

CHAPTER ONE

THREE CREEKS

“No, Daddy, no! I’m scared...” Was all I got out before the waterwings my grandma had made me out of two one gallon lard buckets and a flour sack went sailing into the bushes one way an’ all I could see in the other direction was sky, trees, water, sky, trees, water...

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I splashed face first to the surface of the murky creek all the way out in the middle of the swimmin' hole. I came to the surface, spittin' an' sputterin'...trying to hold my head above water.

"Put your head down, boy!...Swim to me. Come on...Put your head down...Reach for the bank."

I looked up with water blurin' my vision at my dad standin' up on the clay bank of the local swimmin' hole at Three Creeks, waving me toward him. He was a hard-as-nails, muscular, square-jawed, broad-shouldered man without an ounce of fat on him.

I was to be eight years old in three days, June 18, 1949...if I survived. My daddy was a driller for Shell Oil and we currently lived just outside of a boomtown named Gainesville, Texas, in some former Army barracks. The base where all the drillin' crews lived had been named Camp Howes durin' the war.

The war they called World War II...guess there'd been another one before...had been over almost four years and we had already lived in seven boomtowns in three states, searchin' for oil during the war an' were still at it. I was born six months before Pearl Harbor.

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Daddy tried to enlist in the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, an' even the Coast Guard, but they wouldn't let him, said he had a critical occupation, whatever that is...drillin' for oil for the country's war effort.

But, anyway, every summer, we'd go to my mama's home in southern Arkansas just seven miles north of the Louisiana line off the Haynesville Road. That part of the state was known as the deep piney woods.

I could always tell when we were gettin' close. "Daddy, I can smell pine trees."

'Course you have to understand cars weren't air-conditioned in those days, you had to drive with the windows rolled down...Or if it was cold, you cracked the little triangle window in the corner of the front ones, 'specially when mama or daddy were smokin'.

Grandma an' grandpa lived way out in the country on a dirt road in a ramblin' home they referred to as a dog-run house. They called it that on account it had a twelve-foot wide hall down the middle of the house from the big wrap-around front porch to the screened-in porch at the back. There were bedrooms on each side with fireplaces and

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grandma's kitchen was at the far end of the house on the other side of the big dinin' room.

There wasn't no electricity or runnin' water. Grandma used coal-oil lamps for light, had a big, wide cast iron woodstove to cook on. I can still remember the taste of her hot buttermilk biscuits with fresh churned butter an' sorghum syrup in the mornin's.

She counted on us kids to split wood for her wood box beside the stove when we were there an' give grandpa a break.

They had a good deep drilled well that we got to go draw water from with this long, skinny galvanized well bucket. There was a two-holer outhouse about sixty feet from the back door.

Grandpa was born in 1883 and had retired from the sheriff's department at the end of the war. He was now a truck farmer—everbody called him Big John...Big John Jamison. He was about 6'3" an' weighed around 285...Nobody messed with Big John. He wore blue bib overalls ever day over his longhandle top with the sleeves cut off in the summertime.

Us grand kids had been told he once picked up a bale of cotton on his back and carried it thirty feet

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on a bet. Believe a bale a cotton weighs about five hundred pounds or maybe more. Don't know if that's true or not, but we all believed it.

For such a big man, he was gentle with us kids...was actually afraid to spank us. He'd leave any discipline that had to be dealt out to grandma.

Her name was Mame...well, it was Mary Alice, but he always called her Mame an' she couldn't of weighed a hundred pounds soakin' wet. She would be the one to tear up our butts when we needed it, usually with a peach tree switch we'd have to go cut ourselves.

We'd go to their house when school was out for daddy's vacation cause he liked to go fishin' with mama's brothers an' their kids—our cousins. She had one sister an' four brothers an' there was a real passel of first, second an' third cousins lived fair close.

One brother, Uncle J.B., his wife, aunt Thelma an' my three cousins, lived about a hundred yards down a sandy road from grandma an' grandpa. The others lived eighteen miles away in Eldorado, Arkansas. Mama's sister, Aunt Anna Lee, an' her husband Uncle Ford, lived near Homer, Louisiana with their four kids.

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Daddy an' mama would leave my older brother an' me there for the summer when his two weeks was up an' he had to go back to work—we lived for the summer. Never had to wear shoes, 'ceptin' on Sunday for church.

Like I said, grandma had made me this set of waterwings, on account I couldn't swim yet, for when we'd go down to Three Creeks. It was about two miles from the house.

It was a fairly large area because three creeks came together an' that's where everybody around came to swim...most of them were relatives of some sort. It was also used for baptisms an' was surrounded by big trees an' grapevines an' grandpa had hung a rope swing from one of the oaks that hung out over the water. He would go down there to take a bath...even in the winter.

I think daddy finally got tired of puttin those cans in that flour sack an' figured it was high time I learned how to swim...

"Kick your feet, sunshine! Pull the water to you. Come on...come to me...Kick...Kick."

Don't know if I was more scared of drownin' or of him, but I did what he said—put my head down, kicked my feet and pulled the water to me.

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“Good job, Foot!”

I had been christened Henry Lightfoot Lee after a couple of ancestors on my daddy’s side of the Lee family of Virginia. They said Henry ‘Lighthorse Harry’ Lee was a hero of the American Revolution an’ Francis Lightfoot Lee was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

Somehow between when I was born an’ now my name got shortened to just ‘Foot’...Oh, an’ Lighthorse Harry was Robert E. Lee’s daddy.

I looked up, rubbed the water out of my eyes as he leaned over, grabbed my arm and pulled me up—I made it, but I screamed bloody murder while I was still in the air.

“Hurt you, boy?” He set me down on the bank.

“Daddy, Daddy, I stepped on somebody just ‘fore you pulled me out.”

He knelt down in front of me, glanced over at the murky water then back at me. “What are you talkin’ ‘bout, Foot?...There’s nobody in there.”

“Yes, there was...Honest Injun, Daddy, I stepped on somebody.”

He studied my face for a minute, got to his feet an’ dove headfirst into the creek...He was wearin’ some cut-off jeans for a bathin’ suit just like I was.

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My brother, Bobby, an' cousins...Don an' Hubert, ran up to where I was to watch Daddy as he swam back to the bank an' commenced to feel around with his foot.

Then of a sudden, he dove under the water an' in a couple of seconds he come back to the surface an' had a blonde-headed young girl in his arms.

Her name was Bethany Cade...she was fifteen or thereabouts...everbody knew who she was. There was thirteen or so in the Cade family...nobody knew for sure...an' they all lived in this one shotgun shack over near Jolley's Store. My cousins said they was inbred...whatever that means.

Bethany's head flopped over to the side, with her blonde hair hangin' limply as Daddy waded out of the water with her in his arms...could tell right off she was dead...

Daddy laid her on the top of the bank, turned an' ran to our '39 Ford sedan up on the road, got a towel, brought it back an' covered her face.

"Now you boys stay here, I'm gonna go get your grandpa, he'll know who to contact...an' don't touch her, hear?"

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We all nodded as he ran back up to the loggin' road that went past the swimmin' hole, started ol' Huldy, turned her around an' drove off in a cloud of dust.

Cousin Hubert, he was a year younger'n me asked, "What'd she feel like, Foot?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Kinda mushy an' slick."

He reached his foot toward Bethany's arm.

"Hubert! You heard Uncle Joe."

Don pushed him away from her body. He was about the same age as my brother, Bobby, three years older'n me.

Daddy's name was really Bob but the family all called him Joe, don't know why...happened 'fore I come along.

The sun was settlin' down toward the tops of the trees 'round Three Creeks.

Hubert looked up. "Hope Uncle Joe gets back here with grampaw 'fore it gits dark."

Bobby looked over at him. "Why, what's the big deal?"

"Just don't want to be down here in the bottom with no dead body's all."

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Don turned from starin' down at Bethany. "How come? She's dead."

"Yeah but Mamie..."

Mamie was grandma's colored washer woman who was born on the place an' said her grandma and grandpa was slaves for my great great grandpa, but none of 'em would leave when he freed 'em durin' Lincoln's war...Mamie said they was manumitted, whatever that means. Great great grandpa let 'em all be sharecroppers so's they could make a livin'.

"Well, Mamie says haints come out when it turns dark where somebody's just died...'specially down in the bottoms." Hubert turned an' looked around at the darkening deep woods on all sides of the creek.

Don suddenly grabbed his arm an' yelled, "Boo!"

Hubert nearly jumped out of his skin, turned and whaled on his older brother with both fists. "Dang, you! Don't do that. Ain't fair...I'm gonna tell mama."

Don bent over laughin'. "Shoulda told Uncle Joe to bring back a sugar tit while he was gittin' grampa."

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“You just wait.”

We heard the brakes squeal on daddy’s Ford up to the road an’ in a minute him and grandpa were comin’ down the slope through the woods.

Grandpa walked right up to Bethany’s body, knelt down an’ pulled the towel off. He studied her for a few minutes, turned her head to the right then the left an’ looked up at daddy.

“Been strangled, Joe. See the bruise marks around her neck?”

Daddy leaned over an’ looked where he was pointin’. “Can even see the thumb prints on the front.”

“Uh-huh...Used both hands. Strong man...broke her neck. Heard the bones grind when I turned her head.”

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CHAPTER TWO

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“If you’ll stay with the body an’ keep the varmints away, I’d appreciate it, Joe...An’ you don’t mind, I’ll borrow your car, go to Jolley’s Store, call the coroner’s office an’ the Sheriff an’ give ‘em a report...Take ‘em thirty, forty-five minutes to get out here from town.”

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“Why don’t you take the boys on home while you’re at it, John... ‘Magine Mame has supper ‘bout ready.”

“Can I stay with you, Daddy?”

“Naw, Foot, you need to get on to the house... You’re already cold. Your lips ‘er blue an’ I can see you shakin’.”

“I’ll be awright...’sides, you might need some help.”

Daddy tried to hide a grin. “Well, if I do, Hossfly, guess I’ll muddle through somehow... Now, you go on with your grandpa an’ Bobby, Don, an’ Hubert. Tell your mama I’ll be home directly... Keep some supper warm.”

I looked down at my bare feet with my toes diggin’ in the dirt on the creek bank—arguin’ with daddy was like tryin’ to pee up a rope. “Yessir.” ‘Sides it was gittin’ dark.

Grandpa headed up the path toward the road, Bobby, Don, an’ Hubert had already run ahead of him to the car. I heard Don call shotgun.

I looked at Bethany again. Her thin cotton dress that didn’t cover much was made out of those colored flour sacks with patterns on ‘em an’ was startin’ to dry in the late afternoon heat. Then I

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looked back to daddy. He was just standin' there, his arms folded cross his chest, an' starin' at the water in the creek. I turned an' ran through the darkenin' shadows after the others.

'Bout halfway up the path, I stepped on somethin' round an' softer than a stick. I musta jumped 'bout four feet in the air, let out a yelp an' turned on the speed. Knew in my heart it was a moccasin, but wadn't 'bout to stop to turn around an' see what kind...just ran like my hair was on fire. Been chased by cottonmouths 'fore...They're mean as sin...'specially when you pester 'em.

Jolley's Store was only 'bout two miles from Three Creeks an' was the only place around you could buy anythin' you might need without drivin' all the way into Eldorado. It was kinda what you might call a general store—had one of most everthing.

The owner was Smead Jolley. Grandpa said he was some kinda cousin...'course purnear everybody in this part of Arkansas seemed to be cousins or close to it...heard he had played baseball for the Chicago White Sox.

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The store had been there on the Haynesville Road long as I could remember, which wasn't no real great shakes on account of I was only seven...well, in three days.

Cousin Smead would say when you come in the door, "If I ain't got it, you don't need it."

The lights out front were off when grandpa pulled up an' stopped out front. Don got the front seat with Bobby, Hubert, an' me the back. I sat behind grandpa. I could see a light in the rear of the store—cousin Smead had already closed for the night, I guess, an' must of been in the back countin' his money.

Grandpa climbed the four steps of the stoop to the porch, stepped over old Blue, cousin Smead's coon dog, who wasn't 'bout to move for wood, water or coal, and banged on the side of the screen door with his ham-like fist.

It had one of those metal signs across the front that said *MEADS FINE BREAD* across it—must of been there holdin' the door together 'cause it looked kinda flimsy.

There was a big metal coke ice box with *NEHI* painted on the front next to the door—had a big

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padlock on the lid so's nobody could steal a soda pop durin' the night.

"Smead! Smead! It's John. Need to use the telephone."

He banged a couple more times...thought the door was gonna fall off.

"Smead!"

"Comin', I'm comin'. Keep yer shirt on, Big John...Good goshamighty, tear my door up."

He unlocked the wood door that had glass on the top, then unhooked the screen door so's grandpa could open it. Smead an' grandpa was 'bout same age...guess they grew up together.

"Now, what's all this about, John?"

"Found a body down to Three Creeks...one of the Cade gals. Looked like somebody strangled an' then threw her in the creek. Gotta call Sheriff Wilson an' the coroner to come out."

I could hear him tellin' cousin Smead all this through the open doorway while he strode toward the telephone on the wall behind the counter with the cash register.

"Naw! Really?...Which one of 'em was it?"

Grandpa cranked the handle on the side. "Looked to be Bethany, to me...Mabel, this is Big

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John Jamison, get me the sheriff...No, I mean right now."

"Oh, Lordy, she was Clara's favorite. Gonna kill her."

"Sheriff?...Yeah, this is John. Got a body out to Three Creeks...murdered...Tell you who when you and Ralph get out here. Meet you at Three Creeks...Awright." The receiver made a click when he hung it up.

Smead looked at grandpa when he turned around. "How's come you didn't tell him who it was?"

Grandpa pulled off his battered old fedora and wiped the band inside with his handkerchief an' looked at Smead from under his brows.

"You know anythin' said over that telephone of yours, Mabel will have it over the whole damn county by mornin'."

"Oh, right, didn't think about that...Guess you want me to keep quiet 'bout all this then?"

"Purty close, Smead. 'Preciate the use of your telephone. Got some of the grand kids out in Joe's car. Best get 'em to the house 'fore I head back out to the swimmin' hole."

"'Nytime. You know that, John."

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Not sure grandpa heard him 'cause he was already out the door an' down the stoop. He opened the door, got in, an' pushed the starter button on the floorboard to crank 'er up.

Grandma an' grandpa's house was behind Jolley's store three or four hundred yards on a side dirt road that us grand kids all called the red hill where it turned to the south after it passed their house.

We used to play on it when it rained. Really would make Mamie mad 'cause she had to boil our muddy clothes twice in her cast iron wash pot out back of the house.

He pulled up and stopped under some big old sycamore trees that was across the front of the yard. We all piled out and ran up the rock sidewalk to the front porch. Grandma an' mama were sittin' in slat-backed, calf-hide bottom rockers waitin' on us.

My dog, Tiny, a red and white fox terrier an' whippet cross was at her feet. She jumped up when we ran up the steps an' danced 'round my bare feet.

"You boys all right?"

Grandma got up from the rocker. Could tell she'd been dippin' snuff on account there was

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always somethin' a little dark in one of the tiny wrinkles at the corner of her mouth. She didn't want anybody to know she dipped an' always carried one of those small cans of Garrett Snuff a little bigger'n a spool of thread in her dress pocket...but we did anyway.

She gave me a big hug. "That was so awful, you findin' pore Bethany like that...she was such a sweet child...considerin'."

"Uh-huh." I leaned back from her.

"Bet ya'll are 'bout hungry, aren'tcha?"

We all answered with a quick, 'Yessum,' as Grandpa climbed the steps up to the porch.

"Need my flashlight, Mame...you or Vertis get it for me? My shoes are dirty, don't want to mess up your floor...Oh, an' a coal oil lantern."

Vertis was my mama, well, her full name was Johnie Vertis, she was named after grandpa, but all the family called her Vertis, don't know why. I always called her Mama, of course.

Grandma went to get his flashlight 'cause she knew where it was, brought it an' the lamp out an' handed them to him.

"We'll have to go over to the Cades tomorrow with some food. Know Clara's goin' to be beside

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herself, besides, she's carryin' another one, you know."

Grandpa shook his head. "Nope, didn't know. Kinda hard to keep track the way she churns 'em out."

"John L.!"

He ducked his head. "Well, it's the truth."

"Don't have to say everything you know, John L. Jamison."

"Yessum."

Think she was the only thing in this world grandpa was scared of.

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The three-quarter gibbous moon had risen above the trees down at the swimming hole casting flickering gold and silver flashes of light like sparkling diamonds on the surface of the slow moving water.

Joe sat down on the bank next to Bethany's body with his arms wrapped around his knees waiting on the sheriff, coroner, and Big John. He had pulled the towel back over her face.

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The night creatures, frogs, crickets, locust, and birds had started up their symphony of sounds. A rain crow in a close-by tree made his unusual call. *Cherk...cherk...cherk...cherk-cher-cher-cher-cher.* To tell all who listened there was rain coming in a day or so.

The creek didn't make any noise, though, as it flowed slowly toward the Ouachita River and eventually the Gulf of Mexico.

Occasionally the sound of a fish's tail slapping the water would add to the other sounds as serenity reclaimed the bottom.

A louder than normal 'whoosh' of water from the creek brought his head up to study the pool in front of him. *Musta been an alligator gar. John says there's some big ones in here an' some snappin' turtles big as a number three washtub.*

The 'whoosh' came again, from upstream a little above the swimming hole.

Joe got to his feet and studied the water where flowed out of the canopied creek into the moonlight toward him.

"What the...Oh, damn."