

Prologue

Jacksonville, Florida, 1975

The day I tried to fix Mama started out like all the other days since Daddy died. In the morning I had a mother who was broken, but by nightfall I'd made things so much worse, she wouldn't even look at me. The fact that I did it for her own good made no difference. There are some wrongs that can't be made right, some mistakes that *sorry* can't make up for.

Why did I do what I did? I thought I had no choice.

I was fifteen, too old to sleep in the same bed with my mother, but in those first days after Daddy passed away, Mama needed someone to hold on to at night. I didn't mind, really, because it helped her get some rest. Sleep is a healing thing, and I wished I'd had more of it myself, but with my mother acting like she wanted to be in the cold ground more than she wanted to stay with me, slumber had a way of hovering just out of reach.

That night, Uncle Travis had just taken Suzie away and I had already crawled under the covers on what used to be Mama's side of the bed when she came in wearing her gingham nightgown, her wet hair wrapped in a towel. The tart-sweet smell of Dippity Doo filled the room as she sat on the side of the bed that used to be Daddy's and curled her hair. Mama was thirty-eight and still slim, but looked older by the light of the lamp on her nightstand. Grief added lines to her face; lack of sleep and frequent headaches traced dark circles under her eyes. I didn't have to glance past her into the mirror to know how much I looked like her, dark circles and all, though my hair, which I'd finally let grow from a pixie into a shag, was blonder than hers, and I had my daddy's dark brown eyes rather than her blue ones.

It felt nice to watch her work the icy green gel along each mousy-brown strand and secure them with bobby pins she drew from the quiver of pins held between her pursed lips. The tidy brown X's the pins made were like old times, because she hadn't curled her hair since the funeral. The bobby pins in her mouth kept her from talking, and that was fine with me. With the last hair slicked down and tamed, she wrapped her head with a pink satin scarf, to keep the goop off the pillow.

Mama shook a nerve pill from the plastic bottle on her dresser into her palm, then tossed it into her mouth and swallowed, without water. She padded to the bureau across the room and opened a drawer. I knew what she lifted out by the way she cradled them in her arms – the pale blue cotton pajamas my daddy wore when he went to the hospital to die. She sat down on the bed again and turned out the lamp, but by the streetlight shining through lace curtains, I saw her bury her face in the pajamas' soft folds. She cried without sound.

I put a hand on her shaking shoulder. "It's okay, Mama. I'm here."

She stopped crying, sniffled once, and dabbed at her eyes and nose with one sleeve of the

pajamas. She stuffed them under her pillow and lay down, pulling the white eyelet bedspread up around her, taking my hand in hers. “It will never be okay, Honey.”

I squeezed her hand, squinched my eyes closed, and prayed to no-one in particular for her to go to sleep. After a while, her hand fell slack in mine, and her breathing grew deep and regular. Maybe tonight we’d finally both get a good night’s sleep. The bed seemed to tilt and spin and I felt myself sliding toward slumber.

I thought I was dreaming when I felt Mama swing her legs over the side of the bed. The nightstand drawer slid open with a snick. What was she doing? I peeped out of one half-open eye, and saw her lift something heavy and dark from the drawer. She put it into her lap, and stared at it.

I sat up and whispered, “What are you doing, Mama?”

Her head jerked toward the sound of my voice. Her face was a closed fist. She spoke, as if from far away. “Go to sleep, Honey.”

She put the dark thing back in the drawer, and by the light from the streetlamp I saw that it was my daddy’s pistol, which he’d always kept there in case of burglars.

She banged the drawer shut, lay back down, and closed her eyes. “Good night,” she said, as if nothing had happened. Soon I heard the slow, steady breathing that told me Mama’s pill had kicked in and she was asleep again. I stared wide-eyed at the ceiling.

The faces of Paw Paw, Kat, Suzie, and Daddy all swam in the dark above me. All four, inconceivably, gone. Jimmy, gone too, who knew where, and no help at all.

Mama was all I had left.

Mama, and the memories.

Part One

1970 – *Five Years Earlier*

Chapter One

A bell should ring when something important happens for the last time. Then you'd pay attention, and changes wouldn't sneak up on you. You'd be able to hear them coming. You'd get ready.

I was only ten, and didn't realize it would be our family's last normal weekend. I had my nose buried in J.M. Barrie's book, *Peter Pan*, one Saturday morning when Daddy tip-toed into the den, glancing around the pine-paneled room and back over his shoulder into the kitchen. A bar with a chest-high pass-through separated the two rooms. "Honey," he whispered, "Where's your mama?"

I'm not sweet enough for my name, but Mama and Daddy didn't know that yet when they'd named me Tupelo Honey Lee, a decade earlier. My brother Jimmy is middle-aged now, like me, but had been in first grade and just learning to read back then. He found my first and

middle names on the label of a mason jar in the Waffle House where the three of them had gone to eat dinner on New Year's Eve. I arrived in a great hurry before they could even get home that night, but thirty-four minutes too late to win the big stack of baby products that radio station W-A-P-E awarded the first New Year's infant born in Jacksonville, Florida every year. There were no prizes for second place, as Mama liked to remind me.

"She's gone to the beauty parlor," I said. I was glad that, for once, Mama hadn't made me go with her to the stinky shop where she got her bee-hive hair-do fixed every Saturday. It was hot, noisy, and no fun for a kid who could not yet appreciate the sacrifices necessary to achieve the Southern standard of feminine beauty.

Daddy was short and muscular; his salt-and-pepper hair growing thin; his bald spot widening, but his brown eyes twinkled like a mischievous child's.

"Good!" he bellowed. Daddy reached into the deep left pocket of his khaki fishing pants, where he usually kept his harmonica, and pulled out a fat, shiny nail that looked about half the size of a railroad spike. From his right pocket he pulled a hammer, and with three powerful whacks, drove that nail right into the wooden support post that framed the doorway between the kitchen and den, at about his eye level.

"Mama's gonna pitch a hissy fit!"

Daddy didn't seem concerned at all. "She's pitched them before," he said. He patted his left front pants pocket, then his right, then patted each pocket again, looking perplexed. Reaching into the pocket of his blue T-shirt, he said "Aha!" and pulled out a shiny silver ring as big as my fist. He hung that ring on the nail he'd just pounded into the post.

Daddy turned back to me. "Honey-bunny, close your mouth before something flies in there, and hand me that bucket."

I looked where he was pointing, in the kitchen. “That old mop bucket?”

“That’s the one.”

I put down my book with a sigh, walked over and got the white plastic bucket, then set it down by the doorway where he’d hung the nail and ring.

“What are you doing, Daddy? Making something?” He loved to work with his hands, and could make almost anything he set his mind to.

“This is not just making something,” Daddy said, without a trace of a smile. “This is serious business.” His hand disappeared again into the deep recesses of his fishing-pants pocket, and he pulled out a spool of fishing line, like he used with his rod and reel. Then he showed me a green plastic object shaped like a rocket ship.

“My needle,” he announced.

“That doesn’t look like any old needle I’ve ever seen.”

“Sure is. It’s for sewing holes together.”

Daddy threaded the needle with the almost-invisible fishing line.

He leaned down, rooted around in the empty mop bucket, and scooped up a handful of air, holding it aloft with a satisfied grin-and-wink. “Always start with a nice one,” he said. With a flourish, he used the needle to fasten a loop of line onto the silver ring, tying a smart, tiny knot at each end of the loop. He tugged the line with one finger, and, sure enough, he’d sewn a “hole” to the base of the ring. He lifted me up by my waist so I could tug the line with my finger. Yep. He’d really done it.

“What are you making, Daddy?” I tried again, as he set me down with a grunt. I was small for my age, but still, I was no longer a baby.

He grinned. “Not sure. Might turn out to be something; might turn out to be nothing at all.

Just have to wait and see.” Then he reached into that bucket and scooped out another hole. “Oh, yeah,” he said, measuring its heft. “That’s a keeper.”

He’d hooked me by then. After all these years, I don’t recall how long it took Daddy to sew all those holes together, or even how many holes that old mop-bucket held, but I do know that in no time at all I had pulled the footstool up close beside him, *Peter Pan* forgotten, and soon I was dipping into the bucket myself, hefting holes.

Daddy said it was easier on his back if I picked the holes out and handed them to him. A couple of times he scowled and made me throw a rotten hole out the door into the back yard. He was so disgusted by one that he took it into the bathroom and flushed it right down the john.

By the time Mama got home, looking spiffy and smelling of Aqua-Net hair-spray, I’d forgotten about the big nail. But Mama always could find the cloud in any rainbow.

“James Lee, I Suwannee, this is why I can’t have anything nice.” Mama wouldn’t say ‘I swear,’ even when you knew that’s what she meant. She said swearing was a slippery slope leading straight to You-Know-Where. “What in the world do you think you’re doing?”

Daddy dropped the needle, letting it dangle on the line while he grabbed Mama around the waist and kissed her on the mouth, three loud smacks.

“Welcome home, Yellow Rose of Texas,” he said, as if she’d just fed him a spoonful of sugar. “M-m-m, you look good enough to eat.” I noticed he didn’t answer her question.

She pulled out of his arms, trying hard not to smile, and turned her attention to me. “I don’t suppose you thought to tell him to stop nailing up the place.”

I spread my arms and tried to look innocent. “There’s no talking to him,” I said, shaking my head. I’d heard her say that to my aunts, about Daddy, lots of times.

This time there was a definite twinkle in her eye as she made a *hmph* sound and stomped

off to put her purse in her room. I grinned, because there was nothing I liked more than making Mama smile. I wanted more than anything for her to like me, even though most of the time I was sure she didn't.

Daddy and I didn't laugh as loud after Mama got home. She didn't care for a lot of noise inside the house. But we still worked quietly on his mysterious project.

As Daddy added row after row of lacy fishing-line loops, Mama joined us in the den. She settled in at her sewing machine in the corner, with its view of Bass River, finishing up a new judo gi for Jimmy.

When that was done, she folded up the thick, heavy white fabric and set it aside.

"Honey, stop fooling around with that empty bucket and bring me your mending," she said.

I ran to my room and scooped up the small pile of drooping skirt hems, split-open jeans knees, and ripped arm-pits that seemed to magically grow on my desk-chair. I loved climbing trees, and my wardrobe suffered for it.

I handed Mama the stack of mending and said, "It's not an empty bucket, Mama; it's just full of holes."

Mama snorted. "Like your daddy's head."

"You say that now, but wait till you see what I'm making," he replied.

I tried to guess what in the world it might be.

"Is it a spiderweb?" I asked, thinking of Charlotte and Wilbur.

He smiled, and shook his head. "Nope."

"A poncho?" I guessed, and he laughed.

"Wouldn't keep you very dry, now, would it?"

“Is it an Indian dream-catcher, like we made out of string at Girl Scouts?”

He shook his head again.

Mama piped up. “Speaking of Girl Scouts, Honey needs to be sewing her new patches on her sash, not wasting time while I do all the mending. She could use the practice; can’t sew two stitches in a row the same size.”

“She’s not wasting time, she’s helping her daddy feed the family,” Daddy said.

Unless we were going to eat air sandwiches, his answer didn’t make any sense to me, but I was glad he wasn’t letting Mama make me sew, an activity she encouraged, but I hated. I liked to do things I was good at, like the three R’s: reading, writing, and roller-skating.

“Mama, I’m going to be a newspaper reporter like Lois Lane when I grow up, so why do I need to learn to sew?” I asked.

“Yeah, and your brother’s going to take the pictures, I know, I know. But who do you think sews Superman’s britches when he rips them fighting Lex Luthor?” she asked.

Daddy laughed. “I reckon he patches them up himself with his X-ray vision.”

“Spider-Man could spin some thread,” I added.

Mama made a few remarks under her breath, but she didn’t make me stop helping Daddy, so I stayed where I was and wondered why she always seemed to want to put me to work on something else whenever Daddy and I were having fun.

I didn’t have any more good guesses about what he was making, and Daddy wasn’t telling, so I worked real hard on my patience, and as the sun began to set over Bass River at the bottom of our hill, he took the hole-blanket down off the nail and held it up over his head by the silver ring.

“Stretch it out and let’s see how big it is, Honey,” he said. The sewn-together holes fell in

poofy folds from Daddy's outstretched arm all the way down to the floor.

Jimmy arrived home from his part-time job at the gas station, and came into the den to look, too, while I stood on the bottom loops to stretch Daddy's creation out tighter.

"Looks like Lady Godiva's wedding gown," said Jimmy, and we all laughed.

"Good guess," Daddy said. "He figured it out." He winked at me to let me know he was joking. Then he announced that his creation was "long enough," and reached back down into his bottomless pockets, pulling out small round silver weights he sewed onto the "hem" to pull the loops open.

Jimmy watched Daddy work, but wouldn't take another guess; he was sixteen and just wanted to look cool behind his mop of brown bangs. Anyway, I got the feeling he and Mama knew what the danged thing was and were just helping Daddy pull my leg. That happened a lot when you were the youngest in the family.

After Daddy finished sewing the weights on, he looped a long, slender rope through the top, and the four of us trooped into the back yard.

"Now I can practice," Daddy said.

I had reached the limit of my endurance for mystery. I didn't know whether to get mad, cry, or crawl between the stacked-up cement blocks that held up our house and pout. Under the house was a cool place to go when I needed to let off steam.

"Practice what?" I whined instead.

"Fishing," he said, with a reverence in his voice that I usually only heard when he said the blessing at dinner. "It's a cast net, for catching mullet at the beach."

Of course! I'd seen men fishing with nets before; I just hadn't put two and two together, since we'd started with a bucketful of air.

I thought he might head for Bass River, which ran behind our house, but Daddy tried the net out on our lawn first. He clasped one end of one fold of the mullet net between his teeth, and looped the other folds over his right arm, like a man holding a large baby in an elaborate christening gown. In his left hand, he held the slender rope. Again and again he threw the net, badly at first, but then with mounting grace, until it actually did look like a wedding dress, billowing open in the moonlight onto the grass.

As we watched him gather and throw, gather and throw, I could almost hear the splash of the weights hitting the ocean waves, almost smell the salt-tang of the sea air, almost hear the pitty-pat the mullet would make on the wet sand when he dumped them from the net. I thought how good they would taste when Mama fried them in flour and Crisco. My mouth watered, and I itched to go fishing.

I didn't know the tide was already turning.