

Chapter One

When I first met Champion Luckey, I didn't know that he was going to change my life. Maybe you never know when that's going to happen; it's not like something you're expecting. It's more like getting struck by lightning and living to tell about it. 'Course he was the one who got struck first and I did it, but I didn't mean to.

The reason I met him in the first place was because of his aunt, Lily Luther. She's the cook at our boarding house, and pretty much runs everything, including me.

One day, I asked Mama if we paid Lily.

"Of course," she said.

"Not enough," said Lily from the kitchen.

"Well, if she works for us," I whispered, "how come she's the boss of everything?"

"Because she's better at it than I am," said Mama.

On the first day of summer vacation, I slept late, then went downstairs for breakfast. Lily was standing at the

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Roper stove stirring a pot of black-eyed peas and listenin' to Sugar Blues on the radio, her skinny body swaying in time to the music.

“Bout time you showed up, Brother,” she said. “I need you to go to the dairy for buttermilk. The railroad men’ll be here directly, and they’ll be expecting my biscuits.”

I picked up a piece of toast and started buttering it. “Can’t I eat breakfast first?” Lily watched me with her hawk eyes. Her skin’s the color of sourwood honey; not brown and not black. She wore a white flower behind one ear.

“That’s enough butter,” she said.

“This toast is cold, it needs more.”

“Brother Sayre, put the buttered sides against your tongue. It’ll taste fine. If you’d come to breakfast when you’re supposed to, instead of polin’ around wastin’ time, it wouldn’t be cold. Hurry up, now. Get two jars of jelly from the pantry; scuppernong, the kind Mr. Holman likes.”

That meant that I was to go swap something for something else. This time, we were gonna swap jelly for buttermilk at Mr. Holman’s dairy. Swapping stuff was a big thing in Snow Hill, Alabama, in 1937. We were in the Great Depression, although there’s nothing great about it. Songs are written about it and how everybody’s suffering. Mama’s always singing about hard times, railroads, and deportees. Lily just sings the blues.

Seems like hard times happened to everybody. The stock market crashed, so a lot of people lost all their money, then there was a run on the banks and folks that had money

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took it out of the banks. A terrible dust storm out west ruined the crops in the fields, so farmers had to leave their farms and go to California to find work. Some did, some didn't.

Here in Snow Hill, the Mercantile Bank closed, the shirt factory shut down, men got laid off at the saw mill, and some stores had to close 'cause there wasn't any business. About the only real business that was still working was the railroad.

My daddy was the editor and publisher of the town's only newspaper, The Choctaw Herald. And it had to shut down. He explained that since folks couldn't afford to advertise in the paper, he couldn't afford to print it. He also said that a town without a newspaper was a poor town, indeed. After he closed the newspaper office, he left home to look for work. And that's when the worst thing of all happened to our family.

Daddy went to North Carolina to apply for a job at a big paper there. But when he got there, the people who worked for the paper, the journalists, reporters and linotype operators, went on strike against the paper. Well, being a newspaper man, Daddy couldn't cross the picket lines. Then, delivery trucks rolled up and instead of picking up papers, men got out of the trucks and started beating the strikers. That's when Daddy got killed. He was just trying to help, but I guess they got him mixed up with the strikers and somebody hit him in the head with a tire iron. That was two years ago. We all miss him something awful.

We were living in Grandpapa Yeatman's house that he'd

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left to her when he died. Because of the Depression, we didn't have much money, and there weren't many jobs in Snow Hill.

"But we have to make a living," said Mama. "Only I couldn't get a job even if I knew how to do anything."

"Sure you do," I said. "You can cook and sew and work in the garden. You can do lots of things."

"Not that I get paid for," she said. "But thank you anyway. We'll think of something."

She started walking through the house like she was looking for something. I followed her. She went upstairs and into each bedroom. There were five and a little trunk room that belongs to my little sister. Then we went through all the rooms downstairs. And when she finished the tour, Mama had decided what to do.

Grandpapa's house is big, with lots of rooms and pictures and stuff. There's even a picture of him in his black robe hanging over the parlor mantle. "Your grandpapa left me this house to do with as I please. And he'd have wanted us to survive these hard times." So, she decided to open a boarding house for nice people.

Some people in town didn't think she should, since she was the judge's daughter and it didn't look proper. They acted like it was their house, instead of ours. But Mama paid them no mind, she just went about her business. And that's when Lily came to work for us and started to run our lives.

Lily took the pot of peas off the stove and putting her hands on her hips, gave me her hawk look.

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“Brother Sayre,” she said, “stop daydreamin’ and get about your business.”

A railroad calendar hung on the inside of the pantry door. On it was a picture of *The Twentieth Century Limited*, the most beautiful steam engine in the world, rounding a curve of track like she’s riding to glory. Mr. Edwards, who’s one of our boarders and a railroad engineer, had given it to me.

Homemade jellies, preserves, fruits, and vegetables, lined the shelves from top to bottom. We grew most of what we ate. Every season, Mama and Lily put up peaches, tomatoes, apple sauce, beans, and watermelon pickles; and anything else that grew in the garden. I took down two jars of golden scuppernong jelly, and patted the calendar on my way out.

“Lily,” I said, putting the jelly jars into a paper sack, “reckon how long this Depression’s gonna last?”

“Don’t be asking me about the Depression,” she said. “It don’t mean much to me. Don’t mean much to any Negroes. We was born in depression. It only became official when it hit the whites. Now, before you go, run on and see does your mama want anything from town.”

I went upstairs to the sewing room. I heard Mama before I saw her. She was singing about trains, keeping time with her foot on the treadle of the sewing machine. ““This train is bound for glory, this train. . .” *thump*. . . *thump*. . . *thump*. . .”

Mama was mending sheets. She’d split them down the middle where they were worn, turn the outside edges to the

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inside, then make a new seam. Keeping a boarding house takes a lot of sheets.

She looked up when I came in. She was wearing one of Daddy's old shirts and trousers rolled at the ankles. Her curly brown hair was piled on top of her head. "Lily says do you need anything from town?"

"Just the mail," she said. "And I'd like for you to stop by the library. Miss Eulalie has a book for me."

Downstairs, in the shadowy hall, a man's hat hung on the hall tree. It's my daddy's best hat; a dark brown Dunlop felt with a kind of silky hat band. After his funeral, the preacher said I'd have to be the man of the house. That was a joke. I was only ten when Daddy died. But that's when I claimed the hat for my own. It was too big, but I started wearing it anyway, hoping it would make me look older.

That was two years ago. I'm not twelve yet, and I still don't look like the man of any house. I'm skinny, there's a gap between my front teeth, and my hair flops down over my forehead like I'm wearing bangs. I looked in the mirror, tilted the hat the way Daddy had worn it, and went out the front door.

My sister Swan, who's eight, was sitting in the wooden swing with her cat, Shirley Boligee, a calico cat with white fur and splotches the color of orange marmalade.

Twisting a strand of her blonde, curly hair, Swan looked up from reading *MARY POPPINS*. The bridge of her nose was peppered with freckles.

"Where you goin'?"

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“To town, then the dairy,” I said.

“Can I go?”

“No. It’s too far and you’d whine all the way home.”

“Then bring me back a Goo Goo Cluster,” she said, batting her eyelashes like she always does when she wants something.

“I don’t have a nickel for candy,” I said, “I don’t even have a nickel.”

Our house is on Old Post Road, about where town ends and country begins. There’s a white wooden fence around the property. A gravel drive leading up to the side of the house has a cattle gap at the end that makes a rolling sound like thunder when somebody drives over it. I walked down to the front gate and saw that somebody had drawn a picture of a cat on one of the fence posts. I knew what it meant. It’s a hobo sign that means “a kind-hearted woman lives here.”

There’s lots of folks wanderin’ around ’cause they don’t have any homes on account of the depression. Hobos find us because of the marks on the fence posts. Mama said they’re secret maps showing where they can find a meal or work. Sometimes, Lily threatens to scrub off the signs.

“Those folks are gon’ eat us out of house and home,” she said. But the marks stay and the hungry get fed.