

Prologue

It was the kind of day when even the lost believed. When possibilities were larger than reason, when potential was grander than circumstance, when the long, dark days of doubt were suddenly cast off and laid to rest. Brushed away with a smile and a certainty. And in this moment, from this place, you knew the real magic could happen.

It was exactly this kind of day at the edge of a town in a southern place called Echo, Florida. Lying safely on the state's northern border, Echo was first brethren more to its Alabama cousin than to the Gulf Coast. The land rolled by in rural peace and contentment, not given over to the moods of salt-water tides and open horizons but to the soft singing of wind in the pines, of roosters calling in the early morning light, of small cornfields and freshwater fishing holes.

The firstborn leaves of March had sprouted into the tiniest sea of baby green. The world was breathing in and out, moving everything in its path slightly, and on due course, with a gentle, four-edges-of-the-earth kiss. The birds had filled the trees, rumbling from their winter's sleep, and here they were now, glorious and in full song. Squirrels scampered, quick and unseen, beneath banks of dried loblolly pine needles, then ran up the trees so fast they left nothing but a trail of falling bark.

Down at the edge of the powdery dirt road was Mullet Creek, running quietly, steadily throwing off stars of light from its surface. You could hear the airborne fish breaking the bonds of water, then falling with a plop back into the chilly green of the creek.

Within all the living things—the dirt, the water, the cloudless sky, the pine trees long and whispering—was the expectation of something coming. Something full of light and wonder.

When the expectation had stretched as far as it could, had built a crescendo into a feverish pitch, a peculiar wind appeared. Only a tiny thing at first, but even then something special, something delicious and unique. A whirl began to take shape, collecting dirt from the dry bed of the middle of the road and spreading it upward into a spiraling funnel of substance. For a moment it appeared to be an errant breeze that caught the dirt and gave it a twirl, a bit of a dance, before it would settle itself to the nothing it once was. But the dance didn't settle. Instead, it climbed higher and higher, pulling a stream of sandy soil, twisting it to and fro, as if something was shaping it with a manner of something in mind.

At first, there was only the wind, the dust, the dirt, but then, shifting in and out of visible, were two well-worn and traveled boots.

The dirt traveled higher, faster, revealing two trousered legs and then a waist, a chest, two arms with hands, until finally a head and, on that head, a hat well lived in. The image presented a man who had been around, a traveler or a storyteller.

For a time the man and the whirlwind were one and the same. Man and whirlwind. Whirlwind and man. But after a long moment, but still only a moment, the man stepped straight out of that wind, and without the least bit of tussle, he planted his boots on solid ground. And in this exact manner, on this kind of a day, the man was born feetfirst onto the earth.

He adjusted himself, pulling the clothes about his body, arranging the pants, the shirt, the jacket just so. He was a million miles roamed and completely at home. King to the subjects who might demand, but simple statesman to the orphan clan.

He removed the hat and ran one hand through his thick white hair and surveyed the territory before him. Then, after careful and appropriate consideration, he replaced the hat and pulled a watch from the left pocket of his pants. He opened the cover and music began to play. Music so sweet, so hypnotic, so full, it exuded a scent with each note and left it hanging there in the air. "Right on time," he declared aloud and then launched himself forward in a southern direction on the road that had given him life.

He traveled only a rock's throw toward the creek, and there just before the edge of the trees that made up a plot considered the woods, he paused and contemplated a house. Just a small white house of little consequence. A small shelter from the storms of life. There was an old mailbox by the road on which a yellow vine crawled and encircled its wooden post.

Green bushes bloomed with early white gardenias on both sides of a little porch where there was a swing. In the swing sat a small hen of a woman.

The man drew closer, almost but not quite visible, as he watched her from the north side of the pine tree woods.

The woman stood slowly and went to the porch railing, leaned out as far as she could, and peered down the road. Suddenly she stepped back two steps and wrapped her arms about herself. She pursed her lips, pulled them up to one side, listening to that spring breeze singing through the pine needles and thinking.

Then she spoke to her husband, dead now a year. It was an odd, comforting habit she'd taken up. It kept her lonely voice from rusting.

"Did you feel that? That shift in the air? Well, what can I tell you, Joe? It changed. It was one way, then it was another." She paused, looked out toward the tree line. "And somebody's out there standing just beyond the trees." She called out, "Who goes there?" and waited a moment for a reply. There was no answer, but that didn't move her. She was certain that she was right. That someone was watching, waiting just beyond her line of sight.

The woman called again with a more forceful voice. "'Who goes there?' I said."

With that, the man stepped from the edgy shadow of the trees. A chill ran up her back. Perhaps it was a sense of things being torn out of their place, of the future being snapped up and set on another course. She didn't know, but the chill was there, and her heart beat a little faster. The woman cupped her hand above her eyes, squinting into the distance. She was summing up and deciding. She didn't recognize the man, and she was alone—no husband to offer his quick opinion—so she turned and moved into the house as fast as her old legs could carry her. Then she turned back and looked out to see what the man would do. He was still standing in the road, not thirty feet away.

He walked toward the house, and she saw that there was a rhythm to his walk as if he were riding the earth, as if the earth were a creature that moved and breathed beneath him. She decided then and there that he was something like a man but he wasn't a man. She clutched her arms tighter about her.

He stopped at the mailbox and surveyed the strange web of strings that ran from it to the railing, and at the multiple-colored threads that stretched out from the porch and ended without explanation at various points in the yard, lying next to flowers and bushes and bird feeders. He looked up at the woman and cocked his head to one side as she slowly reached up to latch the screen door. The man walked to the edge of the porch, to the bottom of the steps, and then, without a word or an invitation, he forcefully walked up those steps,

one, two, three, four—if you could call it walking—and then he was there, right there, before the door. They stared at each other through the screen, unblinking and unmoving.

“Velma True,” the man said matter-of-factly with no uncertainty in his voice, no question in his countenance.

Velma contemplated the man and his hat. She looked at his boots and studied those for a time. Then she looked past him, up and over his shoulder, to the green leaves and thought about the kind of day it was. About how all the dark edges of the world had seemed to bust right off this morning. Then she considered the man differently, as if he were a part of the day and not something separate from it. As if the day itself brought the man to her. It was a strange thought, but it was the one that caused her to reply, “Yes, that’s exactly who I am,” as she reached out, unlatched the screen, and opened the door.

The man removed his hat with a smile, and for better or worse, he stepped inside.

One

Velma True told the man where her husband had gone, explained that she now lived alone, even though it struck her as not a good thing to confess to a stranger. That maybe she should say he was only around the corner, this absent husband. That he would come through the door any moment. But completely contrary to the good parts of her mind, she told him instead about Joe's death and that they were married during the war but not the last one or the one before that. As they walked down the hall, she prattled on about these things in a nervous chatter as if she were trying to save herself. From what, she didn't know, but she felt forever breathing down her neck. She continued talking as she ushered him into the kitchen, but none of the telling satisfied her, so starting over seemed best. She ran her hand over the apron that covered her from the waist to the hem of her dress.

In the moment that the man had stood on the other side of her screen door and called her name the way he did, like he'd known her all her life, well, there was something in that call that had caused her to unlatch the screen and step back, almost against her will. Something in the tone, the timbre of his voice. But now that he was here in her kitchen, she was

nervous about what kind of man he was, about what she had done and how she might get him to go.

The man placed his hat on the table, pulled the chair out, sat down, leaned back, and smiled again at her.

“Would you like some coffee?” she asked, attempting to appear natural.

He said, “Coffee will be fine,” like he had known all along what the woman had to offer and what she didn’t. Like he had known her heart was beating a mile a minute and she was looking for an excuse to busy herself.

Velma lit the front burner on the stove, reached into the open cupboard, and got her cup. She paused and, after considering, pulled down the old cup next to hers and placed it on the kitchen counter as well.

She sat at the table, waiting, looking at the man and then out the window. The two of them did not say anything until the coffee was ready. They heard an occasional noise that was nothing more than old wood and old times. On occasion the wind would stir just a little, and they could hear the pine trees still whispering through the open kitchen window.

When the coffee was ready, Velma poured and asked, “Cream?” and he said, “Yes,” and then they sat some more. In spite of her nerves, in that quiet, coffee-drinking moment, Velma True felt repaired. Sitting at the table with a warm body and looking at her husband’s cup coming up from the table and going back down again. What a simple thing a cup

can be. What a simple, familiar thing that can cause an ache when someone is gone. And what a simple thing to find comfort in seeing it filled and moving as if a part of that someone had come back to visit.

So Velma looked into his eyes as he watched her while he drank.

And then she said, looking straight at him, deep into his eyes over the cup rim, “I wore a regular Sunday dress when I got married. It wasn’t white even though it could’ve been.” She raised her eyebrows at him so he got the point. “It was powder blue, like a robin’s egg, and I looked down when Joe first saw me. I guess I was nervous and a little ashamed not to be wearing a true wedding dress, but it was the best I could do. And do you know what Joe did? He tipped my chin up, looked in my eyes, and said, ‘That blue will always be my favorite color. You remember I said that, now.’ That’s just what he said. He sure did.” She looked out the window, watched a fat brown bird land on a tree limb. “We buried him last spring in that exact shade of blue.”

She got up and went to the window, tried to identify the bird without her glasses on. She was guessing a robin. Female and fat with eggs.

She turned from the robin and surveyed the man at the table. A spark of courage ran up her spine, and she said, “So tell me, mister, what brings you to my kitchen table? I don’t remember you or the shape of your face. Don’t suppose you

are from Joe's people, seeing how he didn't have any. Sure don't recollect you being any of mine. But you called my name. I figured you know me from somewhere, somehow. But now I'm wondering about that too."

What she didn't add was *I don't think you are even what you appear to be*. She might be snappy, but she was still afraid.

"I do so know you, Velma True," the man said for certain, easy in his skin, undaunted and fearless. "You've just forgotten where and when we met." He smiled again, and a snap of light ignited inside his eyes that made Velma's heart jump. "And I've come due to the great occasion." He leaned over the table toward her, the smile and the spark taking their mark. "There is cause for celebration, don't you think?"

"Who told you?" Velma whispered and was more than a little suspicious now. She turned her head slightly to the side and narrowed her eyes. She kept her stare trained on the man.

"Told me?" The man laughed, head back, eyes closed, mouth wide open. When the rumble of the laughter passed, he leaned over the table and laid his large palm on the back of Velma's hand. He turned it palm up and dropped something into it with a motion too quick to see. "Happy birthday," he said as he looked in her eyes.

What Velma saw was an old man, or what she had thought was an old man, but now she wasn't sure at all about his age. She wasn't sure of anything. There was something happening inside her palm. She could feel it. Her heart started beating faster. She tried to act as if it were nothing so the man wouldn't

notice. But the stranger's eyes were on her in a different way. She thought it must be the beating of his heart somehow filtering through her skin. When she looked down, Velma saw her hand covered in a light so thin it was nothing more than a mist, as if her fingers were wrapped in a tiny cloud. Beneath them, curved cold against her fingers, lay an ordinary-looking rock. She looked at the man again, a question in her eyes, and he smiled once more.

"Happy birthday, Velma True." He picked up his coffee and took a sip. "I've traveled a long way to see you on the great occasion of your birthday."

Velma looked back at her hand. She clenched her fingers, and they wrapped around the cold, smooth rock. She willed her eyes closed, demanded of herself to look away, to regain her composure and her right mind. She thought she heard the robin call outside the window and the soft response of a mate, and when she opened her eyes, she was in her bed with Joe sleeping beside her. She could feel her husband's breath against her neck, warm and soft, and him fast asleep with his head bent down toward her shoulder. Velma didn't want to wake him, didn't want to shuffle or move an inch but to hold fast to the feel of his sleepy breath running along the corridor of her shoulder blade. She lay there looking out their bedroom window at a piece of the moon that was still visible through the pines and wondering how this could be.

Then she was back at the kitchen table.

She looked at the man to see if he knew that her neck and

shoulder were still warm from a breath long gone cold. She reached up to touch the spot and found the skin beneath her palm was still breath-breathed warm.

“How?” Velma fell silent. She now had no reason for the man to leave—fear or no fear—no reason to hurry her words. “What is this?” She studied the rock’s light that covered her shoulders, her chest, and fell across her lap.

Then the man spoke. “Velma,”—his voice didn’t sound like that of a man now but instead like that of many men, a kind of rolling thunder—“this is your last good wish and...” He was interrupted by a crashing noise from inside the house. Velma jumped, made to go find the damage, but he said, “No, sit down,” in such a way that she obeyed even though she was a stubborn woman.

She tried to protest. “Something has broken.” A lamp, a picture maybe, but her eyes returned to the moving light, and the rock had become a splash of color across the table. She sat transfixed. There was the sound of another crash, but Velma sat still, looking at the colors and listening to the man’s odd voice.

The man said, “Nothing’s broken. Just scouts are out, and more are coming. They want what you have now.” He looked out the window for a moment. He narrowed his eyes, then picked up his hat and waved it toward the window as if he were shooing something away.

Velma lifted her eyes and locked them on the man’s. “Coming for this? Coming in my house?” she asked. “What’s coming?” A worry plucked at the back of her mind, but there

was the space of the man and in that space a peace profound. She had thought his eyes were blue, but now as she looked again, they appeared to be an emerald green and then a deep dark brown, until they slowly turned blue again. They caused her to forget about the alarm, about “scouts” and “coming” and just say what was on her mind.

“My purposes are all dried up,” Velma said, the words slapping at her. Words she had been feeling but not thinking, not saying. Her hand went to her trembling lips; her eyes filled with tears.

“Who told you such a thing?” His voice came out butter soft, as if he were rubbing balm into her bones.

“My time’s almost run out.” Maybe the words had been resting in her lap all along. Resting and rocking and waiting for somebody to come by to pick them up.

“This is your time, Velma.” He reached across the table and tapped the rock. “*Your* time.” He paused. “Look at me.”

And she did. She looked into those eyes again. They didn’t exactly scare her, but they were different, and they caused her to tremble slightly.

“Remember this.” He softly tapped the back of her hand. “If something, or a something that looks like a somebody, shows up to take this”—he motioned at the rock—“to take what’s yours, you just tell it to get on.” He picked up his hat from the table, held it in his lap, readying to go. “Got it?” He winked at her but didn’t stand. Perhaps he waited for her questions.

Velma decided to settle on one. “What is this?” She lifted the rock and held it out to him.

“Velma, I told you. It’s your last good wish.” He pointed over his shoulder to the porch. “The one you were making before I arrived. I clearly heard you whisper it from your heart straight up. It was that one word—‘again’—but you said it a thousand times.”

She lifted the rock up to her eyes, peering at it closely. Its presence had begun to displace things, old gray matter and weak sore spots. It began to put warmth in her blood she hadn’t felt in a long time. She closed her eyes and thought of the time she and Joe had gone down to the Gulf of Mexico and stood with the sun baking warm on their skin, water washing their feet, the sand shifting beneath them. The undertow, the tide, pulled her, called her out deeper. She could feel this tide pulling her now. Pulling until she felt herself sway like she was in the water. It felt something like water, but not water at all, lapping up against her, wrapping around her. She thought, *Oh no*, and tried to open her eyes, but it was too late, and then she was pulled under. She was moving in a warm liquid of remembering.

Velma opened her eyes to discover she was standing in the barn. Their old barn made new again. She was looking at the tanned, sweating back of a man. He was stripped to the waist and held something metal in his hands—something he was sharpening. Her first funny thought in all of this was that she had legs. This was an old fact and a brand-new fact that

rushed into her because she felt them—her legs—standing strong like she hadn't felt in, well... Just how long had it been since her legs could carry her forward without a doubt or a care? She lifted her hands, and they were spotless, just the flesh of her, no evidence of where they'd been or the toil they'd endured.

The man whistled beneath his breath. She stepped behind him, trying not to breathe, trying not to make him fade away, fearing to touch him, but she thought she would die if she didn't try. The man wasn't just any man. It was *her* man. The old hunger was suddenly back, filling the space left in those last few inches between them.

For Velma, there was only this minute. Her legs standing strong, the sun hot and dry outside, her hand as it moved toward her husband's right shoulder. She knew it was the end of the first summer they were married because she remembered a part of this moment. Now she was in that moment again, breathing it in brand-new.

Her fingers were only a half inch away now, reaching, seconds from touching the back she had been robbed of this past year. She closed her eyes, falling into the sensation of his hot, sweaty skin alive beneath her skin. A bead of sweat ran across his back, ran over her fingertips. She pulled them up and placed them against her lips and tasted his salt and made a vow at the same time. She tasted sweat and swore to remember this.

Joe moved, lifted his head like he had heard something

calling from far, far away. Then he turned and looked at her, was looking at her right now, and she was drowning in her man's blue eyes. He studied her, her fingers at her lips, her eyes full of wonder and heat and promises, and he emptied his hands before he stepped forward. *This, right now, is forever*, she thought. *This moment is forever and always. It is everything.*

"Velma?" he questioned, his lips against her ear, his breath hot.

She put her arms around his neck, ran his hair between her fingers. She was smelling man and remembering and living.

"This is it," she told him.

He just said, "Velma?" He lifted her off the ground and took her to the corner, and right there, in the middle of the day, in the corner of the barn, he laid her down.

The sun sliced through the slats of the barn, hit the hay and corn shucks, and fell against the side of Joe's boots as he studied her while he took one off. "I'm here, Velma," he said. "I'm right here."

When she got frightened in the night, woke up from a bad dream, he reminded her of this immediately, as if he lay awake all night watching her. "I'm right here, Velma. Right here."

Velma could see that he didn't know what was upsetting her but that he saw something in her eyes, and he pulled the other boot off and dropped it and said, "I've got you, Velma." He covered her from head to toe with his body like the shelter of rock that he was.

She breathed in flesh and skin and hair and man and held her hand over his heart to feel it beating. "Let this be forever." She locked her fingers into his.

When her eyes opened again, Velma was alone in the dark. She sat in the kitchen chair with her coffee cup before her. She pulled it up and drank the cold coffee down in one swallow as if it were strong whiskey. "Well now," she whispered to the dark kitchen.

Night had fallen, and a rising new moon was shining through the open window.

The man was gone. The only evidence he had been there was Joe's empty coffee cup and the rock in her palm. "Well now," she said again.

The cat wandered in and wound himself in languid circles around her right ankle. "What do you think of that, Tomcat?" She turned from him, looked out the window, studied the moon for a time. "No dream..." She shook her head, then sat there in the dark kitchen with the moon and the cat. There was no wind now. Nothing stirring. No owls or birds calling. And it was peaceful like it hadn't been since Joe had gone away. A whole peace, without the sharp, broken edges of loss.

She got up from the table and walked dreamily through the kitchen door into the small hall that led from the living room to her bedroom. She crossed the room and then sat on the bed. The bedsprings creaked with the round, old weight of her as she took off her shoes and then lay down on top of

the quilt, clothes and all, and said, “Good night, Joe,” like she had every night for this last lonely year. Only this time she slept with the taste of his salty skin still lingering on her tongue.