

A Promise for Tomorrow

Chapter One

It was 2:50 Friday afternoon. In ten more minutes, the bell would ring and we'd be free for summer vacation. I doodled on a piece of notebook paper trying not to squirm, but every little curly-cue I made represented another second toward freedom. Our teacher, Miss Puckett, was in the middle of her farewell address, so I pretended to listen. Actually, I'd become a pretty good pretender during those past nine months. Miss Puckett was so boring.

From the corner of my right eye, I detected a slight movement, and I heard someone in our class said, "What the h___ . . .?"

Since I rarely heard anything more than "gol-ly," I turned to the window by my desk. A round face pressed against the windowpane near me. Nose first. Flat. The eyes set in a wide stare. As I watched, the freak's hand flew up in a wave. Instinctively, I waved back.

"Flea," Miss Puckett called. "Face the front. All of you."

"Who is it?" I heard someone say.

"It's just a curious child. That's all." Miss Puckett had a strange expression on her face. I decided she must be tired of seeing children.

About to obey Miss Puckett's command, I then saw a second figure—a man. He grabbed the waving hand and pulled it down to his side. The man's face appeared strained, like someone trying to open a pill bottle with his teeth. Maybe he was scolding

the child. I couldn't tell. Mesmerized, I watched him twist her arm. The child seemed to stumble and then regain her balance. I think I saw her shudder as she brushed against his overalls.

Miss Puckett's voice again broke into my thoughts, and I belatedly turned to face her. "Gather your supplies, class. The bell is about to ring. Once again, have a good summer. It's been a pleasure having you in fifth grade."

Glancing back to the window, I watched the two figures disappear around the corner of the building.

"My pleasure is to get out of here," Betty muttered. We occupied the two desks closest to the window on the back row. Betty also lived across the street from me. As we scrambled for our books and headed for the door, Betty said, "You wanna race home?"

"No," I said. "It's too hot. You go ahead." I grabbed a wad of hair and held it up from my neck. "Do you have a rubber band so I can make a ponytail?"

"No. Fix it at your house. Say, you're not gonna hang around here, are you?" Betty glanced back to the window.

"Not for long. But I do want to know who they are."

"Oh, you're so nosey. Aren't you hungry?"

"Yeah, I guess but . . ."

"But what?" Betty countered.

"Nothing."

"Well, I'm not gonna hang around school one minute longer than I have to."

As we left the room, my eyes drifted up to the calendar Miss Puckett kept posted by the door. Friday, May 27, 1955. I'd thought this day would never come. Betty scurried down the hall ahead of me but then called back over her shoulder.

"Can you come over later for a snack?"

"Sure."

I watched Betty scoot down the steps and retrieve her bike parked next to mine in the metal frame stationed to the left of the front entrance.

Betty was my best friend, but we were about as different as corn bread and ice cream. She was always in a hurry to get home to her paper dolls or child's embroidery kit. Not me. I liked to take my time, to look for adventure. But, frankly, it was hard to find adventure in Sugar Hill, especially when my dad was the pastor of the Presbyterian Church.

Standing at the top of the steps, my eyes gravitated to the familiar yellow bus parked in the bus lane. As usual, the bus driver's shoulders were slumped toward the steering wheel. Somehow, I sensed he was glad this was his last round. What a boring job, driving 30 elementary and high-school kids back and forth through about 20 miles of Sugar Hill countryside.

Two or three other cars waited to pick up children. I recognized Mrs. Whittaker's Buick. I knew it was Mrs. Whittaker's because they were the only family in Sugar Hill with a Buick. Mr. Whittaker held the top spot with our Fairway Mill Company. No wonder he could drive a Buick. And, wouldn't you know, his daughter, Gloria, had wound up in my fifth grade class right in the middle of the year. They were from Ohio, so

Gloria knew more than the rest of us in the “hick town” of Sugar Hill, Alabama. At least, she thought so.

After the bus pulled away, I noticed an old black pickup truck parked across the street. It appeared empty and lonesome, like something you might see in a junkyard. I wondered if it might belong to the strange man who had jerked the girl away from the window.

Then I remembered how the odd couple had turned toward the side of our building. I decided to run down the steps and take the turn leading to the senior high school. Maybe I’d at least see my brother, Rand, and we could ride home together.

Like an old married couple, our two school buildings somehow managed to hold on to each other by a covered walkway at the lower level. A parking lot for teachers sat in front of the high-school building, but we kids used it for fancy bike riding and skating whenever we had the chance.

When I reached the high school, several of my brother’s friends nodded or waved. Rand’s best friend, Frank, liked to tease, so he called and said, “Hi, Squirt. Lookin’ for Rand? He’s already headed home.”

“No, I’m just lookin’. Did you see a weird man and a little girl come by here?”

“You mean Ole Man Boyd and his daughter?”

“I guess.” I switched my books to the other hip.

“Yeah, I might have seen them earlier. Can’t imagine what they are doing here though.” Frank rolled his eyes. “That girl can’t possibly go to school.”

“Why not?”

“She’s retarded. Haven’t you heard about Mavis?”

“No, not much. I do know a Mr. Boyd who lives out by the lumberyard.” I tossed my head in that general direction. “And everybody knows about his No Trespassing sign.”

“Yeah, right. Mavis is his daughter and she's as crazy as a loon.” Frank wheeled his eyes again, more dramatic this time. “I've heard she stays locked up most of the time. Reckon her dad can't help it since he has to work.”

“No, I s'pose not,” I said.

“Watcha doing down this way?”

“I want to see the girl again. Guess I feel sorry for her.”

“Don't waste your worry. Ain't one thing you can do. Boyd probably dropped by here checking for some extra janitor work or something. Besides, isn't your mama gonna wonder where you are?”

“Maybe. But. . . .”

“Look, go home. Okay?”

“I will in a minute. I hafta go inside to the bathroom.”

Frank gave me a funny grin. I suppose he wondered why I hadn't thought to do that before leaving the elementary school. I just smiled and headed inside.

To tell the truth, I really wanted to stall, to decide what to do next. Somehow, I'd hoped this summer was going to be different from all the others. Maybe Gloria was right. Maybe we did live in a hick town.

When I stepped into the senior high girl's bathroom, my stomach churned at the sight. The whole area looked like a crazy person had come through throwing paper towels and bits of toilet paper everywhere. Who had done it? Mavis crossed my mind, but

one person couldn't create this much damage in a quick trip to the bathroom. This mess seemed like a premeditated attack or maybe a misguided attempt to celebrate the end of school.

Suddenly, I wanted to wash my hands, but at the first sink, a pukey feeling crawled inside my throat at the sight of a large chunk of gooey caramel nestled by the drain. On the mirror above the sink, a large blob of bright pink lipstick formed a grotesque kiss on the glass, blurring the strange dark eyes glaring back at me. In fact, as I studied my image in the mirror, my eyes seemed bloodshot. Maybe it was the lipstick. I frowned at my limp bangs and pale face and decided I'd better get out of there before my lunch came up.

As I stepped outside, the air felt warm and still. Several dark clouds swept across the sky. One cloud hovered over a small pecan grove nearby. Maybe we were in for a storm. The thought of cooling rain cheered me up as I headed back toward the hill.

When I reached the front of the elementary building to get my bike, Mr. Boyd and Mavis were still nowhere in sight, even though the black pickup remained across the street.

Maybe the couple I'd seen wasn't them after all. Maybe the creepy man had kidnapped that little girl and planned to take her who knew where. Right then, I decided to squelch the scary thoughts and go home.

As I rode past the high school and football field, my mind flashed back to Mr. Boyd's No Trespassing sign. I remembered Rand and I riding our bikes down by the lumberyard in the spring. Once we almost crossed his fence, but we chickened out.

When I got even with Corley's cotton field, two things happened. It started to sprinkle, and I was aware of something behind me. I hugged the left side of the road and peddled a little faster. A flash of lightening sliced the sky.

Just then, I saw our dog, Splendid, running toward me. She must have wondered why I wasn't home yet, so she'd come searching for me. The minute she spotted the bike, she hesitated and started wagging her tail. I braked quickly, hoping to tell her to wait. But it didn't happen. She bounded out into the road. I glanced behind me, recognized the pickup just as Splendid crossed, and yelled, "Stop!"

Then I heard the sound of brakes squealing, and I saw a splotch of blue denim overalls as the driver's door flew open.

"Git that flea-bitten dog off the road!" the man yelled, stepping into the rain.

The pickup door blocked my view, and I couldn't see Splendid. Was she okay? I threw my bike into the last thin row of cotton and ran. Half-sitting, half-lying in the middle of the road, Splendid looked limp. I didn't see any blood, and she didn't whimper. Then, as I bent over, her tail thumped the gravel. I prayed the rain would stop.

"Did you hit her?" I yelled over my shoulder, my teeth clenched.

"Naw, I didn't hit the dumb dog, but you'd better git her out of here before I do."

Splendid gazed up at me with such sad eyes. I started to pick her up, but then I heard someone say, "She good dog. I touch her?"

The first thing I saw was scuffed white patent shoes, like the kind I wear on Sundays. But these shoes were dingy and definitely too tight for the thick feet they encased. I kept my hand on Splendid as my eyes traveled up the child's body. I

recognized the dress I'd seen in the window but now it hung on her like an old sheet thrown over a chair. And then her face. Flat nose. Blank eyes. Stringy blond hair.

The rain stopped.

Quickly, I turned back to Splendid because I felt her lick my hand. She carefully staggered to her feet and wagged her tail.

"Are you all right, girl?" Splendid wagged some more. "Are you just scared?"

"Hug her?" the child asked.

"No, Mavis, the dog might have mange." The overalls moved forward toward the child.

"My dog does not have mange." I gave the monster my best stare. "We took her to the doctor for her shots two weeks ago. She is in perfect health."

"Perfect health until she gets killed. You'd better keep her off the road." He grabbed Mavis and pushed her toward the truck. "Get back inside, Mavis."

But Mavis balked, giving Splendid a longing look. "Touch?"

"Yes," I whispered. "You may touch." I met Boyd's eyes as if to say, *Don't you dare try to stop her*. A peculiar odor, or taste, seemed to hang in the air around Mr. Boyd, but I decided it must be my own sour stomach.

Mavis hesitated. Then, like a toddler reaching for an ornament on the Christmas tree, she ran her flat palm across Splendid's head. Splendid must have sensed her need and licked her arm.

"He like me," she said, nodding her head like a rag doll. "I had cat, but he gone."

"Of course he likes you. You are a sweet girl."

"I sweet girl?"

“Yes,” I said, “I’m sure you are.”

“It’s time to go, Mavis.” Boyd adjusted the strap on his overalls and pointed. “Get back in the truck.”

“I go now. Bye, dog.”

On a sudden impulse, Mavis reached down and patted Splendid again, but since Mr. Boyd was already holding the passenger side door open, I don’t think he noticed.

Splendid and I waited on the roadside by my bike as he cranked up. Without looking at me again, he pulled away, and I watched Mavis turn in her seat. I raised my hand at the last minute, and I saw her hand flutter just like it had done outside our fifth grade window.