

OF SOIL AND SIGHT

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English Studies, Concentration in Creative Writing.

By

Anna Leigh Robertson

Director: Pamela Duncan, M.A.  
Associate Professor of English Studies  
English Studies Department

Committee Members: Dr. Brian Railsback, English

April 2025

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank the Elizabeth George Foundation for providing the financial assistance needed to complete this thesis project and Kathy and Bob Whitehead for providing a beautiful space in which to write. Thanks to my thesis advisors, Pam Duncan and Dr. Brian Railsback. I also want to thank Ron Rash. Learning about fiction from you has been a dream come true.

My circle of girlfriends makes up the spine of my bravery in this world. Thank you, Val Downes, Kyes Stevens, Jessi Cook, Dixie Patrick, Cyndi Colston, and Sandra Dos Santos. Especially thank you Ashley Day for badgering me to become a writer for all those years and providing your home in Vermont as a writing retreat, where these characters first came to life.

Thanks to my parents, Joe Robertson and Dr. Diana Barnes. Two people who taught me early on the power of tension in a narrative, and that being of the same place does not mean you have the same story. Mama has always supported my learning and absorbing the world around me, while Daddy reminds me that no problem is so big that it can't be worked out with a drive through the pasture to check cows. To my brothers, Jody and Isaac Robertson, who are the best story tellers I know.

Thank you to Oliver and Isabel for your patience with me as I incorporate being a writer into the amazing task of being your Mama. Thanks to my husband, Gabe, for always encouraging me to grow creatively, and supporting me in this adventure in too many ways to describe.

Lastly, to the community of Sautee Nacoochee, Georgia which has nurtured me for 14 years as a woman, friend, artist, community leader, and mother. When I found this place, I found my people. And when you find your people, you find yourself.

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## ABSTRACT

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Anna L. Robertson, M.A.

Western Carolina University (April 2025)

Director: Pamela Duncan, M.A.

My thesis will be a piece of historical fiction based on the life of the fortune teller, Mayhayley Lancaster. Ms. Lancaster lived in west Georgia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and was visited from people all over the region. Known for her accuracy in helping people find lost items, people, and animals, she was known as a “oracle.” Lancaster had other pursuits. She attended law school, ran for public office, farmed and traded mules, and was a teacher. She travelled around Georgia and Alabama telling fortunes as well as buying up land on the courthouse steps that was being sold in weekly tax sales. Through her savvy business style, she amassed a fortune of her own. My connection to this real-life character comes from my own family story in which my grandmother went to visit Mayhayley. My grandmother was in her twenties and was working for the Farmers Home Administration. Mayhayley told her that she would marry a man named “Isaac,” but my grandmother did not know anyone with that name. She was however, dating a man named “Bill” who she worked with. They dated in secret because they were co-workers. Grandmother dismissed her visit to Mayhayley and was convinced she was a charlatan. Bill went off to WWII and Grandmother continued to work, going on to test ammunition during the war. When Bill came back the two were married. At some point, Grandmother realized that Bill’s full name was “William Isaac Barnes” and his family called him “Isaac.” It took years for Grandmother to

recall her fleeting visit with Mayhayley. In the end my grandparents were married for sixty years. I hope to take stories like this one and other oral histories that are out there on Mayhayley and turn them into a chronology of historical fiction pieces that trace her life as well as the changing landscape of the South during the time she was alive. I would also like to take the stories into the modern era and look at how Mayhayley may still be impacting families in the South. For example, one oral history has Mayhayley telling a man that there was confederate gold buried on his property in a cast iron stove. This man confessed this information to his family on his death bed, but by then the property had been sold, and the family could do nothing but keep the information secret. I aim to turn tales like these into a work of fiction set in the modern world with modern struggles rural Southerners deal with in regard to the changing economic and environmental landscape. I am excited to explore these stories and the genre of historical fiction as I immerse myself in Mayhayley's life and the life of my own people during this time in history.

## INTRODUCTION

It was the season of goldenrod when I made the drive from the North Georgia mountains to the community of Roosterville, in the west central portion of the state. Dogs roamed free along the quiet county roads torched with brilliant yellow, against the coming autumn sky. I was on a pilgrimage to find something of Mayhayley Lancaster. Her essence perhaps? I wasn't sure. The only signs of the famed fortune teller of Heard County were the pack of local mutts, who appeared to have the pedigree of a feed sack, circling one another as if they too, were trying to sniff out their long-departed mistress. After all, Mayhayley regularly walked these roads during the early 20th century, often leading a parade of matted, filthy canines behind her. She insisted customers pay a dollar and a dime to have their fortunes read. The dollar for her and the dime for her dogs.

I stopped my minivan on the red dirt shoulder of what is now Mayhayley Road and gazed across a large wrought iron fence into some planted pines. I quickly found out that I am not the only person drawn to Mayhayley's homeplace. After about two minutes a local man in a truck pulled up questioning me about what I was up to. Meeting a fellow rural Southerner, I let him know real quick that I had no intention of trespassing on anyone's land or doing harm to the property. But he already knew my kind. He started to regale me with tales not of Mayhayley the woman, but of other women, just like me, almost always middle aged. They come in groups or sometimes alone, he explained. He had heard their hushed voices in the woods, found them tangled knee deep in brambles in the middle of the summer with walking sticks pounding the ground to scare the snakes away. They were all looking for Mayhayley, claiming a cosmic connection to a woman known to the region as "The Oracle of the Ages."

Amanda Mayhayley Lancaster was born in 1875, the third of eleven children, and died in 1955. She lived her entire life in and around Heard County. Born with a veil-like caul over her face, Mayhayley was considered to have what folklore refers to as “second sight.” For most who know about Mayhayley, her name conjures familiar stories of a fortune teller with a reputation for remarkable accuracy. People came to her for help finding lost objects, farm animals, and people. Tallulah Bankhead reportedly visited Mayhayley for help finding a lost diamond ring. She would tell people where Confederate gold was buried or if a family member had been wounded overseas in wartime.

She worked as a schoolteacher, midwife, newspaper columnist, farmer, lawyer, politician, and was a lifelong member of Caney Head United Methodist Church, attending every Sunday. Mayhayley never married or had a partner or lover that anyone knew of. Customers regularly sought her counsel down a dirt road in the ramshackle log cabin where she was raised and that she later shared with her sister, Sallie. The yard was often filled with cars from all over and a line of customers from all different classes and races.

The best source on details about Mayhayley’s life, and my source for much my writing comes from *Oracle of the Ages: Reflections on the Curious Life of Fortune Teller Mayhayley Lancaster* (2007), a book by Dot Moore and Katie Lamar Smith. Dot knew Mayhayley from a distance as well as members of her family.

Mayhayley went all the way through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, winning academic awards, and then took to the profession of teaching for the next decade. During this period, she also traded horses and mules and wrote a weekly column for the local newspaper. Remembrances by former pupils describe Mayhayley as someone who made sure less fortunate students did not go without.

But early on in her story, it was clear Mayhayley was far from a conventional woman and her path quickly diverged from most women of her time. In 1911, she enrolled as a student at the Atlanta Law School (ALS). This was the same year that ALS graduated its first female lawyer in Georgia. It's unclear whether Mayhayley graduated, but there are records of her practicing law. Some have said that she worked on the trial of Leo Frank, the Jewish man accused of murdering Mary Phagan at the Atlanta Pencil Factory, and who was later lynched by a mob in Cobb County. According to Steve Oney, who has written and researched the Frank case extensively, there is no written evidence linking Mayhayley to the Frank case. Given the timeframe and the fact that Mayhayley would have been a law student, it is feasible that she could have been in the courtroom as a spectator, or in some support capacity for the case.

In 1922, Mayhayley ran for the Georgia state senate, the same year that women received the right to vote in Georgia. She is believed to be the first woman in Georgia to do so. She lost, only receiving 35 votes.

Mayhayley was also involved in “the bug,” an underground number racketeering ring that swept out of Atlanta through Georgia during the 1920s, ‘30s, and ‘40s. Word got out that Mayhayley could predict the numbers for the bug and gamblers began to come to her to buy information. Her bug customers were primarily a black clientele, while the white clientele typically sought out her service in telling fortunes. Mayhayley charged more for numbers and paid young black boys to scribble random numbers on slips of paper behind her house, which she then doled out to customers. If a customer won, she asked them to split their winnings with her, and people did so out of loyalty or perhaps fear. Of course, any mathematician can tell you that the more business she had the better the chances of some of her numbers hitting, and each time that happened her notoriety grew.

Mayhayley amassed a great deal of wealth during this time and proved herself to be a canny investor. She purchased her family's log cabin and lived there as an adult with her sister Sallie. She also began bidding on property sold on the courthouse steps of surrounding counties. Most counties had sheriff sales and Mayhayley would go to town squares and set up a card table, tell fortunes, and purchase land that went up for auction. She acquired property for pennies on the dollar and then sold timber and cotton off the land to further the profits of her investment. She also followed the stock market and loved to talk about stocks regularly with her clients who were in banking and finance.

As Mayhayley got older, her garb and looks shifted from a Victorian and garish look to wearing dirty feed sack dresses and a World War I era cap. Some described her as looking more masculine during this time and certainly more unkempt. At some point in her life, she lost an eye, and she was often seen wearing a patch, a glass eye, or a hand-painted marble in the socket. This added to the stories of her unattractive appearance. One observer was quoted as saying, "When she was poor, she dressed rich and when she was rich, she dressed poor." (Moore and Smith, 20)

The true-crime story that made Mayhayley nationally famous began in 1948. Wilson Turner, a sharecropper, was murdered by his employer, a prominent landowner named John Wallace who was a regular customer of Mayhayley's. Turner, unhappy with his treatment by Wallace, stole some of Wallace's cattle. Wallace went to see Mayhayley about the missing cattle and she told him that Turner had them in a pasture in Carrollton. Wallace killed Turner in a very public beating at a tourist camp and drove away with the body.

Wallace then returned to Mayhayley and told her that he had dumped Turner's body on his land but could not remember exactly where and was concerned the law would find it first.

Mayhayley told him that the body was in an abandoned well with green flies on it. Wallace took two of his hired men, found the body, and had them burn it and dump the ashes in a creek on Wallace's property.

Mayhayley frequently assisted law enforcement in surrounding counties, so it didn't take long for officers to come to her about the case. When the Heard County sheriff asked Mayhayley if she knew where the body of Wilson Turner was located, she stated "fire" multiple times. A few months later, after the sheriff secured the testimony of Wallace's two hired hands and put them in protective custody, his team found the bone fragments after following the tracks of fire in that area.

This made for an interesting case on many levels. Aside from the spectacle of having a fortune teller on the stand as a witness, this was a case in which a rich landowner was sent to the electric chair on the testimony of two black men at a time and place when a white landowner might murder a black man with impunity.

In 1983, Mayhayley's character and the story were featured in the movie *Murder in Coweta County* (CBS), which was based on a book by the same name by Margaret Ann Barnes. The movie starred Johnny Cash, Andy Griffith, and June Carter Cash as Mayhayley Lancaster.

Once her notoriety reached a national level with her involvement in the Wallace murder, Mayhayley and Sallie were regularly robbed in their home due to stories that she hoarded her cash. At one point she reported being robbed 30 times in three years. The robberies became more violent and caught the attention of local law enforcement. The sheriff approached Mayhayley with the proposition to have multiple lawmen search her property for all the money she had hidden away, photograph it, and then take her and the money to the bank to deposit it. Pictures

would be published in the newspaper so that potential robbers would know the hidden cash was gone.

Mayhayley, who loved money and loved attention even more, agreed to the plan. The publicity stunt unearthed quite a load of cash. When the carloads of currency arrived at the bank, the bills were filthy with animal feces and dirt from where she hid her money in hog troughs, chicken coops, rotting hay bales and buried in the ground. The bank president refused to accept the bills until they were cleaned. So, the money was taken across the street and prepared for deposit. The total cash hidden on her property was reported to be anywhere from \$5,000 to \$32,000, which today would be worth somewhere between \$65,000 and \$350,000.

Mayhayley was an agrarian woman with ambition and aspirations that were far more common for the men of her time. The rural South has plenty of stories of “outsider” or eccentric types who lived non-traditional lives. Most of these folks at some point moved from their rural beginnings to places like Atlanta or up north or out west. But Mayhayley kept her home base in Heard County and never left the South. She built a land empire and a profession as a lawyer in addition to her notoriety as a psychic. Later in her life, her family tried to have her declared insane, perhaps to gain control of her fortune. A lunacy hearing was held, and the judge ruled in her favor.

Her sister Sallie was reportedly “touched” mentally, and the two women lived in a manner that today is associated with hoarders. After Mayhayley’s death, Sallie was committed to the psychiatric hospital in Milledgeville and later died there. It is not completely out of the realm of possibility that Mayhayley might have suffered from some form of mental illness herself. If so, it did not hinder her financial success or clairvoyant tendencies.

Melissa Dickson Jackson, a faculty member at University of West Georgia and regional expert on Mayhayley lore, has studied Mayhayley and developed her own theory about her motivations. Jackson noticed that the Lancaster family had a commitment to education and literacy. Among the many documented oral histories of Mayhayley are stories of her family having books and of Mayhayley regularly getting books through mail order, mostly geared toward the law and government. Jackson theorizes that Mayhayley might have been impacted by *Language of the Hand*, written by a Dublin-born author named Chiero and published in 1894, around the time Mayhayley was a teenager. This classic tome is a how-to for all things related to palm reading. This, Jackson proposes, may have informed Mayhayley's work as a soothsayer.

Additionally, Jackson theorizes that when Mayhayley was coming of age, another female eccentric named Victoria Woodhull might have influenced her. Woodhull was a presidential candidate on the ticket of women's rights. Woodhull believed a woman should have the right to choose whether to marry or remain single. Woodhull also blended her political activism with what was referred to as the "spiritualist movement" and has been referred to as a "medical prophet," at one time serving as spiritual advisor to Cornelius Vanderbilt. Woodhull passed away in 1927, and Professor Jackson proposes that Mayhayley may have modelled her own life after Woodhull's.

Sitting on the bench at the Caney Head Methodist church cemetery, I am reminded of my own family story about Mayhayley; a story that has driven me South to study the past in hopes of understanding my own future.

Dorothy Dodson worked for the Farmer's Home Administration in Chambers County, Alabama, shortly before World War II. She was my grandmother. She was dating her co-worker,

Bill, in secret because it was against the rules for co-workers to date. Dorothy had a friend who knew that Mayhayley was in the area giving fortunes and asked Dorothy if she wanted to go.

Dorothy was a child of the Depression and a Christian and thought the whole idea of clairvoyance was nonsense. My grandmother told me that she sat in front of Mayhayley, who examined her palm and asked,

“Who is Isaac?”

Dorothy didn't know anyone named Isaac.

“Well, you're going to marry a man named Isaac and y'all are going to be married a long time,” Mayhayley told her.

Grandmother dismissed the entire experience and forgot about it. Bill went off to war and they corresponded while he was away. When he returned, they married in Washington, D.C.

The day she told me this story, she said she couldn't recall the exact moment that she realized that my grandfather's full name was William Isaac Barnes. After she and granddaddy moved back to Chambers County, they were talking with another local couple who mentioned the notorious fortune teller, and Grandmother recalled her visit and her fortune.

When I mentioned Mayhayley's story in an academic environment, she was quickly given the label of “eco-feminist.” I had never heard this term and considered it to be an awfully highfalutin word for a woman who hid her money in a chicken coop. Then I remembered my Grandmother Dorothy. Despite having a bachelor's degree from Auburn University, and a career in the chemistry lab at West Point Pepperell Mills, she still didn't blink an eye grabbing up a chicken from the backyard and wringing its neck to cook for supper after work. And Isaac? Well, Mayhayley was correct. My grandparents were happily married for 60 years.

As a Southern woman Mayhayley forged her own path socially, economically, and spiritually, yet she held fast to the community that formed her. She made money, she made friends, she made enemies. She did not make excuses for her looks, her housekeeping, or her choices. Through her 79 years on earth, in a time when women were having to fight for the right to even exist outside of the shadow of a man, her shrewdness made her sought after by both men and women. There will never be another Mayhayley Lancaster. But that doesn't stop women like me from trying to find parts of her deep in those woods and deep within ourselves.

While Mayhayley was a real person, not much of her life is known prior to her notoriety from the Wallace case. At that time, much was written by journalists painting her as a folk hero, witch, oracle, and fortune teller. There is evidence that Mayhayley promulgated this image herself. However, little is known about her early years. What formed her, wounded her, and brought her into womanhood. It is clear she was known as an eccentric woman living in the rural Georgia woods who had "the sight." There were many like her dotting the landscape of the region during that time.

The following chapters tell the story of Mayhayley through fiction. While I might not always use Mayhayley's voice in the story, it is through her eyes that I wish for the reader to see and hear her experience. Through extensive research of her life, I endeavor to tell her story, using an informed perspective as well as my own creative liberty to bring her to life. This is a risky endeavor for any writer, but when your subject has a legacy like Mayhayley, it is an even heavier venture. Legend states that those who write or tell stories of Mayhayley that she would not like tend to have bad fortune befall them. I can only say that I have tried to serve her story and voice with as much authenticity and reverence as I would for my own family members. I hope these stories reflect this deep respect for Mayhayley and the entire Lancaster family, as well

as the culture that created her. While my stories are based on extensive research of what is available, this is a work of historical fiction. This means that much of it is made up by me with the hope to capture the spirit of person, time, and place. In that, I hope to find Mayhayley's essence as well as a deeper truth for readers to enjoy.

The cemetery at Caney Head Methodist Church is a meticulously kept grounds funded by offerings still left on Mayhayley's grave, which sits prominently toward the front. During my visit, I sit and listen to the soft wind, wondering if some part of this unconventional woman will come to me in this quiet place. But all I catch are the whiff of those dogs I passed driving in. I begin to ask myself why I am so drawn to her story.

It was a few months before Granddaddy's death when Grandmother told me her story. Granddaddy was in his final decline, sleeping in the bedroom, and she was lying on the couch in the living room, weary of the duties of caregiver. After we finished our visit and she dozed off, I listened to the ticking clock on the mantle piercing the quiet, and wondered: *If I had the chance to learn how it's all going to turn out, would I really want to know?* Twenty-five years later I still wonder about that while I place my four quarters and dime on Mayhayley's gravestone.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Ridge Grove, Alabama 2023**

Thadius

Thadius failed his CDL test for the second time. He always ran out of time despite his buddies' sneaking copies of old tests to him. If the test were a person asking him how to rebuild the engine while they were both perched under the hood of one of those machines, he would have aced it. But the trucks all get sent to Tennessee to get serviced now, so nobody around here was hiring a diesel mechanic. Instead, he had to master the details of tire load, traffic speed, and road conditions all scribbled out and waded through the confusion in his head as he tried to dissect the letters and turn them around to get their meaning. Sitting at a desk trying to visualize real life through pencil and paper, he might as well have been hauling garbage for the city.

Thadius lived in a log truck town. The only good jobs were driving for the pulpwood company. Driving paid better than running a chainsaw these days. That is, what jobs hadn't been run off by the new cut-down machines. A giant tyrannosaurus-rex-looking machine made out of metal with gears wrapped its arms around an eighty-year-old-timber like its giving it a hug, and in one motion slices the tree to a stump, lifts it up and shears the bark off, all controlled by a man in a glass cab wearing safety goggles. The price of lumber was so high, everybody wanted to clear-cut these days. It used to be a man could feed his family running a chainsaw thinning out woods. It was standard to leave hardwood and a few pines. But the rolling hills around Chambers County were starting to look as bald as the mound of his first girlfriend. Landowners are willing to cut down the whole forest if it gives them extra money for that new speedboat in the process.

Thadius sat on his back deck and looked out at his own ten acres of pasture. He calculated long ago just how many pine trees it would hold. No matter which way he did the math, cutting trees on that small a plot would never make him enough money to justify the cost. He finished his last cigarette of the morning while he threw the tennis ball with his dog, Rex, a sheepdog mix, who had showed up at his neighbor's a few months ago and made himself at home with Thadius and Shanda after a steady diet of food scraps.

Shanda, Thadius's wife, had been behind the counter at the Dollar General for hours now. Throwing her ample weight around to the employees like she was some sort of mistress at the post office, a job her granny had held all through the 80s and 90s until retirement. But the Dollar General was no federal job. Shanda made a little above minimum wage with no benefits and held no more clout with the customers than making them wait at the register as she waddled up the aisle when the bell rang.

She took the job after the property was sold by the Snell family to the Dollar General for a mint. They came in and slapped up the yellow-hued shit house. He could see the glow over the pine trees each night as the moon rose over his otherwise pink sky view. The store was a quick three-minute drive from their double-wide trailer they had bought on credit once the land passed into his hands from his Grandpa Isaac. All the neighbors could be found entering the blinding light of the discount store for toilet paper, baking soda, Doritos, and milk at all hours of the evening, despite having barked their opposition to the land being converted from farmland to commercial by the county.

All Shanda really did down there was gossip and sulk at having to wait on the girls from high school who come in for purchases on their way to the lake, or the football game, or Atlanta.

All the places she and Thadius couldn't afford. They always have their little smocked dress blond children in tow and ask Shanda when she and Thad were going to start a family. Bitches.

Thadius knew this because he heard all about it every time Shanda got home.

"Why can't you do this? Why can't you do that so we can have something nice?" She'd complain.

"Shit woman, we got this house! We got this land! What else you want from me?" He'd respond.

It was always the same argument, and it burned Thadius every time. His grandpa Isaac had left him the land free and clear. It was all that was left after Grandpa sold off his portion of the family homeplace piece by piece over the years. But the trailer had been refinanced so many times, any value held by the land was long gone, upside down on what they now owed the bank. His parents had sold out their share and moved to Florida a year after his grandpa died, leaving Thadius with a balloon payment and a GED.

The final notice from the bank sat folded under the glass ash tray next to Thadius's boot. The balance was due, there were no more forgiveness options, the COVID money was over. He stared beyond his property to the tree line where he knew an ancient, barbed wire fence snaked through the uneven gullies, tacked to the hardwoods left to mark the land lines. The original Higgins property covered around 80 acres and was divided into 20-acre tracts between Grandpa and his siblings. The other side of the original plat still belonged to his great aunt Winnie, who was in assisted living up in Birmingham. He could hear her kids and grandkids buzzing around on four wheelers on Sundays when the weather was warm. They let him hunt over there every doe season. He also knew they had game cameras up every 20 feet. Some of them he had put up himself. On the north end of Winnie's property sat the old Edge homeplace. Nothing was left but

a sandstone chimney that was crumbling and some patches of daffodils probably planted by Mrs. Edge herself. His Grandpa Isaac used to take him in his old Ford truck, and they'd look for fossils or arrowheads. Winnie had built a new house with her husband, Uncle Herman, on her share, while Grandpa Isaac and Grandma Dorothy's house lay to the east side, across the Sandy Creek.

As a kid, Thadius spent summers digging out trails so that he could drive the four-wheeler from one house to the next, planting blackberry bushes and drying apples under stacked screen doors they had taken from old barns around the county. Somehow all those old ways had gotten lost in this new post-covid world where everybody wanted to homestead, but only if it brought in enough followers to their YouTube channel. Hell, the clothes alone that some of those folks wore cost more than the livestock they were trying to raise. The goats never had shit on their asses, the gardens never had weeds.

It reminded Thadius of a pumpkin patch his Mama and Daddy had taken him to as a child. The plants were all in neat rows with big green leaves lush with water despite the drought that year. Big bulbous orange pumpkins sat every few feet, waiting to be chosen. But as he got close to the one he wanted, Thadius saw that the pumpkins weren't attached to the vines at all. They had been placed there carefully to give the illusion that they had been home grown. Turns out the soil had been too weak to support good sized pumpkins that year, so the farmer had travelled to the state farmer's market and bought a truckload. That was the state of the world these days. A bunch of fake pumpkin patches.

Thadius propped his elbows on his knees and held his head in his hands. Rex dropped the ball at his feet and looked at Thadius with pleading expectant eyes. The game was over. Thadius had run out of options with this last failure of the CDL test. By the time he got past the waiting

period to take it again, the company would no longer be offering the \$10,000 signing bonus to get truckers back on the road, and the bank would be into the foreclosure process by then.

Thadius thought back to the last days of Grandpa Isaac's life. He'd been gone almost 20 years now. Thadius had hated reading in high school so he would check out audiobooks of Louis L'Amour at the public library for Grandpa Isaac. In those final months, Thadius would sit by his grandpa's bed after school and the two would listen to the stories of L'Amour's old west. Grandma Dorothy would take the opportunity during these visits to have a nap in the other room.

One afternoon, Thadius had come in with a copy of *Last of the Breed* and was eager to get started but Grandpa motioned for him to put it down.

"We got things to talk about today," Grandpa said in his gravelly voice that he was constantly having to empty of phlegm.

"You need to know about this. The Edge homeplace. Keep an eye on it. And if you ever get the chance to buy it from Winnie, take it. Do whatever you have to do."

Fifteen-year-old Thadius had thought maybe his grandpa was losing his head and mistaken him for his father, Royce. Thadius could barely afford money for the movies on the weekend, much less land. Royce Buxton hauled logs and had a few pulpwood crews back then. He was much closer to understanding such things. But Grandpa went on.

"You, Thadius. You are the one who should know about that place. Your daddy, he's not going to want to fool with our family's land. Your Mama has been wanting to leave since she was young. But you are like me, Thadius. You are of this place. It will be up to you how to carry on."

Thadius was startled by his grandpa's frankness. Isaac continued with his story.

“Mr. Edge, I knew him when I worked for the Farmers Home Administration. I used to help him with his crops. He sold his place to Papa when Mrs. Edge died. She was young and I guess the place held bad memories for him. He remarried and started a new family in town. But Mr. Edge originally bought the place from that old fortune teller, Mayhayley Lancaster. Mr. Edge was a friend of Ms. Mayhayley. He would go over to Georgia and visit with her in this old beat-up log cabin where she lived. They had some kin folks in common, I believe. The woman was a psychic and could see into the future.”

Thadius’s ears perked up.

“You mean like them folks people spend all their money calling on the telephone, the ones they have advertisements on TV for? Like Miss Cleo?”

Grandpa Isaac waved his arm and smiled.

“No son, she was the real thing. A seer. Some people were born that way, with real power and she was one of them. Now let me finish. Ms. Mayhayley knew things about these parts. Things nobody else could have known. Sometimes she shared what she knew, but some things she kept to herself. Nobody knows why or how she operated. But she bought the Edge homeplace on the courthouse square during a sheriff sale in the thirties, back when she was young enough to be out and about making deals of that sort. Just before she died, she told Mr. Edge she’d sell it him on one condition.”

“What was that?” Thadius asked.

“She told the old man that she had seen gold buried deep on the land. Said it was in an old cast iron stove that had been dropped into the ground on its side, eight feet down specifically. She said the number eight turned on its side was infinity and that was how long that gold was meant to stay there. Mayhayley told Mr. Edge that she would sell him that land on the condition

that he never go looking for that buried gold. She told him anybody that went digging it up would only bring trouble.”

Thadius replied, “If I were Mr. Edge, the first thing I would’ve done was go looking for that gold.”

“Well, son. He might’ve done just that. But I doubt it. Folks feared Mayhayley Lancaster back then.” Grandpa Isaac said.

“She claimed the gold was buried during the Civil War. Confederates were losing the war and Sherman was on the rampage. Everybody’s homes were getting looted and people buried anything they had of value. Then after the war, the carpetbaggers came in and made all sorts of laws to prevent what they called another insurrection. One of those laws was that it was illegal for Southerners to own gold. Whoever buried it would have told no one, not even family. Even knowing there was gold on the property could’ve sent a wife to jail. Whoever buried it would’ve never told anybody.”

“How did that old woman know then?” Thadius asked.

Grandpa grinned. “Maybe somebody told her. Maybe she had a vision. I told you she could see things nobody else could.”

Thadius looked skeptical as Isaac kept talking.

“Your grandma went to see Mayhayley once, she believes in her.”

Thadius laughed. “Grandma Dorothy? Went to see a psychic? Now you are pulling my leg.”

Isaac laughed. “You go ask her sometime, she’ll tell you the story.”

“Anyway, by the time the story got to me, Papa had passed on and we had already divided up the land and Winnie had the Edge place, so I never said a word. But Thadius, when the time comes and you need something to fall back on, you try and get that land and that gold.”

“What about her prophesy of bad luck?” Thadius asked.

“By the time you are that old, I suspect the bad luck will have been washed away. By then, there’s no telling what will happen to this land after I’m gone, or after you are gone. But you need to know about it. When the time is right, you’ll know whether or not to act on what you know.”

That was twenty years ago when Thadius first heard the story. A couple of years after the millennium and 9/11. The bad luck had seemed to leach out into the soil and infect Thadius and every choice he had made since then.

The years that followed he began to hear more about Mayhayley Lancaster, mostly from friends at school. The old woman got famous for a while after she helped the police send a man to the electric chair using her psychic powers. Thadius found out that stories about her were legendary. Almost everybody he grew up with had a relative that went to visit her for one reason or another, for help finding lost objects from diamond rings to false teeth.

When Thadius was in high school, he and his best friend Skeeter took a couple of girls across the state line to find where Mayhayley was buried. It was after midnight when they pulled up to the old church on a county road. Skeeter was dating some gal named Sonora who was a Wiccan and wanted to do a seance at Mayhayley’s grave. They had lit black candles, and Sonora danced around like a damn fool while Thadius and Skeeter got drunk on Mad Dog 20/20. Skeeter had told the story he heard of the night of a bunch of teenagers who had visited Mayhayley. She told the fortunes of all but one girl in the group. When Mayhayley was asked why the girl had

been overlooked, Mayhayley stated that the young girl didn't have a fortune. That girl was killed that very night in a car wreck.

The story of the gold had come and gone in and out of Thadius's head over the years. He'd even taken a metal detector over to the homeplace once, but he could only afford the kind that went down three feet. In the end he always came back to figuring it wasn't true anyhow. Or if it had been, the gold was long gone.

He stared across the property line thinking of his rich cousins in Birmingham and how the land was nothing more than a playground for them on the weekends. They'd pull up in their RV and trailer filled with ATVs and set up camp for the weekend to watch the ball game. Sometimes they'd shoot doves if their wealthy friends joined them. Thadius had kept the fields baited for them over the years and eaten his share of birds he'd killed from his perch. The rest of them could barely hit anything more than the power lines. He was left to deal with the angry neighbors whose internet had gone out as a result, after they had gone back to the city.

As if those cousins didn't have enough good luck, now some pipeline out of Texas was about to come through moving oil down to Florida. The Sable pipeline they called it, named after the color of the crude oil. The revenue they'd make off that underground river of black gold made the so-called buried treasure seem like nothing more than a chest of copper plated pennies. If he was going to act though, he needed to do it soon. The crew would be moving in within the next week or so.

Thadius watched Skeeter's black Toyota Forerunner pull into the yard. The hood was red, found in a junkyard after Skeeter hit a deer one night that came crashing down off of an embankment and scared the shit out of him. He had been drunk but that had nothing to do with

the accident. Thadius had known Skeeter Gentry since they were kids. Their daddies had been friends, so they were forced to play together at a young age, and it took.

“I already heard,” Skeeter said as he threw his buddy a Budweiser while he made himself at home on the deck stoop. He was referring to the CDL test.

“I see Shanda has already been running her mouth down at the Dollar General.” where Skeeter was his only friend who knew the story of the so-called buried gold.

Skeeter recognized the familiar look on his friend’s face.

“Awe hell no man, don’t even say it,” Skeeter said.

Thadius looked at his friend with faux innocence. “What?”

“Don’t bullshit me,” Skeeter replied.

“Every time shit goes sideways you get the same hairbrained idea. And every time there’s a million reasons not to go there. And now, those fucking cousins of yours have signed over pipeline rights so you get caught digging around on their property now, you got more to deal with than some pissed off city relatives. That pipeline is Federal, son. Hell, you want to break the law? All you got to do is cross the state line and get some scripts for pills. You’ll have that payment made without having to drive any further than up to Ran Shaw’s house.”

Thadius knew all about the pill trade up at Ran’s house and elsewhere around the county for that matter. He wanted no part of that life. Shanda’s Mama was a pill head, and she was as sorry as a three-legged mule. Living on disability, diabetes shots, and soap operas. He hated the thought that Shanda could be headed in that same direction. He had enough of his grandparents in him not to go down that road. Hell, even his parents had been decent folks. But when they left, he was on his own. In his family, you got one shot, and his parents had taken theirs and moved away. Had this plot of land left to him by Grandpa Isaac been his shot? If so, had he blown it

sinking so much debt into a metal rectangle that might as well be laying upside down on his grandpa's land. Or was his shot still out there? Buried in a stove by some rebel in as desperate shape as himself? Eight feet down in the Alabama red clay, below Mrs. Edge's daffodils, that had just started to bloom?

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Roosterville, Georgia 1882**

Sallie Lancaster

The church folk say I'm tetched. But Mama says that ain't nothing to worry about. She said that when God was forming me like clay in his hands, well, his thumbprint just landed a little harder on me is all. She says that mark makes me a little closer to him. That's why I can't talk so good like the others. What I lack in words though, I make up for in laughter. Mama says my cackle will set the hens a laying every time. That's what I was doing the morning of the woman in the woods. Hayley and I were under the porch. That's what I call my sister Mayhayley. Nobody could make me laugh more than my sister. She was almost four years older than me and Mama made her the one to look after me most of the time. Mama liked knowing that where one was, the other was not far away.

Our log cabin was nothing more than a pitiful pile of logs and sandstone that looked like it had been picked up and shaken by God himself and then put back down in the same spot, to be held together by our family's faith in him. Everyone bore their share back then. I reckon I was about three or four years old, and the summer heat had driven Mayhayley and I and our dogs, Coot, Rufus, Black Dog, and Rounder to the shade under the crooked porch. Each dog had their own worn-out wallering hole to keep cool in, and we had dug out our own as well. We were

spread out like a little red dirt graveyard that the undertaker hadn't gotten to yet. To me, that dark cool air felt like the fancy featherbed of a princess.

We were playing tea party with some old pots and cups we kept under the house. Mayhayley pretended to pour tea for each dog lying in his hole. I waited quietly, eager to be served the invisible honey liquid.

"Rowley Powley, punkin pie. Kiss the girls and make them cry. Why Miss Sallie, would you like some punkin pie with your tea?" she asked.

"Why yes!" I squealed holding out my cup.

Hayley moved around to her other guests,

"Rosco, you done et all of the punkin pie, you are a very ill-mannered boy."

She then scolded the hound as it rested on its paws, unconcerned.

After gobbling up our own breakfast at the table in the house, we fed the dogs leftover eggs and bacon we'd snuck in our apron pockets. Hayley was giggling at how Black Dog was licking the grease off my hands and mouth for the last drop of scraps. I was on my back being rolled back and forth by that big old hound dog's head and tongue. My tiny legs just a kicking the air and my white dress smock just as red as the Georgia dirt. I was matted with soil and fleas, but my mouth was open and laughing with about as much joy as could live inside a person. Hayley and I wore dirt better than we did shoes back then. Some might say that never changed. A hen roosted quietly on a nest in the corner under the kitchen. Her yellow mama eyes glared at us, daring us to mess with her eggs that were to become her flock come fall. We had the entire world to ourselves, right there under the living.

Just about that time we heard Mama's footsteps on the loose boards. The dust flicked down through the porch with each of her steps, and fell like powder into the sunrays peeking in from the day.

"What's that mischief making I hear?" Mama called. "Land sakes girls, y'all's about as wild as a beast of burden turned loose to the woods. Don't be wasting your breakfast on them dogs."

"But they's hungry, Mama, and I ain't got no use for them aiggs," said Hayley.

Her voice rose through the slanted steps as if the cabin itself were speaking. She always spoke for the both of us back then.

Mama replied,

"I got too much work to do to be bathing you girls before Saturday. And I don't want no nits in little Sallie's hair. Y'all go down to the creek and get clean. Mayhayley, you be sure and brush her scalp when y'all are done, you hear?"

"Yes Ma'am," Hayley replied.

We took to the woods but didn't bother getting clean til noon, when it was good and hot. We made our way down to our spot just below the foot log where it was deep enough to go all the way under if you sat down in the sandy bottom. We were wading in the cool water splashing one another clean of the heat and dirt, when Hayley spotted them. I was bent over forward watching my hair swirl in the stream and didn't hear the clanking wagon filled with metal objects hanging from the sides.

"Peddler," Mayhayley whispered hard and fast "we need to hide."

My sister grabbed me and drug me through the water behind a big old moss-covered oak tree that was lounging over the creekbank.

“You think it’s gypsies?” I asked, “You reckon they gone try to steal us and take us off?”

Hayley motioned for me to hush. “That’s just something they tell us kids to scare us.”

She knelt down next to my trembling body.

“Besides,” she said, “them kind of gypsies live far off from here.”

The wagon rocked too and frow with a dark nag pulling the load. Once the rig approached the water, a man emerged from the driver seat. He had dark hair and butterscotch-colored skin and a dark brim hat, only worn by travelers. He went to water the animal. Caked with dust and dirt, he appeared docile enough. He had a mustache and kept his eyes low to the ground. As he watered the nag, a woman appeared from inside the wagon. She had long dark hair and dark skin. She wore a corseted dress, attire unheard of in these parts, with a satin ruffled edging around the bottom that was torn and tattered in places. Still, the colors were deep purples and reds, like somebody in a show. She didn’t belong in these woods, that was for sure. Despite the heat, the woman moved from the wagon as if the air was as mild as fall. I noticed her bare feet as she climbed down from the wagon, her steps dainty and precise. She lifted the skirt to her knees and waded into the water. She had no pantaloons, something we knew was supposed to accompany such a get-up from seeing them in the Montgomery Ward catalog. I gasped at the sight of her bare legs, but Mayhayley stood transfixed.

The woman pulled a red shawl from inside her bosom, stretching it out in front of her like a magic trick and in doing so exposed a good portion of her breast. She leaned down and swept the shawl through the water, wetting it completely before wringing it out. She then swept her black hair up and tied the wet shawl around her head like a turban. She was wearing makeup. Women here didn't even wear makeup to church, and certainly not standing in the middle of a creek.

She moved effortlessly, all the colors just flowing in her wake. The man spoke to her in a language neither of us had heard before and the woman replied, uttering more foreign sounds. She held her skirt high as it dripped into the creek and her dress fell around her shoulders as she waded to the edge of the water, showing deference to the caramel-colored man. As the couple loaded back up in the wagon and crossed, all Hayley could do was stand frozen. I felt like I needed to be hiding my eyes from such a scene, but I didn't know why. As the wagon headed down the trail, Mayhayley began to return to the present.

“What in tarnation you reckon a woman like that would be doing in the middle of our woods with a wagon full of hock? They must be headed for Franklin.” Then she sighed. “Must be coming up Mule Day in town.”

I figured we shouldn't breathe a word about seeing the woman in the woods to our parents. Mama and Papa didn't abide painted folks. We weren't Holiness or nothing, but we might as well be. The Methodist Church at Caney Head was just the plain folk of our community who came together every Sunday because it was the closest walk to meet the Lord on the sabbath. But even there, women didn't dress no fancier than a calico feed sack, anything more was seen as putting on airs.

But at the supper table that evening Hayley couldn't wait to tell Mama and Papa about the strange travelers.

“They's like a rainbow,” she explained as she described the pair. “Except all of the color was coming from that woman.” Mayhayley tried not to talk with her mouth full. “They had pots and pans and a clock. What they do with all that stuff, Papa? You think they headed for Mule Day?”

Papa chuckled. “I suppose. Sounds like they are passing through from Alabama.”

“The town’s a growing,” Mama added. “Folks coming from that far just to try and turn a dime.”

“Can we go to Mule Day, Papa?” asked Hayley. The thought of a whole town of people she didn’t know or had never seen dressed as fine as that woman made us both giddy with excitement.

“I had planned to take Charlie,” he said, “but you girls are so worked up, we might just do that. I suppose Mama might want to see what Mrs. Haynes has laid out at the mercantile. What do you say, Harriet?” My Papa then winked right at my Mama. I was sitting on her lap, so I saw it right off. Mama gave me a little bounce and I could feel her perk up as she replied with a smile,

“What she has that we can afford, that is.”

Come Saturday, Mayhayley made sure we were both washed up clean as a preacher’s collar, ready for the trip to town. Mama had gotten her, and my older sister Louise’s dresses ironed out. Louise was talking of nothing but finding a beau to anyone except Mama, because she knew Mama wouldn’t approve. This was my first trip to town so I could barely contain my excitement. Mama made me sit on her lap on the way, the other children got to be in the back of the wagon and point out all the sights together. I don’t recall what I saw, but I remember the smells of baked corn and sugar mixed with manure. Hayley was in the wagon pointing out every bustle and fancy dress she could see, each one more glamorous and brightly colored than the last.

“A lot of these folks are from other places,” Papa remarked.

I gnawed on my hand wishing I could eat that rich, sweet, and foreign air around me. Papa drove the harnessed mules as we circled the commotion and found a spot to hitch the

wagon. Charlie spotted a herd of goats inside a makeshift pen. Charlie was the oldest and helped Papa the most on the farm back then.

“Papa, that’s what we need to clean out the woods next to Granny Thaxton’s place.” Charlie said.

Papa patted Charlie’s head speaking gently. “And they’d likely clean out the pea patch we labored so hard on as well, boy. Let’s go look for a sentinel to protect those baby calves. How bout it?”

Louise, Charlie, and Hayley all hopped down from the buckboard like a flock of baby chicks being poured from the brooder box for the first time.

Louise, of course, was more refined and clung to Mama as we entered the crowd, but Hayley grabbed me, and off we went running through the petticoat skirts and trousers like they were trees in a forest. We found dingy white canvas tents selling tonics, soaps, vegetables, and salves. But that wasn’t what we were after. Mayhayley was on the hunt for the woman in the woods. It was all I could do to keep up. Everything made me want to stop and stare- the people, the animals, everybody trading and hollering about this or that trying to get your attention. Eventually we came to a stop and Hayley let loose of my hand and pointed.

“There they are.”

The peddler and the woman and their wagon of wares were set up on the edge of the crowd but close enough to catch the foot traffic. A group of women and babies was huddled around the caramel-colored man as he tipped his hat and bowed to his patrons.

Mama walked up behind us and spoke. “So, this is what had you girls running like you were on fire.”

Mayhayley could not take her eyes away from the dark-haired woman. She was equally adorned as she had been in the woods but had accessorized with a hat and gloves and was wearing heeled lace-up boots. The woman smiled at Mayhayley and came over to admire us, still fresh from the baths the evening before, with only a slight layer of dust from the ride.

She did not speak. It appeared that neither spoke much English, but the man was able to speak with Mama with that same thick accent from the woods. While the man was holding up copper pots and tin penny cups to the ladies, the woman led Mayhayley and me to an old onion box filled with hard cover books. These weren't just any books either. They had colored pictures of girls and boys not much older than us playing in scenes of sunlight and green fields. The words were printed in large letters in dark black ink, just a few on each page.

“Mama! Mama!” Mayhayley pleaded. “Look, there are so many.”

The man gestured to Mama that the entire box could be purchased for a five-cent piece. Mama eyed the collection with suspicion. I wanted so bad to know what those words in the big letters meant, I started jumping up and down begging, “Peeeeasse, Mama.”

“Too much,” Mama said.

She motioned for us to step away from the goods. The man responded with three fingers raised as if to say he would let the box go for less.

“Two,” Mama responded, and held out two copper pennies for the man to inspect.

The man nodded and we cheered and lifted the box together to carry it back to the wagon. I was too small to carry my half any further than a few steps. A boy hovering around the scene offered to carry them the rest of the way.

“Why thank you,” my sister Louise gushed as he hoisted the books onto the wagon like they were as light as a straw bale. Mama gave the boy a penny and sent him on his way as Louise frowned. The box held at least 20 books.

“I’m gonna teach you how to read,” Mayhayley said.

She lifted me up and twirled me around and I squealed with laughter. The world was coming home with us in that box of books, and I couldn't wait.

The balance of the day was spent looking through the mercantile after Papa and Charlie finished with the livestock auction. Papa secured a fine mule to keep the coyotes and predators away from the calves. But all I could think about was that onion box full of books. It was all I could do not to crawl back in the wagon and start pulling them out one at a time to look at those pictures.

The only thing that got my mind off the books was when Mama took us to the mercantile to window shop. I found this little doll on the floor of the mercantile with real eyes sewn in it and a pretty little dress with flowers that fit her just fine, like it was made just for her. The hair was soft and yellow, made from something I’d never seen. I knew Papa wouldn’t buy her, we had so many other things to get that day. But I carried her around the store like she was mine. Mama and Louise were at the counter ordering fabric and Hayley and me was eyeing the penny candy when Hayley spotted a calico cat in the corner of the store. We took off after that cat hoping to pet it while it scurried round the rows and barrels of goods. Papa was on the porch smoking his pipe and catching up on the news I reckon, Charlie at his side as usual.

We gave chase to that cat like we were aiming to skin it and the cat eventually escaped through the stockroom door. When I looked down, my little doll was gone. And that mercantile was as big as a cornfield to a girl my size. Well, I just sent up a howl, right there in the middle of

everything. Mama says my cackling was something. Well my tantrums could wake the dead, and on that particular day, I'm not sure that it didn't do just that, on account of what happened next.

When Mama and Papa and the others came running Mayhayley told them, stone-faced as ever,

“She lost her dolly.”

So, to stop all my squalling they started looking around. Nobody bothered to mention that it wasn't my doll. They just wanted all the racket to stop, I suppose. Even the other customers were lifting the tops of barrels and poking around tied up sedge brooms looking for my doll. It was then that Charlie appeared, walking around one of the aisles of the canned goods with my doll, and handed it to me as sweet as you please. I hugged my treasure that wasn't really mine, and the store returned quiet for a moment. Then Mayhayley spoke in a way I had never heard before.

“Charlie, you found it, you found the doll.” Then she turned to Mama and Papa and said, “Charlie is going to go to the faraway west one day. He's going, and he's going to come back with the embalmed body of our brother.”

She said it like it was so true it had already happened. And what with the store being so quiet and everyone gathered around me, all the shop people heard her right along with Mama and Papa.

“That girl has the sight,” one of the women standing close by whispered loud enough for everyone to hear.

Mama and Papa just stared. I didn't have no other brothers but Charlie and everybody standing in that mercantile knew just that. But what Mama knew, that no one else did that day, was that the brother Mayhayley was speaking of, was in fact our little brother John Rufus who

was nestled in my Mama's belly at that very moment, in that very spot listening to Mayhayley tell of his death before he was ever born.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Heard County, Georgia 1882**

Harriet Lancaster

I'll tell you the truth. I've never understood Mayhayley even though she is my own child. From the very beginning she was not like the other children. She was always different. But I never thought it would all come to light in the mercantile in front of everybody on Mule Day, of all days. After that we were all the talk.

It's hard to find the blessing in your girl predicting the death of the baby you are carrying before anyone even knows you are carrying it. The eyes of those women in the mercantile followed me out the door and on to the wagon as if I had given birth to the devil. I was barely able to get Louise's dress fabric wrapped up and paid for without cursing the whole lot of them right there in public. I want my girls to be received properly in this town and Lousie will be

courting in a few years. So I held my thoughts to myself and herded the young ones out to the wagon.

Mama Thaxton was the first one over to the house. I was putting away our things in the kitchen when she found me with tears in my eyes. She was the only one I let see my fear. She immediately put her hands on my shoulders and squared my body with her's.

"I knew that girl was blessed." were the first words I heard from my mother-in law on the matter. She said she weren't surprised one bit. Mama Thaxton had kept Mayhayley's caul, from when she was born, pressed in the family Bible.

"There's nothing to be done about it, just raise the girl up with the fear of the Lord and hope for the best." Then she hugged me straight on, something Mama Thaxton rarely did with anyone other than the children.

Mama Thaxton's embrace fortified me for the parade of visitors who came through over the next couple of days. Family and visitors coming by the check on me, side-eye Mayhayley, and just generally collect the gossip of our home. It unnerved me but John said it wasn't nothing to fear as far as he could tell. His Granny Mahala had the sight, and he figured that's where Mayhayley got it. For me, it wasn't so easy to accept. My people didn't come from such things. My Papa ran the sawmill, and we grew up with books and play pretties and dresses for Mama and us girls. There was money to spend. That's why Papa said we went to the Methodist Church, where I met John Lancaster in the first place. His Papa, Lewis and Mama Thaxton lived next door, and I'd never heard either one utter a kind word about Granny Mahala. They said it burned her something awful when Lewis announced that he wanted to settle alongside his wife's people and work with the grist mill here in Heard County, instead of staying with her over in Alabama. I

couldn't understand how we were to simply accept that we have a daughter take after someone her own kin wanted to get away from.

Once the commotion from Mule Day died down, I tried to focus on the new wares we brought from town. I wiped down each book in that onion box we bought from those peddlers. Lord knows what they might have been carrying. I used a damp cloth and saleratus from the mercantile to clean each one and then proudly displayed them on a little shelf in the living room next to the fireplace. I wanted the children to read and enjoy books. This was an extra item that would normally be too expensive for our ever-growing household, but I looked forward to reading to the children each night. I had taught Charlie to read using nothing more than the Farmer's Almanac, and Louise and Mayhayley were already star students in the local school room. I was secretly as excited as they were over the colors and light and pictures to accompany the vowel and consonant sounds on those pages.

Since the Reconstruction, money hasn't flowed like it used to. We were lucky to have been able to hold on to the land. The books were an extravagance. But the children's education was worth it.

I pulled the last of the colorful bindings and embossed lettering out of the box when I noticed a few books in the bottom that were not for children. There was one called *Dr. Chase's Recipes or Information for Everybody*, to aid in solving the problems of the farm. Then there was a black linen bound hard cover with the outline of a gold embossed hand, the sort a child might draw when tracing their palm on brown paper. The gold was faded as was the cover, but I read the title out loud, *Language of the Hand*. At first glance, it looked like an old doctor's textbook on the anatomy of the hand. *What a wonderful reference to have*, I thought to myself. On our

small farm, hands were constantly smashed or cut. I'm sure it would have information on how to properly set bones to prevent deformation and concoctions to treat rheumatism.

But when I began to flip through the pages, I could feel the book get white hot in my hands. This was not a medical text. There were pages upon pages on the sorcery of reading palms. My first instinct was to toss it into the fire. But the thought of breathing the smoke of something so vile and having its ashes coat the inside of our family home frightened me even worse. I dropped the book, and it landed on the floor with a muted thud. The spine flipped open to a diagramed hand with arrows and numbers drawn across it as if it were an instruction book on dissection. I covered my mouth in horror. Had this instrument of witchcraft brought on Mayhayley's vision? I had brought this book into our home. Was her prophesy my fault because I chose to do business with those gypsies? I grabbed the poker tongs from the fireplace and held the book at a distance between the two iron poles. I took deliberate steps out onto the porch and dropped the book into the kindling box for John to take off and bury, just as soon as he came back from feeding the stock.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Roosterville, Georgia 1900**

#### Mayhayley

Papa took me around the side of the house, behind the chimney, a few days after they told me I had the sight. I was sure I was about to get the strap. Mama had been so upset, and people were coming and going from the house with food as if someone had died. But instead, he looked at what must have been my forlorn face and handed me a book. It had a picture of a hand on the cover.

“Your mama wanted me to bury this. But I think it might be of use to you, Hayley.” He said. He spoke to me like I was grown up for the first time I could remember.

“Now you keep your chin up. What you got is a gift.” I wanted to cry but I wouldn’t dare do no such thing in front of Papa. I hadn’t thought of seeing things as a gift. I hadn’t thought of it at all until I heard the folks whispering about me being cursed and all.

I kept the book hidden in the barn but studied it every chance I got. I learned about the lines of life and what the shape of a hand tells you about a person. Sallie was the only playmate I had before all that and she clung to me still, like my wisdom was enough for both of us.

I was a teenager when Papa first asked me, “Mayhayley, do you figure God would punish me for asking my daughter about what she sees for this farm?”

I responded, “Why no, Papa. No man should be punished for being a steward to the land God give him.”

“What do you think about planting that extra six acres of bottom land in peas instead of cotton this next go round?” Papa asked.

“You want to plant potatoes instead. They will come earlier and fetch a better price. Typhoid is going to sweep through and disrupt the pea picking next year. They’ll rot on the bush.”

Papa listened to me, and come February, all the old men at the feed store scoffed at his choice of seed potatoes. But when the typhoid came, all our crop harvest was sold and stored up in the cellars of sick folks all through the county.

Papa was the reason folks started to take me seriously. They’s a lot of seers in these woods and farms that never got talked about like I did. The difference between them and me was I knew money. And the reason for that was Papa. After that first trip to Mule Day, Papa made sure I came along for every sale. He built a second buckboard to make room for Charlie, myself, and our younger brother, John Rufus. He put high favor in making sure I knew as much about

things as the boys. I traded mules and horses just as soon as I was old enough to calculate in double digits. Charlie and John Rufus were none too happy about my suddenly being on the same level as them and having to share Papa with me. John Rufus, who we called JR, was smaller, so he wasn't no problem. I could wallop him a good one, but Charlie was a different story.

Once I was out in the barn working on the milking end of a Holstein cow while Charlie and JR were giving her sweet feed.

“Hayley, I suwannee, you got a face like a goat ‘cept you ain’t never gone have no kids hanging off those teats.” Charlie said. JR laughed while Charlie kept chiding me on,

“And you ain’t see nothing any old granny woman with a mouth full of snuff don’t see, you ain’t all that special.”

What they said was mostly true. Those first years that I was aware that I had the sight, it felt no different than paying extra attention to things. Charlie and JR hated me for it, but I could be just as mean as they were. It was in my blood, I guess. Turns out it was blood those boys wanted.

One day Sallie and I were playing with Mama’s hats in the trunk at the foot of her and Papa’s bed. She had a few fancy hats for revival and going to Franklin. She and my sister Louise were in the kitchen canning blackberry jam and Daddy was visiting Grandpa Lewis who had gotten down with rheumatism next door. Sallie was wearing the town hat, and I was sporting the revival hat and we was playing carnival. I had been reading that book Papa gave me about hands and was pretending to read Sallie’s palm. Sallie had a deep lifeline but all she wanted to know was if she would marry. I had one of mama’s sewing needles and was using it to gently trace her lines. I could push the flat side of the needle down softly on her little pink flesh and see it change

to a pale color, making the the little branches of her palm lines spring forth a story for me to spin like a yarn.

“Looks like you gonna marry a man who’ll give you a baby boy,” I said. Sallie was covering her grin with her other hand and giggling.

“Be still, so I can see what else is in your future, Sallie.” I told her. She was practically a baby herself then and mostly stayed that way even when she got grown.

Neither of us noticed when JR and Charlie appeared in the doorway. They must’ve been lying in wait for Papa to be gone somewhere to really put me in my place.

“Sallie, git,” was all Charlie said.

My little sister whimpered past JR, who stood like a henchman beside Charlie and shut the door. I instantly knew something bad was about to happen. Charlie grabbed Mama’s hat off my head with the pin still in it. He started slapping me over my head and face. The hits hurt but the hat seemed to cushion the blows. Then, as if realizing it belonged to Mama, Charlie let the hat fall to the floor and started in with his fist on my face. But that hat pin had come loose of Mama’s hat on my head and was poking into the edge of my skin next to my eye. It must have only just pierced the skin because I didn’t feel anything. But once Charlie got to punching, that pin went right through and into my eyeball. Blood and puss were gushing so bad, Charlie stopped and froze.

“You poking her eye out,” JR screamed. Then, like it had all been one big accident, the two of them got all nice and sweet.

“You OK, Hayley? I didn’t mean to hurt you like that.” Charlie started rubbing the liquid from my chin like his motion could reverse the damage he’d done to me.

“Please don’t tell Mama.” He pleaded.

I guess I was dizzy from the beating and confused by what was happening. By then one side of my face only saw black and I didn't know why. I heard Mama come into the room. I wanted to clobber those boys, but I was too weak, and something about me wasn't whole.

"What have you all done?" Mama screamed when she saw that pin long as a finger with a pearl on the end coming out of the side of my eye. I put my hand up and felt the fine metal where it was entering my skin. The wet liquid was dripping out like red tears. There wasn't much blood, so I wasn't worried but for the darkness on that side of my face. Mama jerked me up and laid me out on the bed.

"Go fetch Granny Thaxton, I will deal with you two later." She said with the authority of a leather strap.

Granny was the healer for our family back then, and when she arrived, she pulled the pin out and set a poultice with lamb's ear. They put me to bed. The first thing to happen was I took ill with fever. Mama kept using cold compresses to cut the fever but after a few weeks they called for the doctor from Franklin.

Dr. Lane stood at the foot of my bed in his white shirtsleeves with his balding head and spectacles and spoke seriously to Mama and Papa as if I weren't in the room.

"John, Harriet, there's infection in the left eye, where the hat pin pierced. It's a miracle that it hasn't spread from the eye and turned to sepsis." Mama looked relieved, but only for a second.

"But the only way to keep that from happening, I'm afraid, is to remove the eye completely." I don't recall much after he said that. Next thing I knew Papa, Mama, Sallie and I were in the wagon headed to the hospital in Atlanta. I was in the hospital for several weeks after

the surgery all by myself at times, because Mama and Papa had the farm to tend to. The nurses would fuss over me and give me treats. I felt like their pet.

The day they released me; Mama cried all the way home. I was lying in the back of the wagon with my head all bandaged, looking up at the bluebird sky with my one good eye as I listened to Mama's sobbing and Papa's voice.

"Settle Harriet, she'll be fine. She's smart. We'll see that she goes to school, so she won't need to marry."

"She can marry me." I heard Sallie pipe up from Mama's lap.

I didn't know why they should be worried about a silly thing like marriage when I was still just a girl. Marriage wasn't nothing to look forward to as far as I could tell anyway. All I wanted was to travel the world and wear fancy dresses like the woman in the woods and eat city food like they fed me at the hospital. I didn't know no married women who did such things, so I wasn't concerned about no husband. But I could hear the fear in Papa's voice. They kept me in the house and in bed for six months while that socket healed. The waiting time was the hardest time of all.

John Rufus and Charlie got their behinds wore out but that was about all that happened to them. Mama and Papa called it an accident and maybe they believed that. No telling what those devil brothers of mine told them while I was laid up for so long.

Everyday Granny Thaxton would come up the path to check on me.

"Hayley," her voice would float through the screen door before the front door squeaked open, "how's that ooze today, darlin?"

One day when she arrived, I was sitting wrapped in quilts in the rocking chair on the front porch trying to catch the sunshine on my face to dry that eye from the night before, where it had

cried all through my dreams. She had some buttermilk with honey the bees had brought in when the gall berry bloomed. It was the sweetest thing I'd ever eaten in that sunlight. Granny started talking to Mama about the new preacher Harbin at the church and his pretty wife and how they had bought the house a few miles up the road.

“Poor Emma, they ain't got no kids and I heard it was not for lack of wanting. She's just not one for having a baby latch on to her insides. She done lost two since the fall before last.”

I sat back and pictured that pretty Emma Harbin. She had come to visit me and Mama with her husband when I was down. Her blue eyes sparkled, and her dress was as yellow as the sunshine painted on the pages of a child's Bible. I traced a little circle with my finger on the handle of the rocking chair and saw it come to light. It was Emma's belly taking hold of the baby she was supposed to have.

“Knit her a baby blanket.” I told Granny Thaxton. “Don't tell her about it, make it a pretty buttercup yellow. She'll have a baby in the spring when they start to bloom.”

Granny Thaxton stopped talking to Mama and bent down to me in the rocking chair. “What did you say, child?” She asked me as her eyes met mine. I looked at Granny Thaxton, still a little scared to meet my elder's gaze. But my voice didn't crack. I said again, “she'll have a baby come spring. I seen it.”

Granny's eyes softened and she looked at me as if I were the King James Bible and she were reading the information right off the page. Then she leaned in and kissed my crusted cheek. “I'll do just that, girl. It's good to see you doing better.”

Once the wound closed after they did the surgery in Atlanta, it still seeped. Dr. Lane told Papa it might be that way forever and suggested they order a glass eye from somewhere up north.

One morning, Papa came to the breakfast table wearing his travelling clothes. It was a Wednesday, which was unusual.

He had the horses hitched to the surrey so I knew he wasn't going to Franklin for feed like he usually did and even if he were, he would never be dressed like that for such a trip.

"Papa, it ain't Sunday," I said, trying not to be nosy in the affairs of grown-ups. Mama would scold us solidly for such ill manners.

Mama handed him a brown paper sack with the bottom darkened by grease. I was sure it was ham and cornbread for the trip.

"When are you coming back, Papa?" I asked, trying again for information. Folks think having the sight means you don't have to ask questions. But the Lord knows what he's doing. If it's something you really want to know, he won't let you see it right away.

"He's going to Columbus," Sallie whispered to me, "to pick up your glass eye." She acted like it was a secret she wasn't supposed to know.

Then I turned to Papa and told him, "The train will be delayed. They's some dead Holsteins on the tracks up the line that got into some poison cabbage. You won't be back until tomorrow."

Granny Thaxton's reaction to my speaking my visions out loud had made me feel confident enough to start saying what I saw aloud, at least to my family. With Papa especially, being the first one to put stock in my sight, I felt no reluctance to speak freely.

"You ain't see no dead Holsteins," Charlie, who was sitting at the breakfast table with JR and the rest of us kids, chastised. "Ain't no cows any deader than what we got grazing behind the barn." JR slapped my brother on the shoulder as they shoved biscuits and ham in their mouths.

“Can too,” I protested. “I can see them Holsteins holding up the train, and Papa waiting out there on the platform holding his pocket watch that he keeps in his suit vest pocket.”

John Rufus opened his mouth exposing a big bite of half chewed ham and biscuits while Mama had her back turned giving Papa a goodbye kiss. I didn’t give a lick what my fool brothers thought of my sight.

Papa then kissed my cheek and replied, “I’ll be on the lookout my girl. Harriet, throw an extra slab of fat back in that bag.”

Papa returned the next day with the new eye nestled in a velvet box lined with satiny material. I opened it up and saw it gazing back at me, the same hazel colored iris that was my good eye. He kneeled in front of the rocking chair presenting it as if he were a bridegroom.

“Now look here, Mayhayley. Let me show you how to use this thing. Doesn’t it look real?”

I could tell it was expensive, and I must admit, it felt good to get some of my looks back with that thing. But I knew Papa’s excitement was just a sorry mask for his fear for my future. We all knew that no glass eye, no matter how pure, was going to fix me back. No second sight could heal the loss of my first sight.

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Most folks in the country didn’t know nothing about the dark day that was coming. That was when the moon covered the sun making it dark in the middle of the day. I suspect the newspaper in Atlanta was talking about it. But most didn’t get papers that far out back then. John Rufus and Charlie were still as mean as ever even if they played nice to me in front of Mama and Papa. They were plum proud of themselves knocking me down a peg and making me something that Papa had to care for instead of his equal on the farm. Papa tried not to bother me during

those healing days and all that time those boys were just adding on muscle from driving mules and pitching hay that quickly went to their heads. But I knew what to do about that.

I sat in my blankets on the porch waiting for my eye to dry out enough to wear that precious glass eye Papa had paid such a pretty penny for. I watched the sun rise and set, the stars come out and the constellations move just a few inches each night bringing on the change in the seasons. So, the day it happened it was no surprise to me.

Charlie and John Rufus were out planting sweet peas. Mama said sweet peas were nothing more than three messes- a mess to plant in that muddy February soil, The one mess you pick to eat, before the summer sun sings the vines and then it's a mess to clean up the naked hemp tied between bamboo. But Sallie loved to move those little green buttons around her plate and make bird's nests with Mama's taters. Mama said it was good to have something sweet and green in June when everything else was just sprouts coming out of the ground. And if Mama wanted it, Papa made sure we had it. So, every winter he waited until the sunniest day in the almanac to soak the peas overnight and drop them into the ground. This year he had the boys out there doing it.

By then, Mama and Papa had filled our house with young'uns. Sam, Bennie, Lucy, and Gideon had all come out just fine and were growing like stair steps. Mama was about to give birth to my sister Nancy, and Granny Thaxton had told Papa to stay close. By then Granny was getting up in age and had been showing me how to deliver the babies. I got pretty good at it and people around the county would call on me occasionally when Mama wasn't pregnant, which was hardly ever.

On that day though, I knew no baby would be born in our house. So, I decided to lace up my boots and have me some fun with those boys. I found an old army hat among Papa's things to

protect my good eye from the sun and walked out into the field where JR and Charlie were working. The sun was shining brightly, like it knew what was coming. That old moon was about to show just how powerful darkness could be.

I walked up on them using a hoe as a walking stick because I was still getting used to only seeing out of one eye.

“What you want you old cyclops?” Charlie asked.

I just stood there in silence. The sun was coming on brighter and the shadows of the leaves on the edge of the creekbank were starting to fold in opposite of themselves. But those fool boys weren’t paying any attention to the sun or the signs all around them.

“You ain’t to call me no more names, either of you. God knows what you done to me and he will have his day.”

The boys acted like they didn’t hear me and laughed as they kept on working. I glanced at the sun through a piece of a coke bottle I had smoked up in front of the fire. The moon was turning the sun into a thumbnail, its rays dancing out like the devil was standing on it, squeezing all the light out of it.

“I said God knows you boys’ wicked ways, and he won’t rest until you ask forgiveness for what you done.”

About that time the air grew still, and the moon shifted over the sun making a sunset and then total darkness in a matter of seconds. The rooster started crowing, and Black Dog, who had followed me out to the field, started howling like something had a hold of him. The boys stopped their work.

“What the devil?” Charlie asked “Hayley, what did you do?”

JR was the first to fall to his knees. The bag full of seeds hit the dirt and the light green pebbles rolled across the red dirt, just barely visible in the dusk of the day.

“Lord, God, I’m sorry, please forgive what we have done to our sister,” he pleaded to a God he seemed to just now start believing in.

“Please don’t take us, Lord God.” Charlie had joined the chorus by then.

I stood in silence as my brothers pleaded for God, and then me to make the darkness go away. I wished I had Sallie’s crinkled cackle at that moment, but all I could do was laugh the laugh God gave me. Then the moon slipped back to the other side like a peg moving into a wooden hole and the lights of the world came back on. What it revealed were my two yellow brothers with their faces buried in the dirt like they was dogs at a food bowl, hands clasped toward the sky like steeples.

My shadow towered over them with the full sun at my back. I said, “The memory of the just is blessed: but the name of the wicked shall rot.” I spat the last word down at their crumpled-up bodies. “Proverbs 10:7,” and then there was silence.

“Now wipe your dirty faces and come up off your knees. Neither of you will ever forsake me again.”

The boys stood up, first to their knees and gathered their hats in hand before they rose to their feet. “Yes’m,” Charlie said as if he were talking to Mama. JR was still stone-faced as a ghost. I whistled to Black Dog, who had wandered along the creek once the sun came out, and we turned to go back to the house. Those boys never bothered me again after that day. I popped that glass eye in its socket and felt it catch. My eye no longer oozed. When I got back to the house Papa was on the porch with a copy of the *Atlanta Journal* in his hands.

“It appears we survived the dark day,” he said, flipping the paper to where there was a story on the front page about the eclipse.

“Yes, Papa. It appears we did,” I responded.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Ridge Grove, Alabama 1992**

Deirdre and Thadius

Deirdre Buxton was busy praying, something she did whether there was a need to or not. Today there was a need. Her only child, Thadius, was having another spell of bronchitis he couldn't shake. From the next room, she could hear his chest heaving up and down, laboring with each breath, pain from his lungs burning and the muscles around them tight and sore from the work of expelling whatever it was that had taken hold of her child's wind. Deirdre could feel the pressure of his pain running through her own body. Six-year-old Thadius sounded like their old spotted mutt, Hunter, when a prowler came up in the yard. Only Hunter had been in the

backyard wagging his tail and eating leftover grits from an old cast iron skillet. All Thadius's friends were in school. He would get this way during cold weather, ever since he was a toddler. Doctors said it was likely genetic, it could be asthma, but the tests had all been negative. Thadius lay under the electric blanket sweating with chills pulsing and shivering through his ribcage as the coughing fits came on stronger.

Deirdre wished for the more soothing sounds of Royce's pulpwood truck engine sputtering as it eased out of the driveway and picked up speed on the highway. She longed to see young Thadius run up to the truck as it turned in for home, hanging from the big rearview mirror with his feet barely touching the running board and riding into the yard. Royce's elbow hanging out of the window as if he could grab the boy in an instant, were he to slip. Those sounds meant the family would have money that week and her son was a healthy boy able to run around carefree, as he did when the cold air didn't claw down into his windpipe and put him into bed like an old man.

Deirdre went to take the blankets off the line. Her parents would be over soon to check on the boy and seeing the quilts hanging in the sun would worry them that Thadius was worse. They would see it as a sign that she was trying to air out whatever bacteria and germs were festering his condition. She gave the antibiotics as usual, and like usual, they helped up to a point. Soon, she would have to make the decision to take him to the hospital, which meant they would go further into debt. No health insurance meant the ER wouldn't turn him away, but the bills that came later were their own crippling affliction. Her pride kept her from sharing these financial troubles with her parents. The couple had lived on her Daddy's land ever since Deirdre got pregnant and had to drop out of junior college. It was God's ironic joke that Deirdre was given a sickly child, when she had planned to become a nurse. Something her parents had never really

gotten over. So, Deirdre avoided giving them any excuse to highlight the couple's shortcomings. Of course, Thadius's arrival had softened the situation. The way they doted over their grandson made a person think they let the family live on the land out of love instead of necessity. Deirdre took Isaac's love for her son by proxy as if it were meant for her. Thadius held the balance between the two generations.

The small two-seater S10 pickup truck bounced up the driveway in an almost trot. When it came to a halt, the doors opened halfway as Dorothy and Isaac Higgins argued over who would carry what of the items they had packed for their ailing grandson. Dorothy climbed the front steps with a Tupperware bowl of vegetable soup and corn bread wrapped in tin foil while Isaac carried an old humidifier and some Vicks Mentholatum.

"How's that boy?" Isaac asked his daughter as he unloaded the supplies in the metallic smelling living room that was cold but for the kerosine heater glowing against the wall. His voice did not reflect the concern Deirdre had for her son, and she tried not to change his tone as she took the food from her mother and received Dorothy's kiss on the cheek.

"Oh, he's rough. But he's our tough cookie." Deirdre replied.

"Is he asleep?" Dorothy asked.

"I found that humidifier in the attic."

"Mama, we already got one," Deirdre said.

"I know, but it won't hurt to have an extra one going." Dorothy replied.

"Too many of them things will make the air too cold for him, Dorothy." Isaac said to his wife with gentleness Deirdre presumed he reserved only for his wife and Thadius.

"Is Royce working today?" Isaac asked Deirdre. She heard the shift in his tone.

"Yes, Daddy" Deirdre said with irritation in his voice. "He works every day."

The trio knew this was not entirely true but the sound of Thadius's coughing broke the tension between them.

"I'll go check him, Deirdre, honey. You sit down," Dorothy said.

Deirdre appreciated her mother stepping in with Thadius but being alone with her father was never a comfortable situation.

Everyone in the Higgins family had gone to college to become something. The only family in the county to do so. Deirdre had heard it all her life. Her aunts were all schoolteachers, and her Mama and Daddy met just before the war as coworkers. No one got rich but they all held steady jobs with benefits. That made Deirdre the black sheep taking up with an older man who was divorced and worked with his hands.

"Thank heavens he didn't have any kids" Aunt Winnie commented when word spread that Royce would be joining the family. Even though it had been the late 1980's, it was still rural Alabama so Deirdre might as well have a Scarlett letter on her chest getting pregnant with such a man.

Deirdre sat in the silence as the two listened to Dorothy's dove like voice comforting Thadius in the other room.

"How's the garden?" Deirdre asked her father, talking soil was always a safe bet between the two.

"Tomatoes need rain." Isaac replied. "Your garden looks good, I see."

"Royce has rigged a water barrel using some screen and an old oil drum he put on the edge of the barn. That's how we've been surviving the drought."

Isaac nodded his head silently. Thadius's coughing started again.

"The boy needs to go to the hospital again, Deirdre," Isaac said.

Deirdre looked down, she knew her father was correct.

“I’ll give it until the morning,” Deirdre replied. She didn’t want to get into the issue of money. She couldn’t bear the sinking feeling in her chest that came when she had to acknowledge any truth about her father’s prediction about a life with Royce.

Dorothy returned from Thadius’s room. “Poor boy, I gave him a peppermint candy to suck on and he seemed to settle.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Deirdre felt her mother’s hand on her shoulder and patted her mother’s touch.

Thadius lay in bed with his eyes closed sucking on the peppermint his grandma had given him. He could hear the adults shuffling outside and knew his grandparents had ridden across the pasture in the truck just to see him. He hoped Grandpa had brought a book to read to him, but he was too tired to listen. He drifted in and out of his dreams as the fever moved through his tiny body. Soon, he heard the door open. He expected to hear his mother or grandma’s familiar movements around his bed. He did not want to be awakened yet again to have his temperature taken.

But when he opened his eyes, the color of the walls of his room had transformed from the dingy white that had been painted before he was born to a soft lavender. Thadius had wanted to be afraid but was too weak and lay still instead. A woman stood at the foot of his bed. A woman who was not his mother or his aunts or Grandma. She had long black hair and alabaster skin. Although back then, his childish speech would later describe her as a pale looking ghost when he told Skeeter about it.

The woman did not speak. She held a tall narrow pitcher, the color of the sun and walked to Thadius’s bedside holding the vessel. The woman removed the covers from Thadius’s narrow

chest, exposing his skin. She then poured a purple liquid from the pitcher straight into his chest. Thadius watched the liquid flow into him as if his heart was an open wound. The woman patted his chest when she was done and kissed his forehead with a peacefulness unlike his mother's nervous hands and cold, wet lips. Thadius fell into a restful sleep for the first time in days.

After her parents left, Deirdre tried to busy herself as much as possible. For the next two hours she scrubbed the baseboards of the small house. Cleaning was a way to relax for Deirdre. Having grown up with a mother who kept a "cleaning schedule," she kept her mother's habits despite everyone else she knew giving way to the trend of letting the house look "lived in." According to Royce, that was just some women's lib nonsense. Deirdre was listening to a Walkman while she worked, knowing that Thadius was asleep. Before she knew it, had gotten lost in the second side of the Judds last album. That song, "Love Can Build a Bridge" got her every time. She couldn't believe the duo had broken up and this would be their last song together.

Suddenly it hit her how much time had passed, and she ripped the headphones from her ears expecting to hear her son crying or the sound of croup coming from his room. Instead, there was silence and Deirdre panicked. She dropped the wet rag to the floor and kicked over the bleach bucket as she ran down the hall and burst into Thadius's room thinking her only son had perished. Thadius lay still on his back, a white disc of peppermint laying by his face with a trail of red dye and drool from his mouth. She held her hand under Thadius's nose and felt the air of his breath as he slept. She laid her hands on his chest and then her ear. The rattle of his chest was only faint.

When Thadius awoke, his mother was standing over him.

"Mama, there was an angel lady in here," he said. "And now I feel better."

“Baby that’s wonderful.” Deirdre said. She wasn’t sure what to make of her little boy’s testimony. Aunt Winnie had told her of healings that were part of her uncle Herman’s Pentecostal beliefs. The rest of the Higgins family were Methodist, and they regularly kidded Winne for marrying a “holy roller.”

Over the next few days and weeks though, Thadius’s lungs cleared, and his breathing became easier.

When Deirdre worked up the courage to tell someone she called on her Aunt Winnie, who lived across from the property in the house her father had grown up in.

“Well, it was a faith healing.” Winne remarked in her matter-of-fact teacher’s tone as she placed her teacup into its saucer. Deirdre was sitting across from her aunt having just described the scene little Thadius had relayed to her.

“But it sounds like he was dreaming, auntie, the boy was pretty feverish” Deirdre said.

“Yes, honey but that’s how the Lord works. Sometimes it’s through others, like the healing touch of a conjurer.” Winnie took a sip, “And sometimes God sends his angels. Thadius was young enough to have his health set right.”

Deirdre took a drink of her iced tea and laughed, “I can’t believe I am having this conversation.” If she hadn’t known her aunt her entire life, she would insist she was talking to a witch doctor. “Conjurer? I haven’t heard that word since that Baptist preacher took over the youth group in high school and forbid the whole community to trick or treat.”

“No honey,” Winnie went on. “This goes way back to the old ways. Certain people of God have the power to touch and pray over a person, and a healing follows. It goes beyond the scripture, beyond the preaching.”

“And what does my daddy have to say about such things?” Deirdre asked, trying to imagine how this woman and her father came from the same household.

“Oh, I expect he believes what he wants to. He certainly wouldn’t condemn the healing of his only grandson,” Winnie responded. “But it doesn’t matter what anyone believes if the boy stays well and doesn’t get sick again.”

“Well, either way, it was a blessing,” Deirdre responded.

Never again did Thadius have bronchial troubles that laid him up like that. Deirdre never mentioned the healing to her parents. She held the event in her heart as an intercession of their own little family to hold fast and survive. Every year, all the way into adulthood, Thadius would feel the tickle of a cough once the chill of the winter rains pierced his oilskin coat, usually after having been out too long working for his neighbor pulling a calf or trying to load a bull for breeding season. Seasonal work to get him through before everybody had sold out to the pipeline. He would feel the familiar swell of barbed air clutching his heart and would pray that the work of the woman in his vision had held to get him through to spring. It always did.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Roosterville, Georgia 1909**

Mary Arrendale

Mayhayley was my older sister by 20 years. She was the one who delivered me. Some might think that meant she was like a mother to me, but the truth is Mayhayley didn't have a maternal bone in her body lest you were an animal, and even then, her only inclination would be to keep you fed.

She had quit teaching at Red Oak School by the time I became a student there, but my older sister Nancy was one of her pupils. Nancy recalls Mayhayley as a prim and well-dressed school mistress who was strict with her own siblings, but kind to the kids who showed up in rags with no books. Aside from her eye, she looked like most other ladies of her time back then. But Sallie was the real looker of the family with blonde ringlets and eyes that lit up when she laughed, making you feel like you were the most marvelous person she had ever seen. But Sallie

was as shy as an earthworm, so Mayhayley did most of the talking for the pair. Still, once Sallie started poking out in her chest it was only a matter of time before the men came courting.

I was just a little girl back then, still playing at Mama's knee. Mayhayley was putting on Mama's best pink gauze dress and my sister Lousie had a little gathering of lilac that she was pinning onto the lapel.

"I don't know what all the fuss is about," Mayhayley griped. "I ain't got no use for no man, Mama. I'm just going for Sallie you know."

But even I could see that her cheeks were all rosy and her eyes were lit up by the color of her dress. She smelled like face powder and perfume.

Louise had put the whole thing together. She was dating a boy named Jack Wright from Rock Mills, over in Alabama, and he was bringing a couple of friends with him to go to the movies in Franklin. Mama had laid out all her finery to help the girls get fixed up as best she could. Mayhayley was plain to begin with, poor thing. But that eye still oozing even with the glass one in the socket was enough to shroud even the most tragic beauty. Folks weren't startled by her looks when she was young. Her debilitation only made her look worse as she got older. The night the group showed up at the house, Mayhayley and Sallie were putting on each other's rouge in the back room, having a regular dress up party getting ready for those boys. I was sitting on the bed watching them giggle. Louise was helping with the finishing touches.

When Jack Wright came pulling up in his surrey to pick them up, he took the steps two at a time, hat in hand. Behind him was a brown-headed boy with big eager eyes named Johnny. Johnny wore overalls and a button-up shirt and was peeking over Jack Wright's shoulder when Mama opened the door. The other boy had darker hair and was named Richland. He had a white

shirt with tan britches that were torn at the bottom. He carried himself behind the others as if he were the real prize of the evening. I heard him speak as he shook Papa's hand,

“Some folks get confused and call me ‘rich man’,” he boasted. “I just tell em’, give me a few years, by God.” He grinned and slapped Papa on the shoulder like they were some sort of equals. Mama nodded and offered them a seat in our living room that she had gussied up enough to resemble a parlor.

It looked and smelled like those boys had split a can of pomade between the three of them. All slicked back and rangy. Louise was seated in the living room by then, waiting as a lady should do. She called for Mayhayley and Sallie to present themselves. When those two entered Sallie was all but shivering from fear of how to act around those boys. Mayhayley stood like a fence post and appeared to size both of them up in an instant, and decided Johnny was the better choice for Sallie. I suppose she thought old “Rich Man” seemed to think a little too highly of himself.

Well, apparently, no one had told those boys there would be two Lancaster girls accompanying them that night. Now, somebody having the sight like Mayhayley was no big thing to older folks back then. They were the folks who mainly came to see my sister in those early years. But to the young folks, a girl with the sight was nothing more than a sorceress they wanted nothing to do with, and most folks looked on such things with fear. Apparently, those boys with Jack Wright knew all about Mayhayley. How she could predict the crops and find an old Granny's eyeglass that had gone missing. I suspect they were curious and wanted to get a look at Mayhayley. But even I could tell, plain as day, when she came out all dressed up and ready for the movies, neither of them had planned on her being part of their night out in town. The air just stood still right there in our little log cabin. The boys' eyes got big and wide. Sallie

was clinging to Mayhayley's dress as if she needed it to stand. They took short, apprehensive steps together like some spooked four-legged monster. For a minute everybody just stared at each other. Even Mama and Papa seemed to not know how to proceed. Richland was taller than Johnny by a good foot, which put him closer to Mayhayley's size. She was a tall girl even back then. His eyes glinted and that musky man smell wafted over the room despite his best efforts at Lye soap. I saw the hairs on Mayhayley's arm lift a bit when he looked her way. Then she pointed at him and smiled.

"This one," Mayhayley said to Sallie, "this one is gone be with me."

Johnny stood bashfully at Richland's side, not daring to do anything to shift the focus to himself. I watched Sallie's grip loosen a bit. About that time, Richland darted his eyes to old Jack Wright and said in the vilest tone I had ever heard a man speak,

"Uh uh. To hell with that."

Then he put his hat back on his head and darted out the front door. It all happened so fast you would have thought he was blown out by the wind. But when I looked through the crack in the door as it was closing shut, I could see he was running fast up the road into the darkness.

Johnny reached his hand out to my sister and said,

"Pleased to meet you Miss Sallie," and Sallie slowly held her shaky hand out to receive him.

Louise was swatting Jack Wright, who was clearly trying not to snicker at what had just happened. Mama put her hand to her chest and looked to Papa for guidance, who seemed dumbfounded by the whole encounter. Papa just shifted in his spot and said,

"Well, you all ought to get on to it," as if what had happened was as everyday as breakfast.

Mayhayley stood frozen. I saw her good eye start to water. I could see the shame that bastard Richland had left on her. She stood there shunned, the lilacs on her lapel drooping from the heat of the room. Sallie let go of Mayhayley's arm and I saw Louise come over and put her arm around her, coaxing her to go with her and Johnny and Jack Wright. Sallie looked back, unsure of what to do without Mayhayley. The lamp oil light flickered in the windowpane, as the foursome disappeared into the night. Mayhayley lifted her hand to her eye and wiped away a tear and then turned in silence to go to the back room to take Mama's rouge from her face.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **Heard County, Georgia 1920**

Mayhayley

One of the first buildings I bought with my own money was that movie theatre in Franklin. Sallie had taken to courtin' that rapsSCALLION Johnny Mitchell and once they married, the two of them had taken off to Texas to be with his kin folk.

Not long after, Papa came to me one afternoon when the leaves were starting to change, and the rain was turning things cold outside.

"Come here girl, I'm going to teach you to read money."

I was contemplating laying the first fire of the season and had no idea what he was talking about.

"I got something I want to show you," He said.

Papa had just come from Franklin and held in his hand a long narrow strip of paper, the color of pine sap, coiled around his palms and arms like a rope he would use to pull one of the

field horses in front of the plow. It smeared his fingers with the fresh black ink of letters and numbers.

He laid the strip along the length of the mantle and then told me to follow his finger as he began to trace it over the groups of figures that were typed out. He explained that these were stocks, pieces of a company that a person could buy and sell and win or lose money. It sounded like gambling to me, which the ladies of Caney Head spoke ill of. Gambling was something sorry men succumbed to and lost a family's entire earnings in cards and cock fights.

But Mama didn't seem to mind that we spent each day on the porch or at the kitchen table reading and studying the stocks and how they trended up and down with the goings on in the world. Papa had his own investments, and we tracked how much profit he held. Papa rarely lost in the market as he and I knew which companies were solid. Before long he was asking me what I thought. I started to observe the world around me through the lens of how a thing became a commodity. A hog ate corn and come fall everybody was looking to fatten their hogs and the price of corn went up. Then in the winter, after hog killing time, corn went down because nobody was buying it. But the price of hay went up because farmers had to get their cows through the winter. Then when the hay went down the price of beef went up.

Suddenly all these things around the farm seemed to be connected through something other than nature and seasons and God. Papa taught me that we were part of a larger machine driven by money, and I could see the entire story being told in how the numbers changed on the capital lettered codes of those pine sap-colored tapes.

I began to observe man and beast and ask questions of those around me as if I were interested. Then I was able to look ahead into what was about to happen. I could see our

country's movement overseas and knew the war coming. It was all connected to money, and I decided that money would be my first and only love.

I got so good at reading the market, folks started to approach Papa, asking if they could come talk to me, get advice, and we'd exchange information. After a while, it was hard for me to know what of my knowledge was supernatural and what was just plain listening to folks around me. Either way, they would talk to me just like I was one of them and I learned that the seat of prominence could be found in the circle of men.

One day a big fancy black car pulled up to our log cabin. A man with a top hat got out. I wondered what on earth a man like that would want with the likes of us. But Papa walked out and shook his hand as proud as you please like it was nothing. Mama came out on the porch carrying a tray of tea in the fancy cups she kept hidden away in the cupboard. The young kids were tumbling all over the grass in the front yard like a bunch of urchins, but Mama and Papa didn't seem to be concerned about them acting right.

Papa introduced him to me as Mr. Horace Bledsoe, the president of Franklin Savings and Loan.

"John, Mrs. Harriett, I come calling to see if I may have a visit with your 'oracle.'"

Turned out this man, who was as old as Papa, was coming to see *me*.

"My customers down at the bank are all nervous about this so-called market crash they all say is coming."

I eyed the brass buttons on his suit coat and the shine of his black loafers against the brown boards where one of the dogs lay gnawing on a ham bone. He smelled of cloves and money.

“Flimflam,” I said. “Everybody is going to be running for their money, though. So, you best be ready to bar the door. It’s going to be a panic.”

Mr. Bledsoe nodded and thanked me and placed a brand-new silver dollar in my hand for my services. I had never seen a coin like this. But I knew what it was, what it was worth to me. I looked at Mr. Bledsoe, shocked.

“Well, what is it child?” Mr. Bledsoe asked. “Do you have an aversion to being paid for your time?” The metal was warm in my palm, and I ran my two fingers over the fresh minted grooved edges. The barb of the thin figure cut out of metal. Papa would make the same amount harvesting a day’s worth of cotton with the boys. I looked at Mama and Papa expecting them to scold me for taking it, but they stood and looked at the scene as if I had just given Mr. Bledsoe a mule from the pasture.

“No sir,” I responded.

I felt like I had just earned a dollar for nothing more than seeing the things I saw. Then, Mr. Bledsoe went on to talk to me about his own personal investments. Something Papa said nobody in the county knew the extent of but would like to know for a lot of reasons. Well, he talked to me like he wanted my advice, and I gave him what I knew.

“Now Ms. Mayhayley, I’m a lawyer in town as well as the bank president. If you ever need anything, you come to see me. I’ll help you look after things.”

When the market did fall, Mr. Bledsoe did better than most and before I knew it people I had never seen before were coming from all over, mostly men looking to hear my thoughts on their investments. I figured if my wisdom was worth the dollar Mr. Bledsoe gave me, well that would be my going rate. I couldn’t believe folks would pay good money for such, but I didn’t turn anyone away. After the panic cleared and the runs on the bank passed, Papa took me to town

for the sole purpose of setting me up a bank account with all my silver dollars. I figured he and Mama would need it for something, but he insisted it was my money.

“You earned it, and now you need to let it grow,” Papa told me.

“Banks are nothing to be afraid of, and neither is having coins to deposit on a regular basis,” Papa went on to say.

Mr. Bledsoe was glad to take my money for deposit and we began a long professional relationship of financial and legal services.

But aside from money I saw other things too. I saw the look a wife had for her husband or smelled the presence of a woman on a man when he didn't have any business with that sort of smell. From there I started to read people the same way I would read money. I could see the invisible ribbons that tied people together like that yellow ticker tape tied together those stock prices. I would hear something from one person and know who they were talking about and use that information to predict what a person in an entirely other town would do.

I made many a rich man in Heard and Coweta County. Soon I began to charge for my time to all my visitors. No longer was I telling people where to find a lost set of boots for free. It would cost them. My techniques matched the frivolity of my clientele. I started reading that palmistry book Sallie and I had stashed under the house with more conviction. If folks wanted magic, I'd give them that. I laid out playing cards, spit in the fire, closed my eyes and moaned. The more spectacle I became, the better.

After I had seen my own future on that evil night in the eyes of that old jackass, Richland, I figured there wasn't nothing worse than what waited for me here in Heard County. I decided to take my talents to travelling around telling fortunes. I never wanted to be tied up with some man anyway. As far as I was concerned, I had no use for them. But I was willing to go along with it

all because that's what women did. I figured I could be a wife, the same as Sallie, and with her close by it wouldn't be so bad. But it's one thing to settle for something you don't really want. It's another thing when you are rejected by some trumped up dream you never wanted in the first place. It hurts so deep it just pushes a hole right through your heart and then all the air rushes out and you feel free. For me, it was thrilling to leave school teaching for the road. Education was a fine profession. I loved setting a decade's worth of Heard County kids on the right track. But I was meant for more than to rule a school room. Seeing the future was the art I was born with.

I took up with an outfit out of Roscoe that was forming a travelling show that moved with the carnival. The Dunnaway family had connections as far away as Arkansas. When the canvas train pulled out of the station, I was on it. With Sallie gone I had no reason to stay in Roosterville, other than to deliver more babies, which I had long grown tired of. First, we went to Atlanta, a town I had visited plenty of times before. But had never seen through the eyes of a grown woman amongst others whom Reverend Harbin would have referred to as "unchurched." They took me to all sort of places I never knew existed- basements with women dancing in nothing more than a few glittered feathers, dance halls filled with nothing but men as each other's partners. They all knew where the speakeasys were, which made no difference to me since stumbling upon liquor in the country wasn't nothing. But to see all these different people gathering. To think such things were going on in the world made my head spin.

In Birmingham we picked up a woman with no right ear and a scar across her cheek. Her name was Ruth Belle, and she claimed she lost her ear in a threshing accident. But she later told me her daddy had gotten drunk and done it to her when he found out she was with child. She said he also made sure the child was no more by the time he was done with her. Her story made my empty eye socket seem almost precious in comparison. The small towns attracted the biggest

crowds. Once the men and women of the carnival created our own free street parade for the locals, it was like a marching advertisement for the grotesque and absurd. The clowns were dressed up, one of them always like Uncle Sam, and it made me wonder just who was imitating who in this world.

Carnival life was the veneer of curiosity caked in days of travelling dust. I kept a trunk of fancy dresses, but not a one of them was ever cleaner than the muddy creeks we crossed in between the towns. I often thought about the woman in the woods on those days and how she had the appearance of glamour and beauty, but I never got close enough to smell her hair and I'm sure if I had it would have been no more pleasant than Papa's hog troughs after a storm. Despite the rough living, I enjoyed the sights of other places.

Once we got to Kentucky, my first prophecy from that day in the mercantile in Franklin about Charlie came back to me and I realized it had come true. Except it was he who had gone to the far west to Oklahoma and died, and it would be John Rufus who went out there and brought the body back. I was fetching water from a well outside of Louisville when I looked down into the water and saw Charlie splayed out on his back. He was not calling out to me.

I had to go back home. I boarded the train to Atlanta and walked all the way back to Heard County with the news. My little sister Mary was playing on the floor in the kitchen, while Mama was scalding the pots to put up vegetables. This time, when I came walking up the slatted wood steps, they could hear me coming with the jangling of my bracelets and belts I had taken to wearing as part of my town getup. I don't remember what she said when I told Mama of my vision, but she dropped the pots, and they clanked across the floor with a crash that scared the life out of Mary. Mama ran to get Daddy in the field, and they immediately hitched the wagon and headed out to Franklin to send word to Oklahoma to find Charlie. I knelt beside Mary, who

was stricken, and I decided the best thing I could do was talk to her like she was an adult. So, I just told her.

“Our brother Charlie is dead. I seen it while I was travelling with them carnival folks. I was pulling water from the well outside of Louisville. When I looked down into the water, I saw Charlie’s body lying in the bottom of a quarry pit in Oklahoma. His right leg splayed backwards like a rag doll, his hair flopped over those big blue eyes.”

Mary didn’t remember much about Charlie, so she wasn’t too concerned, and she was still just a child herself. Ever since that time I set him right in the field on the dark day, Charlie had been a good brother to me, so I didn’t speak ill of him. John Rufus brung his body back to Caney Head four months later. The undertaker in Oklahoma had fixed him up real good so he could make the trip. Mama found out that he went missing after a night out in Tulsa. He was running around town with all sorts of green spilling from his pockets, making a show of himself. He got rolled after he got drunk and whoever did it must have tossed him down the quarry. They say he was alive when he fell or got throwed. When they found him, he didn’t have anything on him of value. No wallet, no money. His shoes and belt buckle gone. That’s how we figured it was thieves.

Mama and Nancy and Louise scrubbed our log cabin raw so’s everybody could come see the beautiful boy laid out right there in the living room. About the best I could do at housekeeping was throw some old oranges in the fire. The coffin perched in front of the glowing hot fireplace, because it was winter by the time they got him home. Every girl in Heard County had chased after those blue eyes before he went west looking for work. Even though Charlie had been gone so long, they all showed up with misty eyes and black bonnets as if in their minds they should be taking up the role of widow. Charlie was no longer that scrawny bully who used to

torment me. It was like looking at the corpse of a beautiful, younger, more handsome version of Papa lying in a pine flower box filled with cut blooms that couldn't be planted.

The table in the kitchen was piled high with funeral food and people were jammed in chairs along every wall of the small house. But to me it felt more like they were coming to lay eyes on me since coming back home.

“That’s the one. That’s John and Harriet’s girl. She’s the one’s born with the caul.”

I heard Mrs. Delmar whisper loudly to the woman next to her who I did not recognize. I was grabbing a handful of ham biscuits. They smiled and stared, and it made me feel uneasy at first, being back home having fully inhabited my gifts. But I took my place in the cane back chair Louise had brought up from her house.

I sat alone eating biscuits and sneaking bits to the dogs when no one was looking. With my sister Lucy dead for a few years, and now Charlie, there were only nine of us kids left. Still too many, some might say. I observed Reverend Harbin and Emma, now a mother as I had predicted way back. All the women in the room had lines carved out by time and soil and soap and tears. Every other lap held a different sized youngun’ pawing at its mama’s breast. I noticed that I was the only one there wearing a new dress that I had purchased for the occasion with my earning telling fortunes. But in the eyes of these women, there was no hiding who I was under thick satins and new hats. Leaving Heard County; I had felt like a shiny new penny. But here amongst my own folks, my time away had made me both a phenomenon and nobody special.

Bessie Calhoun was wiping her face with a dingy white kerchief that I knew came from her Mama. The whole family was Holiness from over on Meriweather County. She was older than me by quite a bit but still younger than my parents. I suspect she had been one of the girls with eyes for Charlie at one time.

“Why Ms. Mayhayley,” she spoke all high and sweet as she found an empty seat next to me. “I hear tell you’ve been off a travelling.”

That’s what folks called me going with the carnival. It sounded more respectable. Like I had been visiting relatives in Savannah rather than sleeping in a dirty tent smelling the mules all night in the rain.

“Why yes, Bessie.” I replied, “I have seen the world, I can tell you.”

Bessie scooted closer as if she were about to tell me a secret. “Well, what’s it like?” she asked.

I knew all she wanted was gossip, she could pass on to her Holiness ladies and I wasn’t about to give her none.

“Why, I’ve been consulting with some of the Vanderbilts,” I blurted. “You know they are quite the spiritualist family, and they just adore me!”

The lie flew out of my mouth before I could even get it straight in my head. Bessie’s head flew back in surprise.

“The Vanderbilts! Well, I’ll be”

“Why yes.” I went on, “Cornelius’s son, George Washington Vanderbilt purchased this dress for me as thank you for advising him on some railroad purchases, he was looking at.”

I felt myself grow taller in each detail of my lie. Bessie stared at me in shock. As if whatever she was expecting me to tell her was nothing close to that. Suddenly, my fancy clothes did not feel like garb but a sign of affluence. A sort of capital that moved outside of the currency of my people. We weren’t poor by any means, The Lancasters had long been landed gentry, but one thing I did know from my travels was there was a heap more out there better off than us.

I excused myself and made my way out the back door where it was cold but peaceful. Sallie was sitting quietly reading the *Atlanta Constitution*. Sweet Sallie. She loved like a child even though she was well into being a young woman. Johnny Mitchell had brought her back from Texas. She had been all hell bent on becoming a musician, but we all knew she couldn't play more than a few notes. But Johnny's kinfolk took her in and let her dream, the way family does for Sallie's kind. She came back sharper to the world but to me, she still needed the care of her sister.

"Hayley, lookie here." Sallie's childlike voice piped up. "They's a woman in Atlanta gone make them let her be a lawyer."

I looked at the headline. Sure enough, it read: WOMAN IS REFUSED TO GEORGIA BAR; CASE MAY CAUSE LEGISLATURE TO TAKE ACTION.

I read the entire article aloud as Sallie sat with a big smile on her face, like she found my lost penny. The woman was named Minnie Anderson Hale, and she was from Talladega, Alabama. Not too far up the road from where we were. She had a law degree and was going to fight the legislature to let her take the bar. As I read, I found that I admired Ms. Hale but found myself a little jealous at the same time. A woman lawyer. Why had I not thought of that? With all my knowledge of money and farming and my second sight, why, I would make as fine a lawyer as Ms. Hale. Certainly, better than any man. Being a lawyer would put me in the class of money and property that I had only dreamed of up until then. Everybody needs a lawyer, rich folk, poor folks. Folks look up to lawyers almost like they do a preacher, maybe more if they are in enough trouble. That's when I decided I would enroll in law school. And I'd wear my finest dresses right up to the state capital and talk to the legislators myself if I had to.

That beat being a carnival side show travelling from town to town, gawked at by strangers and then leered at by my own folks. I knew at that moment that I wanted to be taken seriously. I wanted my own people to look at me with fear and awe the same way they looked at pastor Harbin on Sunday, when he got to sputtering and turning red. And no caul, or glass eye, or psychic abilities were going to stand in my way. I would just learn how to make those parts of me useful to those old bats staring me down from across the room inside the house. And the best way to do that was through the men they were tethered to who were all gathered on the porch smoking cigars and talking farming and property.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **Franklin, Georgia 1928**

Horace Bledsoe

They say that when women hit the change of life, they just lose their damn minds. I have no reason to dispute such an observation. In Mayhayley's case she was already there for the most part so when she crossed the threshold, I suppose we should consider ourselves lucky the entirety of Heard County didn't just burst into flames outright.

It didn't help that women in Georgia were getting the right to vote about that same time. I suppose signing up for that voter registration card went straight to her head, because next thing you know, that old gal was filling out the paperwork to run against me for my Georgia State Senate seat!

I met Mayhayley when she was just a girl out on her daddy's farm giving everybody advice. I'm not ashamed to say that I went to see her myself for guidance, both personal and

business. She had a knack for something, whether it was of spiritual origin or not is unknown to me.

When I was bank president, we had a robbery. Some rascals got in and stole \$7,500 and the insurance company had Pinkertons crawling all over everything. I went out to see Mayhayley to see if the robbery was an inside job. If it had been, we wouldn't have gotten our insurance money. That's part of your job as a money man- to stay one step ahead of trouble. Ms. Mayhayley was good at that back in those days. She told me it was some gangsters out of Phenix City, and that I best not get too involved because they were dangerous people. She said the Pinkertons wouldn't find anything, and the insurance would pay us our money, and for me to just leave it alone. I took her advice, and those mobsters were never arrested.

She did well over the years at the log cabin all those Lancasters shared. She charged me a dollar, but I heard that later she added a dime to cover food for her dogs. She taught my kids out at Red Oak school. Mayhayley once told my wife that she must have the patience of a catfish, and my wife didn't know what to make of such a comment. Our eldest son was trying to memorize the states of the confederacy to very little success. But when the time came, both my children were ready for college. Both went on to the law school, following in their daddy's footsteps, I suppose. I figured one of them would take over my senate seat one day, but they both moved off to Savannah.

Heard County has been good to me. I've witnessed a lot of growth in our little community over the years after the Civil War. I fought as Chief of Cavalry out of the Atlanta regiment and came back as bruised as the state of Georgia. But we all rose up through Reconstruction. I built the first bank in the region and worked to get the city of Franklin on the

boat line from West Point so we could increase commerce. I was so beloved, they tapped me to take over our state senate seat when the time came, and I was honored.

My days on the Franklin square always began the same. In my law office my girl Shelby would have coffee for me every morning. I'd make a few calls and stroll over to the courthouse when I wasn't there for court. I'd make the rounds, shaking hands and being seen. After that I'd drop by the jail to get the gossip on who or what had gone sideways the night before. Then I would stop by the post office and pick up my mail and hear about the goings on of the county.

Well, it was on a Monday that I went into the post office and Martha Cooper was just awaiting on me at the window, practically bouncing with news.

"Horace, you know you got a challenger in your senate race this go around?" she asked when I came in. Her voice sounded as if she were on the verge of a giggling fit.

"Well, course I do Martha. My first cousin, Fletch Taylor challenges me every time. It's a little running joke we have in the family. We have a bet..."

"Naw honey, not this time, I'm not talking about your kin." Martha shook her head, and she leaned over the postal partition as she spoke, "Miss Mayhayley done filed her paperwork. She told me so herself. She was just in here fetching herself a voter registration form and she told me that once she got done paying her poll tax, she intended to pay the twenty-five-dollar fee to run for office." Martha was all but red-faced knowing she was the first one to pass such vital information directly to me.

Mayhayley was a respected woman, as was her family. But we all knew she was about half off her rocker most of the time. She'd take these notions to glide into town wearing layers upon layers of mismatched cloth and feathers. She looked like a grown woman who had raided her mama's cedar chest for dress up. She had some sort of connection to another plane that,

when needed, came in handy for some of us. But as a leader and representative of our county? In Atlanta? A woman? That woman? Well, heavens no. No one would consider her for such a task.

“Martha, honey. Listen. Ms. Mayhayley can go spending her money anyway she sees fit, and today it appears that she has taken the notion to throw it up the wild hog’s behind of the Georgia Secretary of State’s Office. That’s all this is. I will call the lieutenant governor this afternoon to tell him you’re welcome for the donation from our county.”

I decided to return to the courthouse to the elections office, to see if what Martha had been huffing about was true. Claude Benson walked to the counter as though he had been waiting for me and slapped down a copy of that weekly rag out of Lagrange, *The Graphic*.

There she was, on the front page of the paper, perched in a wicker chair wearing some get-up layered in lace and bows and buckles, looking at the camera as stern as a man, while leaning atop an American flag draped over the side of the chair. The disrespect given to the stars and stripes in her pose, well she might as well have been nekkid in the photo.

I personally was still more loyal to the South’s stars and bars, my being a veteran of our recent war of northern aggression, so to tell you the truth the old woman could have squatted over that flag and relieved herself for all I cared. But, she would do herself no favors acting with such airs as that. The newspaper editor, a woman, of course, who had been hired by the Cox family and transported from up north was the one who had written the glowing endorsement. Turns out Mayhayley had a “platform,” and they had it laid out there like a corpse. A fifteen-point treatise that I later read, once I got to my office. My girl kept coming into the office to see what I was laughing so hard about. First, the crazy witch wanted the negroes and the whites to go to school together. Next, she wanted the banks to be federalized. She wanted doctors to work for free and I suppose she imagined this was all going to happen on some big rock candy mountain.

A few days later I got a note in my office from Ms. Mayhayley, asking if I would debate her at the next meeting of the farmers' cooperative. I had my girl take the dictation for me,

Dear Ms. Mayhayley,

I would be delighted to debate with you in the presence of the fine farmers and cooperative feed store members of Heard County. I look forward to a spirited discussion involving the issues of the day.

Sincerely,

Horace Bledsoe

*Well, this ought to be a hoot.* I thought to myself and said as much later at my lunch with the courthouse lawyers over at the soda shop. By then, everybody in town was razzing me about my opponent.

“Horace, you better get you a new set of spectacles so’s you can see in the future like that oracle.”

“Horace, you going to make them folks in Atlanta have to put in a women’s privy if you lose?”

It went on and on and I was good natured about it. After all, Ms. Mayhayley was related to most everybody in the county in one way or another. There was no use in being ugly. Even if we all knew the old woman was as crazy as a shit house rat, that’s not how we are around here. We are a kind and compassionate people, and I intended to keep it that way.

In the weeks that followed, Ms. Mayhayley hired herself a convertible automobile out of Newnan to drive her feathered behind around the square while she waved and smiled as if she were the homecoming queen of a high school for haints. Folks came out to see her for the spectacle and I’m not convinced that wasn’t her main motivation to begin with. Mayhayley loved the attention. She fed on it really. People act like she was the only old woman who ever lived in the woods and told fortunes. Well, I’m here to tell you, they were them kind all over rural

Georgia back then. The difference between them and Mayhayley was, she wanted to be known. She wanted to be notorious. How else could she be explained?

So, on the evening of our debate, I knew what I was dealing with. I let her prance around doing her show-pony routine. She spoke of her ridiculous platform and how her family was a pillar of the community. I watched her very kin roll their eyes and fan themselves when that subject came up. The whole community was humoring her. When it came time for me to respond, I stood tall and crisp in my business suit and stated,

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, I can honestly say that I have never had a more entertaining opponent in my political career in in any courtroom than this young lady across from me.”

The crowd let out a muffled nervous laugh. No one was sure how to act in front of a person openly confronting the oracle. I went on.

“Now Ms. Lancaster is correct in saying that she comes from a good family, and I can say that I have a great deal of friendship with her and her people. But folks, the state house in Atlanta ain’t a place to be entertained.”

Mayhayley interrupted me from behind her podium.

“Them damn fools tripping over their two-faced tongues is the best show I’ve ever seen.”

The crowd roared with laughter. *Well, I’ll be*, I thought. That old bat is making them laugh *at me*. She’s making a mockery of *me*, the father of this town. How dare she? I smoothed my lapel and held my hand up to the crowd as if to silence a rowdy room of Sunday school students.

“Ladies and gentleman, please...”

I began to grow red in the face waiting for the crowd to simmer down. Mayhayley began

to poke her tongue out at the crowd, mimicking her version of one of those two-faced monkeys she had just described, implying she was standing next to one of them on the podium. The crowd started up again.

“Our elections are not a circus!” I proclaimed in a fiery voice. “And anyone who votes for this witch don’t deserve a voice in our sacred legislative branch.”

By then, the crowd’s roars had overtaken my voice, and it didn’t matter how ridiculous I sounded, and I know I sounded ridiculous. For the next six weeks before the election I was taunted everywhere I went.

“Horace, you best watch your step there. You know how you politicians can’t seem to walk any straighter than you do business.”

“Horace, it was so cold yesterday they say you had your hand in your own pocket for a change.”

These were all, of course, friends of mine. But none of them would dare taunt me in such a way before Mayhayley had done it at our debate. They all intended to vote for me, and they did. In the end, it was a landslide. I won by 364 votes and Mayhayley got 35. That’s about half the folks in the county who are related to her. So, in the end, even her own kin didn’t support her shenanigans.

So, when this whole John Wallace trial came about, I was the least surprised of anybody that Mayhayley took every opportunity she could to put herself in the spotlight. It always came back to attention for her. I have no doubt that John Wallace killed that boy who worked for him. Plenty of folks out at the tourist camp, some of whom are my friends, saw the beating that boy took at Wallace and his buddies’ hands. I also have no doubt that the boy was asking for it. You don’t go stealing cows from the biggest landowner in the county and expect to be left alone. I’m

sure for Mayhayley it was nothing different than any other visit, when Wallace came asking her about whether the law would find that body. Hell, knowing Mayhayley, she told him to move that body just to mess with the old bastard. Mayhayley had her own code of justice. It was one of the things I admired about her. She not only saw the future, but she saw things in her own way. It wasn't all crazy notions she had.

Well, when Wallace got put on trial for murdering that boy, it was all the talk, being that he owned most of Coweta County, otherwise known as "the kingdom." The law had gathered evidence, including the two colored boys that moved the body for Wallace after Mayhayley told him it would be found in the well he left it in. They had been put in protective custody in solitary confinement a few counties over, for their own safety. As hidden away as they were, Mayhayley was the exact opposite. She glided through the town square all dressed up, shaking hands and reading palms like she was the mistress of ceremonies for the circus that had taken over Heard County.

Folks were in town from as far away as Athens and Birmingham. Word was, there was even a reporter from the New York Times, but if he was ever really around, I never saw him.

I was on the second floor of the courthouse in one of the judge's chambers that wasn't part of the trial. All the other cases got pushed once Wallace went on trial. The spectacle was too much to try and get any other business done. I watched the old woman standing tall and grand, the woman who had been the girl I went out to Roosterville to seek council on my investments once upon a time. That young girl had told me about the bank panic of 1926 and our bank was one of the few who had enough cash on hand to stay open. As a young woman, Mayhayley advised me to leave the thieves alone who had robbed the bank and she was correct, they never tried that again. For all I know, they were customers of hers and she advised them not to come

back. Mayhayley had her hand in about as much as any politician that ever came through these parts, including me. Had she been a beautiful woman, I may have even wanted to take her for a drive. But she was never a man's woman. She was her own person.

One thing she knew well was how to get a man's goat. She got mine as a political opponent, and Wallace was no different. They had Wallace in a holding cell not far from where we were watching the spectacle outside. I could hear him meeting with his attorney the morning of the trial. The attorneys were going over the witness list.

"The prosecution got that witch on their witness list. What the devil you reckon they want with her?" Wallace's lawyer asked.

Wallace snarled and spit before answering,

"Awe hell, don't worry about that bitch. I had her in my pocket for years. We practically kin, she and I. We understand each other."

I found my hackles going up hearing someone speak like that of Ms. Mayhayley. It was true, she could be a pain in the ass. Nobody knew that more than me. But she was like watching a good movie at the picture show on a Sunday afternoon. There wasn't nothing else interesting going on around us, and so we enjoyed being entertained by her. Some of us even learned a few things in the process.

I was in the gaggle of suits that made their way into the courtroom before they let the crowd from outside take seats. They let the local lawyers and city leaders have seats up front. Wallace was sitting in the defendant's chair and the prosecutor, a friend of mine, was seated across from him. Wallace was turned around grinning like a cheshire cat to his friends and family. The murder victim's wife, Mrs. Wilson Turner, sat in what was probably her best dress, holding a baby with two boys about grammar school age beside her. When the judge called

Mayhayley to the stand the doors opened, and you would think some sort of hoochie coochie show was about to commence, with all the plumage and boas she was wearing. To make it worse, she had these bracelets and belts jangling as she walked.

Wallace's attorney rose up and turned around to get a better look at the spectacle coming down the aisle.

"Well here comes Christmas," he shouted in a high-pitched drawl.

Mayhayley looked down at the stubby man in his pin stripes. Her eyes peered over her spectacles the same way she must have looked at my boys when they were misbehaving in her classroom, and replied, "Yes, and there will be no presents for you."

The courtroom howled as folks always did when Mayhayley displayed her wit. Even Wallace was laughing and patting his attorney's shoulder as if the young lawyer shouldn't take it personally.

Once she took the stand and the prosecution began questioning, it was a different story. Wallace presumed that Mayhayley would lie for him on the stand. Instead, she proceeded to answer all the questions truthfully. She detailed how he had been to visit her twice. How the first time he wanted her help finding some lost cows.

Mayhayley spoke eloquently as if she were born for the courtroom.

"He told me he had lost two cows, and I told him that Turner had them over in a pasture in Carrollton."

The prosecutor then asked, "And how did Mr. Wallace respond?"

"He said that he was going to go over and get those cows and if he found Turner, he intended to kill him."

Wallace's grin began to slide down into his lap as he heard Mayhayley speak. She was going to spill all the beans on that rascal. She went on to detail how Wallace returned regarding the dead body of Turner, who he told Mayhayley was stashed away on his property.

"He asked me if that body would ever be located," Mayhayley went on. "I told him yes, they would find it in a well with green flies on it."

The prosecutor proceeded with care. "Now Ms. Mayhayley, what is it your business to know such things?"

"I'm a spiritualist. A reader of palms, some call it," Mayhayley responded.

The prosecutor took her answer as if she had just told the jury she was a schoolteacher. He went on to question her about her conversation with Wallace in which he acknowledged having killed Turner, and hid his body on his property known as "the kingdom."

Once Wallace's defense attorney stood, I saw him approach Mayhayley with the same arrogance I had when I stood to debate with her in our senate campaign. He began by speaking to her as if he were scolding a child,

"Ms. Lancaster, you say you are a spiritualist. Now, what exactly is that?"

Mayhayley replied, "I do not particularly like the way you refer to me sir. I prefer to be called an oracle. You may call me an oracle of the ages."

The defense attorney took the bait. "Oh, well, excuse me ma'am. An oracle, why yes. Perhaps you can educate our jury on the vocation of being an oracle."

He stood as if he expected the jury to laugh. But none of the jurors responded. This was a murder trial after all, of a prominent white man in rural Georgia. No one dared show any reaction for fear of retribution from Wallace's goon squad. Mayhayley may have been a distraction to those of us in the audience, but the jurors were unconcerned with her eccentricity.

“Ms. Lancaster, you described quite a few sights in your testimony. Cows, green flies, dead bodies. Now tell me, ma’am, did you see these things with your own eyes?”

“No,” Mayhayley replied. “I only have one good eye. I see nothing with my own eyes.” The audience ruffled a bit. *She has him, I thought. She’s about to make a fool of him.*

“Yes, well, your good eye, has it seen any of these things you describe?” The defense attorney pushed. He was trying to make her look like Wallace’s accomplice. Seed some doubt in the jury.

“I only know these things. I have not seen them,” Mayhayley responded.

“Ah yes, with your powers as a...what did you call yourself? An oracle?”

“Yes,” Mayhayley responded, as serious as the life that was on trial.

“A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself; but the simple pass on, and are punished. Your client did not hideth himself as I advised him to do. He went over to Carrolton and killed that man.”

Objections flew and the judge gaveled the room back to order. The defense attorney came back,

“So, you just know these things as part of your power as an oracle. Your natural eyes see nothing? Have you another set of eyes somewhere that we don’t know about? Tell me, Ms. Lancaster, you just quoted scripture earlier?”

“Yes, Proverbs 27:12,” Mayhayley replied. “And you objected. Tell me sir, do you regularly object to scripture being quoted in your presence?”

The jurors were perked up listening to Mayhayley spar with the defense attorney.

“So, you knew this man Turner, you knew that Wallace was going to murder him? Correct?” the defense asked.

“No,” Mayhayley replied. “I only heard him say that he was going to do it. I advised him not to.”

“But you knew it was going to happen? Being an oracle and all? You could have prevented this murder, Ms. Lancaster. You see the future! Hell, you could probably tell everybody in this courtroom what’s going to happen to them if you take the notion.”

The defense attorney seemed to have reached a dead end with Mayhayley. But that didn’t stop her from getting in the last word.

“I could tell you. But you may not want to know. You may get what Turner got.”

The room grew silent, and the defense attorney wiped his face with his handkerchief and hesitated before turning to face his client. Wallace was all but fuming in his chair at Mayhayley’s words and his lawyer fumbling around with her on the stand. The judge dismissed the witness and Mayhayley rose with authority and exited her audience. I watched her bustling dress swish as she carried herself with a swagger through the crowd. Were she a man, this extra movement of cloth and accessories would not be seen, only the back-and-forth steps of trousers, and her confidence would be assumed. But for Mayhayley, she wanted you to see that she was a person of fortitude. She wanted to be noticed. She wanted to be seen.

## CHAPTER NINE

### **Lafayette, Alabama, 1938**

Dorothy and Bill

Dorothy pinned her dark hair back as she looked through the reflection of herself in the mica-stained mirror that hung by a solitary wire in her small boarding house room. It was her usual routine for readying for work at the Farm Security Administration. Mrs. Miles could be heard downstairs stirring with the coffee and eggs. The boarding house held no sounds except the old woman working. Dorothy pulled on her worn leather shoes and tiptoed down the stairs for breakfast. She was one of only a few guests who rose early enough to enjoy Mrs. Miles cooking while it was still hot.

It was a cool Alabama morning that met the sidewalk outside the two-story clapboard house. Dorothy had a car, but decided to walk each morning since her work was only a few blocks away. She bought it after graduation from Alabama Polytechnic Institute on credit. She mainly used it to drive to the neighboring town to see her younger sister and give her rides.

The spring flowers were starting to peep up through the sidewalk under Dorothy's footsteps. Her lunch, wrapped in wax paper in a brown paper sack dangled from her hand and she looked more like an overgrown schoolgirl off to catch the bus.

Dorothy was one of two women working in the government office in Chambers County. Roosevelt's picture hung large in the entryway to the otherwise plain office where her co-worker Theodora sat and answered phones.

"Good morning, Dot."

"Good morning, Theo," Dorothy responded. "Guess it's just you and me today."

Theo was a little younger and lived outside of town with her sister and brother-in-law, Sam. She always arrived early to work because she could catch a ride with Sam. It was the last day of the month, the day all the field reports had to be compiled and sent to Washington D.C. Dorothy usually worked in the field with Bill, her male counterpart. The two usually took his car to farms around the county. Bill would meet with the farmers and discuss cattle herd size, grazing, and crop rotation. Dorothy worked with the wives, using her home economics degree to teach food preservation and safety. She liked the work. She had a good enough rapport with the women, but Bill was her key to breaking the ice.

Bill grew up on a farm and had a kind way with the farmers they met. Families were often put at ease by his humble greetings of "how you doin'?" when the two would get out of the car together. He did not come off as a college boy but just a local. After all, he was a Chambers County boy himself, and while his family wasn't prominent enough for him to be known, he made everyone feel as if they should know him. For Dorothy, this was an important quality to have in a work partner. If the men felt comfortable, the women would be more willing to invite her into their homes and kitchens.

On this morning, Dorothy and Bill were not to be out making the rounds and she would be at the office working alongside Theo. Theo had attended secretarial school and worked at the FSA filing paperwork. The other agents, all men, usually took the last day of the month off, but Dorothy came in to help Theo. She knew it was expected of her by her superiors and never questioned it. Besides, the two women got along swell and Dorothy was thankful for female company. The two women worked diligently throughout the morning getting reports ready to send out the county office's data for the month.

At lunchtime, the women ate together in the shade of the young pecan trees outside of the office situated on the town square. Lafayette was the county seat and the only real town that wasn't dominated by the mills. It was still a farmer's town as opposed to the villages that had popped up closer to the river. People still drove in on horse-drawn wagons alongside the few cars on the roads. Dorothy preferred the slow pace. The movie theater was on the other side of the courthouse, and she and Bill were supposed to go there together this weekend. Dorothy dared not utter a word about this to Theo. Dating co-workers was a sure-fire way to lose your job and she didn't want to risk it. But she was pulled from her daydreaming about her clandestine date by Theo's voice.

"I hear Mayhayley is visiting her sister Sallie up in Randolph County. I want to go visit her. Dorothy, why don't you come with me after work today. I don't want to go out there alone. I hear she has a passel of dogs."

Dorothy chewed her sandwich slowly. She did not want to spend her precious afterwork time driving to another county to see an old witch. And that was what Mayhayley was, as far as she and every other God-fearing person knew. She had no use for psychics and anticipated the

entire experience as a wasted dollar and dime, the required payment for a sitting with Mayhayley. And she certainly had no desire to fight off a bunch of dogs in her work clothes.

“What do you want with Mayhayley?” Dorothy asked, hoping she may be able to change her mind.

“Oh, I’m just curious,” Theo replied. “Haven’t you heard how she gives folks the numbers to the bug, and they go off and win a bunch of money? It’d be nice to win some money.”

Dorothy didn’t believe in luck. She knew better than to trust money falling from the sky like Theo. Dorothy’s life began on a farm in north Alabama where her mother and father made a living on the land. But that life ended when her Daddy caught consumption. The night Dorothy found out he was dying; her mother was working a shift as a nurse at the hospital on a different floor. The Birmingham hospital didn’t allow children back to see the patients. But Dorothy’s aunt Jimmie pointed to the light that was her father’s hospital room on the second floor from the outside. It was there, in her dress, that 13-year-old Dorothy hoisted her wiry frame up the big sandstone exterior boulders mortared together and propped herself on the windowsill. The night was cool but not cold and Dorothy’s soft fingers dug into the grainy rock as if they were little shards of salt piercing a wound. It was there Dorothy watched her father’s hallowed body lie in his hospital bed until his labored breath turned to stone. She did not know how long she was there, but she knew it was long enough for her to get through singing the first two verses of his favorite hymn,

“Bringing in the sheaves,

Bringing in the sheaves,

We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.”

She had started singing “Going forth with weeping...” when she saw the color drain from her father’s face.

The Great Depression hit the farmers last in rural Alabama. The furthest people removed from the stock market, who traded in goods rather than coin, were able to last a little longer than the city dwellers. When Dorothy’s father died, her mother had to plan quickly to fend off the creditors. Unfortunately, her plan included marrying a drunk and within a year of her father’s death, the family farm ended up with the bank and Dorothy found herself living and working at the boarding house of the drunk man’s mother in Birmingham.

Dorothy’s luck had come to her in the form of a professor and his wife. They had spotted the teenager at the boarding house and the couple asked Dorothy if she would be willing to move in with them and care for the wife’s aging mother. There was no pay for the job, but they could offer room and board and free tuition to Alabama Polytechnic Institute.

“You know that bug is rigged,” Dorothy protested. “I hear she makes you split your winnings with her. I bet she’s in with some of those Phenix City mobsters. I don’t want any part of that.”

The truth was, Dorothy did not trust money. She had seen the stock market ruin her uncle Denson, a man who never held so much as a stock note in his life. But he had to close his mercantile after the crash hit. No one was buying goods and so he lost his business and then his house. Dorothy had carved out her life on the currency of hard work and persistence. As far as she knew, Mayhayley was a fraud, and Theo was looking for a shortcut.

Theo laughed. “If you saw how this woman lived, you’d know that no mobsters are hanging around. They say she’s as ugly as sin. My sister’s neighbor hit the bug twice after going to see her and nothing bad has happened to him.”

~

Mayhayley rocked on Sallie's porch, surrounded by cotton fields and fading sunlight. It was a much brighter setting from her small ramshackle cabin in the woods with newspapers covering the walls and a line of people out the door. Sallie's husband, Johnnie Mitchell, had brought her to live amongst his people and Sallie was just days away from giving birth to their baby. Mayhayley had known it was a boy since she first read her sister's palm at the log cabin in Roosterville. Sallie's baby would be the last one Mayhayley would deliver.

In the cabin, Mayhayley had visitors round the clock. She would set up next to the fireplace until the early morning light accepting customers. Many came at night so as not to be seen. But daylight filled her yard with nice cars and even nicer dressed folks, curious, or in need of knowing something important. She had become the premier destination for Sunday drives. She would spit in the fireplace as visitors came and went, giving them fortunes with her eyes either open or closed. But on her trips to see Sallie in Alabama, she took to the porch. She liked to watch the sunlight reflect off the cotton bolls that lined the field as far as she could see. The white rows meant it was close to picking time and the farmers would be in town selling at the gin with money in their pockets. Men with folding money made good customers. The pine trees at the edge of the field marked the road, and she could look out and see who was coming up the driveway long before they got there. She had time to decide if she wanted to fool with them or not. She didn't expect to have to see people in these parts, but she was never one to turn down the chance to earn money.

Her trip to be with Sallie in her laboring would include business as well. The monthly sheriff's sale South of here was happening in a week and half and she aimed to be there with

cash in hand. Her dollars and dimes all wadded together in her handkerchief- she wasn't sure how much was there but knew it would be more than enough.

The vision had come when she was walking through the woods of Heard County hunting skunk cabbage along the creek. She saw a pot belly stove, the brass handles corroded down like the nubs of a dead man. It had been thrown down in the hole and landed on its side. The shovels had covered it quickly, leaving a permanent dent in what was already a low-lying piece of land. The spot was marked by a chimney that had crumbled but still stood like a grave marker. The cache of gold coins entombed inside the vessel. Some land owner had tossed it underground to keep his fortune safe from Sherman's men, who never actually made it onto his property before the war ended. The old rebel then died or grew too old to remember he had put it there in the first place. So, there it sat. And she knew that land was coming up to be auctioned off in Lafayette at the tax sale. It was the old homeplace of the McLemore family, a good 18 miles from where she sat as the crow flies. She could see it as plain as the cotton rows pointing the way to the tree line.

Old Man McLemore buried it there when General Beauregard emptied out the Iron Bank in Columbus, just before Sherman's troops pushed into Georgia. He had planned to tell his family about it on his death bed. But a swift kick to the head by his mare had kept the secret buried. Now the land was to be auctioned for taxes as the family was set to move down South with relatives. Of course, she could reveal her vision to the family. But why should she? Besides, they had not sought her council. So, it might as well be her gold. That sort of wealth hoisted upon a widow with boys old enough to marry would only lead to more blood-shed in the end. No, the treasure would remain buried and the mystery of how it got there would too. And Mayhayley would stand guard in her soldier's cap as steward of the past. Subverting the hands of the wicked.

Mayhayley saw the dust rise from the trail of Theo's car misting out her view of the pines and figured they would be looking for her. Mayhayley stood and called for Sallie who was out back dressing a chicken she had just wrung for dumplings later. Johnny was out in the field working. No one was coming to see him, she knew that. Sallie continued with her work unphased. *Word must be out by now*, and soon Sallie's home would have a line out the door of poor and well-dressed folks looking for a leg up on their own fate. Mayhayley reached for the greasy marble in her coat pocket and poked it into the socket of her eye, readying herself for business.

The sun was falling low in the sky and Theo and Dorothy were suddenly timid standing at the edge of Sallie's porch. Mayhayley stood at the top of the stairs which made her tall stature loom even larger over the women.

"I got my table inside" she said, "you got money?"

The women nodded without speaking. They looked at one another before Theo went first up the wood steps and then Dorothy. As they entered the darkened room, Mayhayley motioned to Dorothy. "Have a seat in there," she said, pointing toward the chair in the kitchen. Dorothy wished she had just stayed on the porch. The kitchen was filthy with dirty dishes and cobwebs thick along the walls. Flies swarmed corn and beans sitting in a peck basket on the table. No doubt from someone's garden, maybe Sallie's, maybe another customer. It had clearly been there for a few days and was not fit to eat. Any canning attempted in a kitchen like this would turn rancid from the spores on the surfaces and in the air. There were fewer dogs than expected to greet the women, Dorothy considered that the old witch had left her herd of beasts back home to guard the place in her absence.

Dorothy could hear the muted moan of Mayhayley as she spoke to Theo and then the two women appeared to converse normally. She did not try to hear what was being said. She simply tried not to inhale the offensive odor of dogs and rotted food.

After a few minutes Dorothy heard Theo get up.

“It’s your turn, Dorothy,” Theo’s head came around the corner. “I’ll be out on the porch.”

Dorothy settled into a worn seat in Sallie’s sitting room. It was a bit more welcoming than the neglected kitchen. Dorothy looked at Mayhayley’s dark leather heeled boots and how they were not all the way laced up. She felt self-conscious of her own simple work shoes that she wore each day to the office and to farms around the county. Dorothy knew what poor farmers looked like and these women were not poor. But their neglect of home and hearth, Dorothy found off-putting. Mayhayley asked for Dorothy’s hand and examined her palm gingerly at first. She picked up a ragged pencil, the lead point just a round smooth nub. Dorothy felt it trace across her palm slowly and she thought of Bill’s touch in the dark movie theater they frequented. How they would purchase their tickets separately and then find one another in the dark corner in the back row. His hand would reach for her’s when she got close and guide her to their spot.

“Who is Isaac?” Mayhayley asked out loud.

The question startled Dorothy out of her sweet vision. At first Dorothy wondered if Mayhayley was even speaking to her.

She replied with what she knew, “Why, he’s the son of Abraham.”

“No child,” Mayhayley chastised. “You know a man named Isaac, who is he?”

“I do not know anyone by that name.” Dorothy’s words stumbled from her as if she had done something wrong.

“Well, you will marry a man named Isaac, and the two of you will be very close. You will be together for a long time,” Mayhayley stated, and then laid Dorothy’s hand back to her lap as if returning a baby bird to its nest.

Dorothy thought of the story of the boy taken to the mountaintop by his father and laid out for sacrifice, only to be spared by God as the knife was raised over his heart. Dorothy had heard the story in Sunday school when her Papa was still alive, and they attended the Methodist church as a family along the Sipse River. Those times were a world away and Dorothy felt anger that this filthy woman in this stinking house would bring up such a tender memory, only to remind her of how much she had lost and had to learn on her own. Dorothy knew of no such person with this name and wanted to shout “blasphemy” at the old witch. Not so much that Mayhayley would use the Bible in this way. But Dorothy knew there would be no more security in her life than she felt in that church as a child, taking communion with her family fully intact. She didn’t need to lose a dollar and a dime to know that much.

Mayhayley then reached for some yellow stained notebook pages in a stack next to her chair. She began to write furiously with the chewed-up pencil in handwriting Dorothy could hardly make out.

“These scriptures, look to these as you go through your life. They will guide you. You are going to live a long life. You will see many things. These will help you,” Mayhayley told Dorothy.

Dorothy stuffed the scriptures in her purse once they got back to Theo’s car. It would be several weeks before she saw them again and would promptly toss them in the trash. Dorothy felt shame for having fallen for such a gimmick as Mayhayley. She would never tell anyone,

certainly not Bill, that she had gone on such a foolish trip and the nonsense that she had seen and heard.

~

Bill spent his day off driving out to his mother and daddy's house, in Ridge Grove, on the west side of the county. His daddy's potatoes were looking poorly, and Bill had some leftover fertilizer samples from the USDA man who had visited the office last month. When he pulled into the yard he could hear his sister, Winnie, on the piano in the front room, banging out "Go Tell It on The Mountain," like she was a Baptist preacher's wife. His two younger sisters, Mabel and Mary Charles, were in the yard playing school with some of his daddy's old notebooks he had used for farm records. Neither took notice of their older brother as they were too busy scolding one another.

Bill entered his family home, the one he was born in, and instantly felt his body shift from that of a man directing farmers in the field to his mother's eldest son.

"Isaac, is that you?" Mildred Higgins called from the kitchen.

"Yes, Mama, it's me." He removed his cap and walked across the threshold from his sister's music to the smell of his mama's cooking. No one called him by his middle name except his family. It had started back at Alabama Polytech when he had gone out for the football team. The coach read the incorrect name on the roster, "Bill Higgins," and looked at him to start his drill. Bill had not dared correct the man and so he was known from that day on as Bill. His first was William, so it wasn't too far off. No need to correct folks. Bill had been too short to make the team, despite having practiced his tackles on the family mule all summer before tryouts. But the name had stuck just the same.

“You got some mail today,” Mildred said as she puckered her mouth to kiss her son’s cheek. Her Isaac had never stopped letting her baby him.

“I’ll get it after I eat,” Bill responded.

“It’s from Washington, some government business I suppose,” Mildred said as she stirred the soup beans on the stove next to a cake of corn bread.

“Papa will be in shortly,” Mildred said. Bill knew no one would be eating until the family gathered all together around the oval table his father had hewed from an old mule trough. It sat in the corner of the kitchen, waiting to be set.

“He’s been trying to get that new heifer to take her baby calf. He said if she don’t nurse in the next 12 hours, he’s going to have to get rid of her.”

Bill looked out the back door toward the barn and saw his father under the hayloft in the shadow of the open door wrestling with the head of the new mama cow. He walked out to meet him.

“You try sweet feed yet?” Bill asked his father, without saying hello.

Razmus Higgins looked up from wresting the head of the stubborn heifer about the time her neck snapped up and snorted a trail of snot across Razmus’s overalls.

“Dad-gummit” Razmus said as he tried to hold the heifer still.

Bill’s younger brother Tate peeked around the heifer’s back end, he was trying to line up the calf to the mama’s udder.

“We tried sweet feed. We tried blinding her with a burlap sack. Ain’t nothing working. And that calf is getting more poorly by the hour,” Razmus answered.

“She let you milk her?” Bill asked Tate, who was on the side of the cow most likely to know the answer.

“Yep,” Tate responded, but Daddy said this heifer ain’t worth keeping if she don’t take her calf.”

“Well, he’s right about that.” Bill responded, scratching his brother’s freckled head. Tate was all of thirteen years old but knew the ways of the farm the same as a man. Bill had visited grown men who didn’t know as much as his little brother. The three men left the heifer and her depleted calf long enough to take nourishment of their own. The sun was starting to get high in the sky and the Alabama heat was beating down despite not being summer yet.

At the table, the girls chattered like partridges about coming and going at the Ridge Grove school, where they were all students. Bill listened to the gossip of the neighboring families told through the eyes of the children on the playground and smiled.

“I got fertilizer for the potatoes,” Bill announced to his daddy, and proceeded to explain how it was mixed and what it was supposed to do. “It’s a new compound they came up with out of Washington DC. They sent some feller to Africa to study soils, and he claims this will help with root rot.”

“Hell,” Rasmus muttered under his breath lest he get a scolding from Mildred. “What does some man in Warshington know about my potatoes, and what is there in Africa to learn about how to grow them any better?”

Tate laughed and Bill silently agreed. While his job was the blessing that had helped the family keep the farm after the depression, he had seen the government throw away plenty of money in the name of research.

“Well, it won’t kill em’, so we might as well try it out.” Bill responded.

After lunch he helped his father with the new fertilizer and tried, along with Tate to work with that heifer a bit more. The calf got a belly full of the Mama’s milk, but that dance wasn’t

going to sustain itself through the winter and Tate was already talking about how much beef the scrawny heifer would yield if they butchered her in the coming week.

Bill watched the sun shift over the dogwoods and knew he was going to have to call it quits early. He was to meet Dorothy at the movie and then hopefully go for an evening drive. His mind had been on her as he smelled the dogwoods that were close to blooms. He knew she had been cooped up in the office alone today and he had missed having her by his side. He hadn't mentioned her to his family yet, since it was against code for them to date, and he knew his little sisters couldn't keep a secret past the mailbox. He bid his family goodbye and grabbed the letter from the table in the front room on his way out. Once he got back to his rooming house that he shared with three of the other agents from work, Bill opened the letter. It was from Washington but not the Department of Agriculture as he had thought. The letter was postmarked by the United States Government Department of Military Affairs. Bill's heart sank. He was glad that his mother had missed this detail.

His roommate, Shep Sanders was at the kitchen table holding a similar letter of his own.

"You too?" Shep asked Isaac.

Isaac read the words on the page.

"I knew the draft was possibility, but could we both be that high up on the list?"

"Yep," Shep replied, "We all got one. Roosevelt is looking to build up the armament in preparation for what's ahead. Young, single men who are already on the government dole are the first ones to get the orders."

Bill cleaned and dressed for his date with Dorothy. He would tell her first. Before anyone else. He pulled his car into the parking space in front of the theater and saw her thin frame leaning against the ticket window, laying down her money and running her hand along the side

of her freshly set hair. She did not see him pull up or know that he was watching her. She was a strong girl who could easily do the work of all three of the men in the office being sent off. Still, he hated the thought of leaving her, just as they were at the crest of their new love. He smoothed his hair down over his forehead and felt the letter folded in his jacket pocket. He waited for her to go inside so he could go and buy his ticket to meet his love, for what would be their last date as a carefree couple in a country without war.

## CHAPTER TEN

### **Ridge Grove, Alabama 2023**

Thadius

The night the plan came together the rain had blown in later than expected and was spitting on the windshield while the wipers ticked it away into the darkness. Thadius knew the road to the Edge property by heart and kept the headlights off. The pipeline crew had parked their equipment next to the chimney. It appeared the site of the homeplace had become a staging area for the excavation that was to begin just up the ridge, opposite where Thadius lived. He had decided to leave Skeeter out of the plan. Skeeter would never be able to keep his mouth shut if they pulled it off, plus Thadius was secretly greedy about not wanting share whatever he found. It was *his* grandfather who told him about it in the first place. All he had to do was hotwire the backhoe and he could work by the moon. That had been the plan, but the cloud cover was

making it darker than expected. The next full moon would fall on a weekend and the Birmingham cousins might be down, not to mention the work on the pipeline would be in full swing by then, and there would likely be 24-hour surveillance.

He had already disabled the game cameras pointed at the property where the chimney stood but kept the lights out just to be safe. At night the Edge place seemed haunted by the old families who had been before. He had learned over the years that it was a man named McLemore who originally owned the place. He had found the deed through research at the courthouse, it had been purchased from the Creek Indians when the treaties were put into effect. His family had their own lineage for essentially stealing what they now called family land. McLemore's wife sold it to the county before it went to Mayhayley. He wondered how Mrs. McLemore's life would have been different had she known what her husband had done for her. Would the McLemore's carried similar prominence as the Higgins family once did? Would there be heirs that grew up alongside Thadius, playmates? Maybe there would be a younger sister who he would have become sweethearts with, and they would have lived in love with their land and people. Instead of his ending up with Shanda and her perpetual dissatisfaction with life.

He had a small headlamp that he turned on once he was in the backhoe cab. Unlike the machines around here, this one did not have the glass busted out from riding the rocky dirt roads on a flatbed. The metal floor was cold and damp all the same. Thadius reached under the gears and felt around the side of the engine block until he felt the solenoid and its big and little posts. He had been cranking machinery this way most of his life. Royce Buxton never had a pulpwood truck to run right as far back as he could remember. The ignition switches were always busted. The track hoes that would be coming later in the week would have their own key tied to a corporate computer at Caterpillar. But these old school diggers were still up for grabs. His boots

were sticking out of the cab, and he felt the rain falling harder on his legs, soaking his jeans.

Thadius pulled his multi-tool from his back pocket and with his light shining through the sliver in the metal plate, guided the tool's clamp as it touched the big post and then came down on the little post together. Once the connection hit, the machine belched alive like a bridge troll.

Thadius jumped in one movement to the seat and began to move the clutch and gears to keep the engine from stalling out. The rain was making thick splatters on the glass and the cloud cover had formed a thick grey carpet of fog. His headlamp reflected off the glass as if he were staring out through the smoke of a forest fire. He lifted the bucket up and over to try and clear his view a little better. It was no use. The back hoe engine sputtered and the rain drops were splattering louder. The red clay was so soft, any digging would just make a slick, compacted mess. Worse, there would be proof that somebody had been there. He had to be smart. Thadius had to hold off for now.

It wouldn't be a complete full moon for three more weeks, but it would be better than this shit show. He lowered the bucket having not even moved the backhoe an inch and climbed down into the rain. The ground was growing muddy and there would be tracks. Thadius pulled a leaf rake from the bed of his truck and dragged it as he walked backwards to his truck. It was the best he could do, but those pipeliners weren't the sharpest tools in the shed, so he figured he would be OK. He could easily explain the tire tracks to his cousins if he had to.

Shanda was asleep and didn't hear him come in, nor had she heard him leave. He had met her at the door with her favorite jug of Carlo Rossi wine and told her it was a surprise. The two had drunk until she was tipsy enough to turn in early. He thought he may need to have sex with her, since that was often how it went with the jug of wine, but she wasn't in the mood for any of that. There was a pawn shop on the other side of Atlanta near Kennesaw Mountain that dealt in

civil war memorabilia. He had found it on the internet, it was called “The Rebel Shop,” and sported more rebel flags hanging from its front porch than the entirety of what Thadius sees in Chambers County in a week. The owner was controversial for being on the Georgia Sex Offender Registry and a more liberal paper out of Atlanta referred to him as a white supremacist. None of this appealed to Thadius on a personal level, but the guy sounded just enough outside of the law to know where to direct Thadius on converting his gold to a currency he could use. He probably wouldn’t get the best price that way, but it would minimize how long the coins were in his possession. He hadn’t spoken with the man directly, but had been in a few chat rooms and listened to the guy talk to customers enough to figure he was the right one for the job.

Thadius would tell Shanda that he had a job out of town and would come back with the trailer paid off. He may not even tell her at first. He may wait, and see how she treats him when he gets back and then decide whether to let her in on his secret. A man with his land paid off is better than a millionaire. He wanted to show Shanda that he could pull them out of this hole. He wasn’t even doing it for love at this point. He just wanted her to shut the fuck up.

Thadius stripped out of his wet and muddy clothes on the back deck in the rain. He moved through the darkness inside the house to the laundry room where he started a load, hoping the rush of water wouldn’t wake his wife. The next morning Shanda did not notice the load in the washing machine.

Three weeks later the moon came back around and lit up the night sky for Thadius to return. He had been watching the almanac and the weather. The pipeline crew would be moving in with RVs and more equipment to start the work in a few days. The morning before Thadius’s next attempt to dig up the gold, he walked the property on the pretense of checking the game cameras. There had been two RVs move in on the other side of the pipeline’s path, down in a

valley below the ridgetop that would become the corridor of crude oil from Oklahoma to Pensacola. Thadius crossed the tree-lined fence on foot. The rutted cow path was grown over, but he still knew the way. He saw his initials carved in an old tree that he and Skeeter had claimed as their own to build a treehouse as kids. The structure never made it past a few scraps of boards nailed into the trunk for a ladder to the lowest limb. As he climbed the hill up to the homeplace, the sandstone chimney's form took shape starting from the highest point in his view and with each of Thadius's steps, gradually came into view down where a mantle had once stood. Once Thadius became level with the site, he saw the clod of red dirt off to the right. The hill was at least four feet high. It had not been there a few weeks ago. Thadius paused to take in the newly formed hill and then took off in a sprint toward the scene. There was a dip in the earth next to the red dirt that Thadius didn't see until he was on top of it. He jerked his feet back, his speed almost had him running right down into the grave like opening. Boot prints were scattered around the soft wet earth. There had been more than one and they had used shovels. The cuts were rough and got narrow at the bottom, like when he was a kid and had tried to dig a well.

He took a step toward the edge and felt the earth give way beneath him. He slid down the slick red clay with a thud. The motion felt like something of a child and if he were not a full-grown man, would have immediately climbed back out and done it again just for fun. The bottom of the pit had a cave like opening to the side. He felt the hollow inside, brittle rusted shards cut his fingers and when he pulled his hand out, he held the oxidized pieces of metal, breaking like the dirt itself. Thadius felt the top of the hollowed-out space again. It had to be the stove buried in the side of the earth. He was so far down, and it was too narrow for him to bend down and look inside. As he felt around further, something furry but lifeless brushed his hand. He grabbed it and pulled out a dead skunk. It was still fresh. Somebody had placed the carcass there. Thadius

jumped at the red and white matted fur, the stink sack hanging from the entrails. He slammed the dead animal against the side of the hole. “Fuck,” he shouted as it slid down next to his feet. He felt around some more but there was nothing in the stove but red metallic smelling mud. Thadius clawed his way up out of the ground and inspected the boot prints more thoroughly. He recognized Skeeter’s Chippewa boots first, followed by a few larger feet he didn’t recognize. Then the smaller, narrow set appeared to circle the perimeter. The same size as Shanda’s. Keds. He read the perfect marking of the letters in the soil.

Each step sunk deeper by her heft, although it appeared that she had not moved much during the excavation. He wondered if she had stood patiently by and watched or hurried the thieves along with her impatient nagging.

When he got back to the house she was gone, but not to work. The Dollar General employees looked at him with the usual dull indifference when he went in to see if she had shown up. No note, no car anywhere. Her timecard at work was the last real evidence of her existence outside of the footprints. He hadn’t told her about any of it, but it was clear Skeeter had. Who knows how long it had been going on? He could find out all the details if he ever ventured inside to the Dollar General again. They would be talking about this shit for years. Instead, he went back home to feed the dogs. He stopped at the Quick Sak though and bought a couple of cases of beer. He would drink them one by one, making a pile of crushed red and white aluminum cans next to his perch on the deck. While he waited for the car from the bank to pull up and stamp the foreclosure note onto the door.

## EPILOGUE

### **Heard County, Georgia**

May 20, 1955

Mayhayley

The soil turns easy, still wet from the winter rain. Hands on wood, sifting red over black, over red. A lukewarm breeze picks up the stray hairs that have fallen from my pins, like the stroke of a lover. The rhythm of the soil keeps time with the warble of the waterthrush that are nesting along the creek. I've been working these rows since my Papa first broke soil here. Land that Grandpa Lewis gave to him when he married Mama. On this day, the furrows sit plowed and ready for corn, but I will not live to see their silk tassels. Yet I work at the hoe anyway.

This knowing comes to me as I return to the house and see my milk cow, lying on her side. She's bloated with all four legs outstretched, her eyes still open. When I passed by her a few hours ago to work in the field she was fine. She stood motionless, aside from the side-to-side of her mouth crushing cud. Now she is frozen in place, waiting on the flies to drink from her wet, plum sized eyeballs. I look into them, and I know the prophecy is mine. This one doesn't come

from the stars or the spiritual realm, but from the kingdom of heaven. They are the voices of those before me, telling me what's to come.

I started losing weight shortly after I moved to my new house. The family said Sallie and I could no longer live in the log cabin after the last robbery. This last bunch decided that the money they stole wasn't enough and beat us both. Poor Sallie took it the hardest. She had experienced the love of a man's hand and to feel anything but that was a shock. For me, I knew the violence men's fists could elicit. I have the glass eye to prove it. But these men were powerful, and overtook us in ways that went beyond what I had suffered with my brothers. My sister Mary insisted on taking us in after that. Well, everybody knows that Sallie and I have our ways, and we didn't aim to change any of them just because we were guests in the home of our own flesh and blood. So that didn't last long.

That's when I decided to build this new house up at the crossroads. I kept my fields where they were, and walked to tend them each day. The day we moved in, a band out of Alabama came over to play on my front porch as a housewarming present. As usual, it made the papers. After they electrocuted John Wallace, I couldn't piss off the porch without it making the paper. I became such a celebrity, I even got to meet Johnny and June Carter Cash when they came down to make a movie about me. Folks seemed to treat me better too. I became an elder and I suppose I enjoyed it. I have become too slow to cause a scene and besides, there's not many more ways to shock folks around here anymore.

So, after I see that milk cow dead, I know what's coming. In the beginning, when I was a young girl, the visions came fast, and I would grow tired directly after. Nowadays, the visions come slower, and they are talking more to me than through me. On this day, I grow tired like when I would have a line of folks out the door of my cabin. I take to bed and lie down. My

visitors still come, but not in the droves they once did. Mainly because folks don't want to hear the truth like they used to. If a man darkens my door with his wife on his arm and I can look at him and tell he's running around on her, I'll tell him right there in front of his wife that he needs to quit that carrying on. Folks' ought to treat each other better. And I have no qualms telling them so, but in this day and time, meanness is more entertaining than goodness.

The early summer sun is blowing cool air into the house. The summer equinox is a little over a month away so there's at least one more blackberry winter upon us just yet. Folks are starting to come to the house and sit bedside with me, my sisters, the preacher and his pretty wife who only got slightly less so with age. Poor Sallie is crying out and wringing her hands. I'm glad she has little Johnnie to look after her. I try to speak but all I can do is feel the blood running through the capillaries of my face, trying to set my mouth to talking. But I won't speak another word.

Sweet Sallie is taking it the hardest. The rest of them vultures who call me kin are just perched waiting for me to leave this body so they can pilfer through my money and land for themselves. Well, I showed them. That lawyer in town who thinks he runs things, the one who used to be the bank president and who I ran against for the sport of it, he made me an airtight will giving it all to Sallie and little Johnnie. Not a one of them knows anything about it. But I spec they will in a few days after they all line up around my grave and talk about me in ways they never would when I was walking among them. They won't mention how they tried to get me declared insane a few years ago. They wanted my money then, but the judge was one of my pupils at the Red Oak School and he did a quick examination along with some psychiatrist he knew, and they could see what was going on.

I only wish I could be crossing over in the log cabin. It was a solid home, but it was falling down around me from the moment I was born. Eventually, somebody came along and burned it down. For all I know, it was the very kin sitting with me now. Folks love to find ways to make their elders dependent on them in the end, especially when they think there is something in it for them.

Everywhere I ever went led me back to the log cabin, soil worked by three generations of Lancasters. It's the only place where anything of mine has been able to take root and stay. Like any home, I got my own bad memories too. But it's too late to tarry on such things now.

Sallie is crawling into bed with me, and I can feel her frail body wrap around mine. We're like two twigs placed in a nest by a Mama robin. Her arm is under my neck, and she is crying and praying into my chest. She won't be far behind me, and life for her will be abysmal until then. The family will get to her like they never could when I was around to protect her. She'll die in the asylum in Milledgeville. I wish I could take her with me. That's the only thing holding breath in my body, not being able to let Sallie go.

I hear Granny Thaxton and Mama telling me I did good with my life. Papa telling me he's proud. I suppose old Wallace is burning in hell and too preoccupied to tell me much at all. That's just as well. I don't regret helping the police with that or any other case. Folks seemed to think that I knew them so well that they had to reveal the worst of themselves in my presence, lest I call them out for the devils they were. So, I became confessional for some. But I saw to it they got what was theirs in the end. I was just an old woman who could see and feel things and pass them along. What knowledge I gained came from here on the earthly plane and from places outside of us all.

I hear my customers old and new, congregating on the front porch. Every so often I hear the hinges of the door creak open and my sister Mary's voice.

"You folks need to hush up and git on home, this is a family matter."

They all want to see me one more time, tell me thank you, ask me for help one last time. For some of them I am leaving when they need me most. Women with babies whose husbands took off. Men who have been cheated out of their money for being foolish. Well, as far as I can tell, they were lucky to have me for as long as they did. It's time for folks to start taking care of each other now. I will return to the soil from which I came. Everything will be dust in a few years. Unless they bury me with my glass eye.

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## APPENDICES

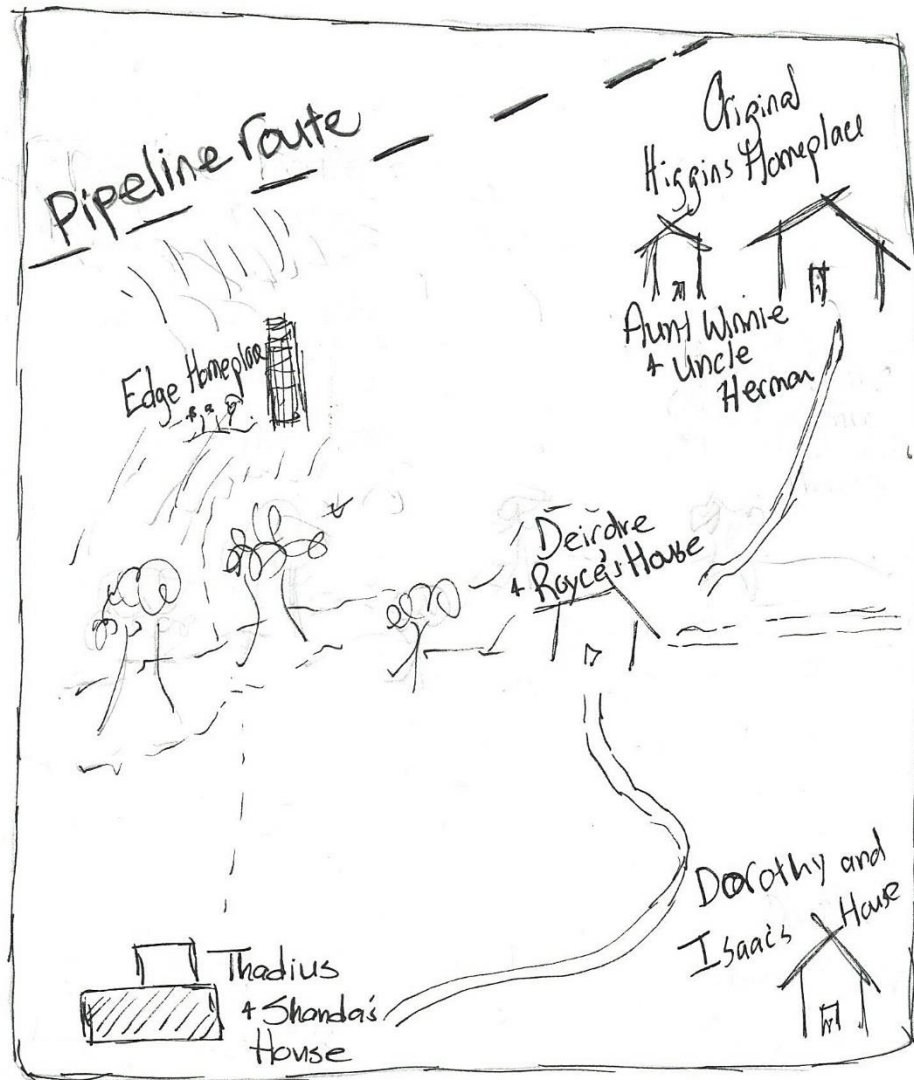
## APPENDIX A



Photograph of Mayhayley Lancaster

Source: Heard County Historical Society

APPENDIX B



Map of

Higgins

Family Property  
Rendered by the author

APPENDIX C



Map of West Georgia and West Alabama

Rendered by Gabe Bennett