

*June 21, 1953*

*Mims, Tennessee*

*Something was wrong. Bad wrong.*

*A rooster tail of scorched yellow earth kicked up as the pickup rounded the corner onto Vernon Dairy Road. I cut my eyes sideways at Mama, rigid behind the wheel, but bit my bottom lip to keep silent. I didn't like the look on her face, like she'd just been told the Rapture was coming and she'd been caught off guard. But mostly, she looked tired. Beneath the streaky traces of last night's powder, her face was pale and strained, her eyes puffy and red, though whether that was to do with tears or drink, I couldn't say.*

*Both, probably.*

*Beside me, Caroline was mute, huddled against the passenger-side armrest, her beloved rag doll, Chessie, clutched to her chest, wide green eyes fixed on some invisible point beyond the cracked windshield. Her hair was snarled from sleep, a coppery halo around her pale young face. We'd barely gotten breakfast down—milk and hunks of leftover corn bread—before Mama shooed us from the table and out of the house.*

*I thought of the battered suitcase bumping around in the back of the truck, then tried not to think about it. I didn't want to remember the way Mama's eyes slid away from mine when I spotted it, or how the sleeve of my sister's blue dress had spilled out from one corner. There was something ominous about that sleeve, something ominous, too, in the way Mama had pressed that old hand-me-down doll into Caroline's hands as she herded us out the door and across the front yard, past the empty plastic swimming pool and the old tire swing Daddy put up the summer he went away for the last time.*

*Mama was quiet behind the wheel, her eyes hard on the road as it ground away beneath the tires, as if she'd made up her mind about something and there was no going back. In her rumpled hat and too-tight dress she looked as threadbare as Caroline's old rag doll, like her stuffing might come loose any minute.*

*Desperation. The word popped into my head without having to reach for it. It was written all over her face, coming off her like last night's bourbon.*

*We'd been driving almost two hours, and I still hadn't scraped up the nerve to ask where we were going. Maybe because I knew I wouldn't like the answer. Or maybe because I couldn't think over the words echoing in my head. Something's wrong. Something's wrong. Not the regular kind of wrong, like when Daddy would disappear for weeks at a time, or Mama would lose another job because she didn't have money to put gas in the truck, but the really bad kind of wrong, like when Sherriff Cady had come to the door to say that Daddy wouldn't be coming back ever. Today felt like that kind of wrong—the kind that changed things forever.*

*A fresh cloud of dust churned up from the road, boiling into the open windows, coating the dashboard with another layer of grit. We were passing an empty field of sun-bleached scrub, an ugly stretch of nothing that made me want to leap from the moving truck and run all the way home. Turn around! I wanted to yell at Mama. Turn around and let's go home. But she didn't. There were tears in her eyes now, and I couldn't bear the sight of Mama's tears.*

*The road narrowed to a single lane as we passed under a peeling wood sign. I had to squint to make out the letters: Mt. Zion Missionary Poor Farm.*

*Poor farm?*

*I shot Caroline a panicked look, but she just kept on staring straight ahead, her green eyes fixed on the narrow swath of dirt road. Either she hadn't seen the sign, or she didn't know what it meant. But I knew.*

*I knew money was tight, and had been for a while. We haven't had milk in weeks, and more nights than not, dinner was nothing but corn bread and collards. But we'd been through rough patches before and Mama always found a way. Sometimes, when she was between jobs, she would bring a man home from the Orchid Lounge. Sometimes he would even stay a few weeks. But there hadn't been any men for a while—or any jobs, either.*

*Up ahead, a big white farmhouse shimmered into view against the hot blue sky. Beyond the house was a small, whitewashed chapel, and beyond that was a scatter of smaller houses and outbuildings, all*

*crisscrossed with a maze of split-rail fences. A handful of men milled about in overalls and dirty boots. A few looked up with dull eyes as the truck rattled up the circular drive and stopped in front of the house.*

*I sat stock-still while Mama climbed down out of the truck, then went around to drag the old suitcase out of the back. If I didn't move, if I didn't get out of the truck, maybe it would all go away. Or maybe if I said a prayer. But there was no time for prayers. Mama was coming around to the passenger side and opening the door. Caroline tumbled out obediently, Chessie dangling limply from the crook of her arm. I had no choice but to scoot across the sticky seat and follow my sister.*

*Mama pointed to the suitcase and then to Caroline, charging me with the care of both while she went inside to see to things. I thought I caught a whiff of bourbon on her breath. Last night's, I remember hoping, though I didn't think so. I watched as Mama mounted the porch steps and disappeared through the screen door with a soft slap. I couldn't say for sure what things she was going to see to, but I had a pretty good idea.*

*Poor farms were for people who couldn't feed themselves or their families, a place where grown-ups and children earned the food in their bellies and the roof over their heads by working in the fields. I had heard of such places, and what folks said about the people who went to them—people willing to take a handout because they were too lazy or too dull-witted to find real work.*

*We would be those people now.*

*I eyed the old suitcase with a sick feeling, wondering how Mama had managed to pack three people's clothes into one small case. The thought filled my head with a low, dull buzz, like a swarm of irate bees, though I couldn't put my finger on why the thought kept nagging at me. It wasn't until I heard the screen door slap again, and looked up into those guilty green eyes—eyes just like mine—that I realized Mama had left the truck running.*