Prologue

*November 1942*

The news that June’s grandfather was being evicted had

come from her older sister Mary, who worked in town at Langham’s Drug Store. She rushed past June, who was read­ing a schoolbook in the living room, to find their mother Rose in the kitchen. “Mama, I got a telephone call at work today.”

“A telephone call? Who on earth was calling you?”

June put down her geometry book and twisted around in her chair. Her mother was peeling potatoes at the sink. Mary stood beside her, acting all tall and important like she had ever since she finished school and got a job in town. “A man from the Army.”

Rose put down her knife. “What does the Army want with you?”

“He was looking for you, Mama. He was calling about Grandfather Foster.”

Rose’s face tightened. “I don’t understand . . .”

“The Army is buying his house. He has to leave in two weeks; he has no choice.”

“The house in Bear Creek Valley?”

Mary nodded. “The man couldn’t tell me what they need it for, except it’s to help win the war. He’d been to see Grand­father but said the poor old man didn’t understand when he tried to explain what was happening.” Mary’s tone softened. “The Army man said he kept saying it was 1924. Grand­father must be losing his mind.”

Rose let out a loud breath. “I suppose we have to go get him, don’t we?”

“He said we should make arrangements.”

Rose turned from her daughter and gripped the counter in front of her. “June!” she cried out, without looking up. “Go fetch your daddy!”

June leapt off the chair and ran out the front door toward the barn. She was a loose-limbed sixteen, still more girl than woman, and young enough to run from place to place. Her brown hair wrapped around her long neck as she sprinted through the field, white skirt whipping at her legs.

She’d always known her mother hated her grandfather, though the reasons had never been fully explained. Her mother hardly ever spoke about her life before meeting June’s father. The one thing June was certain of was that her grandfather Jericho was a drunk. She’d heard enough whispers between her parents and seen enough of Jericho himself to be sure of it. Jericho never had been what a grandfather was supposed to be, and they’d only ever been to visit him four times. He had a long beard and always wore overalls, living alone with his dogs in the tiny dirt-floor cabin where Rose had grown up. The dogs had snapped at June when she was little, and her grandfather did nothing to stop them. He didn’t talk to her or her sister much, and when he did, he was surly and serious, as though they’d done something to make him angry. Rose told them he didn’t like children, but he didn’t seem to treat her parents much better. Rose was tense around him and unsmil­ing; June’s father Frank strained to make conversation.

June heard her mother tell her father about the phone call in hushed tones, her arms crossed and head bent under the burden of the news. Frank took it in slowly. “Reckon we can make a room for him in the attic.”

“Where are we supposed to get a bed for him?” Rose pro­tested.

“We can load up the furniture from the house in Bear Creek Valley and bring it over here.”

“And what are you going to load it onto? Your back?!”

Mary spoke up then, and June realized she was the only one not invited to the conversation. “The Army man said if we could find a truck to borrow, he’d give us the ration stamps for gas.”

Frank cleared his throat. “Reckon Hank Lawson could loan me his truck.”

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June Jumped as soon as she heard the engine of the truck grumbling in the driveway the next morning, and Rose looked up, too. “Go on, then,” she said to June, who turned and ran to the front of the house.

She’d only ever been in a car a handful of times before, when her uncle came to visit and took them out for drives. She walked to the passenger-side door and peered inside. “Better



put on your sweater,” said Frank. “Gets cold in there with that broke window.”

The truck rumbled as her father put it in gear. June sat up straight and tall, peering down at the ground through the broken window. They began to move, and she felt a small thrill. As they headed out of the hollow, Ronnie Lawson ran out to the road and waved. His round cheeks were flushed and his dusty curls flopped in the air as he ran beside the truck. She waved back at him as they passed.

June looked up toward the sky. The leaves were mostly gone from the trees, but a few brilliant reds and yellows stood out against the bleak November landscape. As they picked up speed, a cold wind whizzed through the broken window, and June shoved her hands under her legs to keep them warm.

Frank was silent. After a while, June turned to him. “What do you think it will be like having Granddaddy around?”

“We’ll manage all right. Just one more mouth to feed. He probably don’t eat too much, though.”

“What about Mama?”

“She’ll get used to it.”

“What do you think the government needs Granddaddy’s land for?”

“Hank said he’d heard they were building a demolition range.”

“What’s that?”

“For trying out weapons, I reckon. Practicing.”

June shivered. It didn’t seem right that the Army could take a man’s house from him. She supposed they must need the land for a good reason, wartime and all, but it didn’t seem fair to force people to take in crazy old grandfathers.

They had to drive through Knoxville to cross over the Tennessee River. June was always impressed by the city, small as it was. The tall buildings, movie theater, and department store might as well have been in New York or Chicago for all she knew. Women in fancy hats walked alongside men in dapper suits, and everyone looked rich and busy and alive, like they were on their way to do something important. Not like back home, where there were no buildings or people, just familiar trees and country and cows. By the time they got to Bear Creek Valley, June’s feet were numb with cold. Frank parked at the bottom of the hill, and they looked up at Jericho’s tiny cabin. It was so different from their two-story farmhouse that she could hardly imagine her mother growing up here. Jericho’s hounds appeared on the porch, barking loudly. June’s frozen feet thudded on the ground as she hopped out of the truck, sending a shiver up her legs. She followed her father up the hill and stood behind him on the porch as he knocked on the door. “Jericho! You in there?”

The old man opened the door and peered out at them. His overalls were covered in dark stains, and his beard went halfway down his chest. “What you want?”

“Jericho, it’s me, Frank.” The old man stared blankly. “Rose’s husband.”

“Rose?” Jericho looked skeptical. “Rose who?”

“Your daughter.”

“What’d she go and marry you for? You look like a darned fool.”

“You know me, Jericho. You’ve known me for years.”

“Ain’t never seed you before in my life. But you might as well come on in, if you like.” He opened the door wide for them.

A dank smell assaulted June as she walked through the doors. The dogs ran in after them, still barking intermit­tently. It was dark inside, but she could make out the outlines of a few pieces of homemade furniture—a table and chairs, a rocking chair in the corner. There was a brown jug on the table beside a jar of pickles, a guitar lying against the wall. A fire was burning, and June went to it, eager to warm her feet.

“Jericho, we’ve come here to help you move. You’re going to come live with us and Rose. We don’t have much time, so we need to pack up whatever you want to bring with you.”

“What you talking about?! I ain’t moving nowhere.”

“You have no choice. The Army is evicting you from your land.”

“I don’t give a goddamn about the Army!”

Startled by the profanity, June turned from the fire. Frank put his hand on Jericho’s shoulder. “I’m sorry about this. I know it’s not what you want. But we’re going to help you.”

The old man stared up at Frank distrustfully, but he didn’t move his hand. “June, why don’t you start collecting your granddaddy’s things?”

She didn’t want to move away from the fire and, to be honest, was scared of looking too closely at the interior of the cabin. Luckily, Jericho didn’t own much. She began by tak­ing down a few pictures on the wall beside the fireplace. One was a cross-stitch sampler her grandmother must’ve made before she died. “Cleanliness is next to Godliness,” it pro­claimed, though the thick layer of dust covering the frame mocked the sentiment. Beside it were two photographs. One showed Jericho when he was younger, though not much dif­ferent in appearance. He was wearing a with a darker but just-as-long beard, standing in front of the cabin. She wondered if they were the same overalls he was wear­ing today. The other photograph was a formal portrait of her grandmother, who looked stern in a black dress with the high collar of a long-ago era. June took the pictures down care­fully. The walls behind them were covered in old newspapers. Bits of ancient news and advertisements peeled off in her hands: “President Coolidge announces . . .” “Harmon’s soda for a delicious . . .” “. . . destroyed by floods.”

Frank cleared his throat. “I’m going down to the truck to bring up some feed sacks and egg crates for packing.”

She shot her father a panicked look, terrified to be left alone with the old man. But Frank paid her no mind and went out the door. Jericho stayed seated at the table, a dog curled at his feet. He bent over to speak to it. “We gonna go hunting later, girl. Catch ourselves that fox we saw yesterday.”

A few minutes later, she heard an extra set of footsteps join her father’s over the porch. Frank came in carrying the crates, followed by another man in work pants and boots. “June, this is Leonard McMahon. He lives up the road here.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Mr. McMahon. “How you doing, Jericho?”

“Why won’t you’uns leave me and my dogs be?”

“We’re helping you pack,” said Frank, in a patient tone not unlike the one he’d had to use with Rose last night. He turned to June. “Here, you can load up everything looks worth saving in this here crate.”

She took the crate and began stacking the pictures. Mr. McMahon stayed and helped them pack up Jericho’s few motley possessions. The old man watched them suspiciously but didn’t make a fuss. They were able to pack up the house quickly. After Frank and Mr. McMahon had carried the wardrobe, rocking chair, and table down to the truck, they sat on the porch to take a break. June brought them water from the springhouse in two cups she’d found in the kitchen and given a quick scrub. “Your family got somewhere to go?” Frank asked Mr. McMahon. “We’ll be staying with my sister for the time being. She lives about fifteen miles from here.” Mr. McMahon shook his head slowly. “You know it weren’t ten years ago we got kicked off our land when they built Norris Dam. Government man came around that time, too, and told us they were fixing to buy our house and we had no choice but to move. My old farm is at the bottom of Norris Lake now. At least TVA gave us some time, helped us move. This time round, we find a sign tacked in our yard telling us we got two weeks to move. How’s a person to find a new piece of land in two weeks? What am I supposed to do with my cattle or the hay in the barn? And the Army ain’t paying half of what the place is worth. The timber alone is worth more than they done give us for the whole farm! So many folks round here been kicked off their land that property prices in Anderson County have shot up, and we can’t afford nothing.” McMahon spat emphatically on the ground. “I just don’t know what Mr. Roosevelt wants from me. I done sent two of my boys off to fight his war and now he has to take my farm from me, too! You a farmer, Mr. Walker, so you understand.”

“You work a piece a land for years, the government can’t put no price on that.”

“For men like us, our land is everything.”

“We’re mighty thankful to you for helping us today—and for getting the news to us.” “That were my wife’s doing. Luckything I weren’t in the house when that Army feller came back asking about Mr. Foster’s family. I’d warned him not to step on my property again—and it is still my property for another week.” He fin­ished off his water in a big gulp and stared out toward Pine Ridge, where the sun was beginning to set. “It’s a good valley,” he said, his voice soft. No one spoke for a long moment as the light began to fade.