If she lived to be a hundred she would never understand how she could let a man, any man, but especially a man like Tinkum Price convince her to give up any hope of leaving Jessup County for a better

life, and instead, pack what few belongings she had and move in with him and Beatrix. Nights spent listening to the newlyweds fueled the resentment and bitterness in her. If it wasn't for the occasional look and touch from Tinkum, she would have ran out of the hollow like her hair was on fire and her tail was catching. Her hopes and dreams to have Tinkum for herself kept her in the one place she vowed she would never be, Mud Flatts.

"Ollie?" Beatrix groaned. "Drink. My mouth is so..."

Olive glanced over her shoulder to see her sister fall back to sleep. She made no attempt, great or small, to turn her attention away from the hilltop. Beatrix was left to sink back into the dark oblivion that had become her home. Olive fought the urge to be jealous of Beatrix's means of escape in spite of her failing health. At least, she wasn't standing until her feet ached waiting for a man.

Lightening shot from the sky striking a drowning Sugar Maple in the small front yard severing its limbs. Olive screamed and regretted it immediately when the baby began to cry. Rushing to her sister's bed, she gathered him up into her arms to soothe him back to sleep. Looking at her sister sleeping so deeply she didn't appear to be breathing, Olive kned the bed just enough to cause Beatrix to gasp but not enough to wake her.

Hearing shouting and the sound of an engine revving, Olive grabbed the bedspread off of Beatrix and wrapped it around her and the baby and rushed back to the opened front door. It had to be Tinkum she told herself. Standing on the ragged edge of where the porch had been, Olive sighed with disappointment to see Ephraim Hatch and Arvis Ange topping the hill in a boat. Ephraim saddled the jon boat right up next to the house. Its metal shaving the rain soaked boards as the rising water bounced them like fishing bobbbers.

"Take hold." Arvis shouted as he reached to take Olive's hand. Her gut reaction was to recoil seeing his fat dirty hand grabbing for hers.

“Easy. That’s it. Take it easy. We’ve got you.” Ephraim said in his know-it-all way. The motor idling under his direction. She fought back a snarl thinking of him walking on the water instead of coming to her rescue in his boat.

The boat pitched suddenly. In unison, the threesome turned to see four stiff legs and the nose of Harp Margolus’s mule, Lucy, float by with the plow handles cutting channels. They each knew what the other was thinking. Olive swallowed hard pushing down the dread that Ephraim or Arvis would feel the need to say something unnecessary to try to explain it away. As if, being a woman rendered her incapable of understanding the massive consequences of water rising so fast it would pull under a full grown mule still tied to the plow.

No one had time to say two words. In the time it took for their hearts to beat, water poured through the house pushing out everything that was not nailed down. The front door gave way to the rush of water. A flash of white sailed passed its opening. Olive recognized it. It was sheets. Beatrix’s bed.

The windows burst pouring water. Ephraim and Arvis and Olive watched stunted as the iron bed slammed against the opened doorway tossing Beatrix out. Their eyes followed her body as it came to a stop floating against an overturned tractor braced on something deep below the water’s surface. Her cotton gown ballooned like sails. The iron bed bent and fractured rammed into her. Turning her. Later Olive would remember thinking how peaceful she looked - as if still asleep and unaware of what was happening around her. The fast moving current dislodged the backup sending Beatrix down the hollow with the mule, the plow and the iron bed.