

Chapter One

Smoke and Fire, 1950

Etta May woke up coughing, inhaling the black smoke drifting in through her open bedroom window. She had heard voices and engines revving and smelled gasoline fumes, but imagined she was dreaming.

It was no dream. Something was burning.

Tossing back the covers, she scrambled out of bed. Her sisters were awake now, coughing, yelling, and hurrying through the house, searching for the flames. Beside the front door, Etta May jammed her feet into her garden shoes and grabbed a loaded shotgun.

The five single women, four sisters and a widowed sister-in-law, had been sound asleep when they were startled awake by noises and smoke coming through the windows. Disoriented and still wearing their nightgowns, they searched frantically for the fire.

Outside in the front yard, hot flames shot up into the night sky. A wooden cross burned voraciously, yellow tongues of fire lapping too close to pine tree limbs.

“I’ll get the water hose.”

“Don’t put water on the flames. I smell gasoline.”

“Help me get shovels from the barn.”

Afraid the arsonists might be nearby, Etta May yelled and fired two rounds into the air, ready to shoot anything that moved. Nothing stirred in the darkness beyond the fire’s glow.

One sister ran back into the house and called the village fire station, knowing it was futile. She didn’t expect a fire truck to get to the farmhouse in time to help. The telephone operator said she would call the sheriff, too.

Shoveling dirt to smother the blaze, the Robinson sisters sweated side by side. They had helped each other move this Louisiana farm dirt, in one way or another, most of their lives. But they had never used it to squelch the flames of a burning cross.

As they watched the pile of smoldering embers on the charred grass, the exhausted women, their night clothes soiled and sweaty, leaned on their hand tools.

“I hope they catch the fools who did this.”

“Could be that crew out of Morehouse. There’s been talk.”

The sun peeked over the horizon while the fire marshal and sheriff walked the grounds around the house with Etta May, investigating and checking for stray embers.

She yelped but caught herself when she stumbled over a hard object protruding from a patch of tall weeds and dense palmettos.

It was a man’s boot. She screamed when she realized the boot was still on the foot of a dead man lying face down in the brush, blood caked around the bullet holes in his shirt.

The two officials pushed the foliage away and turned the man onto his back.

Etta May gasped and put her hands over her mouth.

She knew the victim.

And she was not sorry to see him dead.

The Interview

Robinson Farm, Louisiana
June 22, 1970

Aunt Etta May: Why did I stay here on the farm? Well . . . lots of reasons. I couldn't leave. There was too much work to do. Hard work. It's all I've ever known.

And I surely wasn't gonna let foolishness scare me away. No ma'am. We had plenty of that, mind you, but I dug my heels into this dirt even deeper whenever I felt the old rougarou lurking nearby. That's what they call 'em down south, but demons are everywhere. They won't scare me.

For eighty some-odd years, I've worried through storms, hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts, and floods. If I'm not thinking about this sticky Louisiana weather, I'm worrying about insects and swamp critters. Well, I call 'em swamp critters. I mean gators, snakes, hogs, black bears. Yes, ma'am, anyone who lives out here is gonna have to know how to shoot guns, just like you did when you lived here, Penny.

We've had more dogs eaten by those dang gators. They come up out of the river whenever they get hungry. That's why I keep Bouncer in the house. I wish the little rascal could be an outside dog, but I'm afraid he'll disappear like the others, bless its heart.

All these years, I've been negotiating with Mother Nature. Sometimes she won, sometimes I won, sometimes we both won. Sometimes we both lost. Truth be told, when it's all said and done, nature's gonna win.

I'm pleased with what we have here. I think Daddy – your grandpa, I mean – would have been satisfied with us, mostly. He's been gone a long time, but I still want to make him proud, just like when I was a little girl.

Sometimes, when I'm holding a dirt clod in my hands, I can feel him and your grandma close by. I can hear the swoosh of their brogans across the green St. Augustine. Gives me goosebumps, I swanee.

No, I wouldn't trade our land or this life for anything. Not even if I was promised I'd never see another mosquito . . . and that's saying a lot. Whenever I've thought about selling out to Linley Farms, or any other big corporate operation, I can see Daddy tsk-tsking and shaking his head. Too much of the family's sweat and pride is mixed into this rich soil.

Pawpaw Robinson used to cup his hand behind his ear like this and say, "Listen . . . hear that sound? That's the dirt a-singin'."

His leathery face would wrinkle into a smile, but I knew what he meant. There's history here worth remembering and passing

along to other generations. This parish, this dirt – with all its heartaches and blessings – is home.

I'll tell you what I've told my sisters and your mama. When my time is done on this earth, I want y'all to put me in the ground right out there beside that old magnolia tree, next to my daddy and his daddy. They were good men. That's where I'll rest.