

# The Blue Book of Red Magic

By Charles Haddad

Reviewer's Copy

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“No wise fish would go anywhere without a porpoise” - The Mock Turtle in Alice In wonderland

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## Chapter I

# Running like all git out

This was no day for running, but Zelma Honeycutt ran like her life depended on it. Her calloused, muddy feet hightailed it along the lofty ridge of giant chestnuts and pines, which oozed sap as if melting under the blazing September sun. A hellfire of lead sheared the trees of leaf and limb.

Overhead there was a sickening crack that sounded not unlike the breaking of bone. A mighty limb plummeted, clunking Zelma on the head. The blow should have knocked her bow-legged. But Zelma didn't miss a step, let alone stumble. Nor did her grip loosen on the queer book she clutched to her pounding heart.

It was a rough-hewn tome bound in red velvet. Inside the words looked as if they'd been scrawled by a raven's claw dipped in gooseberry syrup. The scratchy blue script may not have looked like much but it told plenty. Why, if Zelma heeded its words, she could charm bees slap out of their honey. Bee charmers, that's what folk hereabouts called the Honeycutt women for as long as anyone could remember.

The Honeycutt women could do a lot more than charm bees. With teas of sarsaparilla and ginger, compacts of ugly agnes and moonwort, they mended broken hearts and broken limbs. They did it all with the red book of blue magic as their guide.

Zelma had been fixing a lot more limbs than hearts as of late. In July, Yankee Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman invaded the North Georgia foothill country of Appalachia with 100,000 men. At first the Army of Tennessee, or what remained of it, retreated and retreated. Then it decided to make a stand – right around Zelma's cabin atop Peachwood Heights.

Zelma took to caring for the tore up reb soldiers who limped, staggered and crawled to her cabin. The lucky ones returned for a second – even third patching up – before Zelma never saw them again.

She'd done all right for a while. It seemed like Zelma alone held up the scrawny line of butternut soldiers, which withstood assault and assault.

Then this morning a shell tore plum through the cabin, upending a potbelly stove and setting the place afire. Thank goodness pa and momma weren't there. It would have broken their hearts to see the family homestead go up in flames.

Momma had passed a year earlier of the fever. Daddy was up north serving under Marsh Robert in the Army of Virginia.

Zelma reckoned she could have just surrendered. She'd heard Billy Yank had more food than a county fair – and wasn't stingy about sharing it. Zelma hadn't anything but fried dough in three months. But if she surrendered what would then have become of the red book of blue magic?

That's why Zelma was a running now. Not so much to save her own sorry hide, although she wouldn't have minded. She was a running to save the book - if not for herself, then, for someone, some day, like her.

Zelma wasn't the only one skedaddling. Ahead of her a line of mangy men bolted like wild turkeys flushed from the thicket. Well, not men exactly. Most of them weren't much older than Zelma's 15 years. Not one was thicker than a broom handle. All were barefoot.

She tried to catch up, but it wasn't easy. Zelma was weighed down something awful. A burlap pouch lumpy with a clacking load dangled from a belt of twine. Then there was the red book, which felt heavier than it looked, as if Zelma were carrying the weight of its words.

"Y'all wait up now, hear?" Zelma hollered at the soldiers. Not a one slowed, let alone stop. Which left Zelma, as a straggler, a tempting target.

She glanced over her shoulder. Through the thicket of holly, creepers and wisteria Zelma espied patches of blue cloth. One of the patches stopped. There was a loud crack and a spiraling nugget of scorching lead grazed Zelma's cheek.

"Ye God," she bellowed. A stinging, bloody line scored Zelma's cheek. Her eyes darted about the chestnuts and pines. Ahead she saw a last hope of escape. It was a ravine that ran along the backside of the Heights.

Zelma veered down the ravine's steep slope. A Minie ball whistled through flying hair as Zelma's legs buckled under the weight of the red book. Down she tumbled head over heels. Zelma finally landed belly atop the red book, face first in the creek at the ravine's bottom.

At first, Zelma laid as still as a corpse. Which was what she hoped her twisted body looked like to any Billy Yank peering into the ravine. But the cool creek water also soothed her scorched cheek.

Above her Zelma heard the thudding of a hundred boots. Slowly, she gathered up her never, lifting her dripping face from the muddy creek. Through drenched strands of hair she eyed the ridge. None of the bluebellies stopped to look down into the ravine. They were too busy a hooting and a hollering at their retreating foe.

Zelma smiled for the first time in weeks. She felt as if she'd outfoxed Uncle Billy himself, which was what Billy Yank called Sherman.

Not that Zelma was home free, mind you. There might well be stragglers skulking about in the willows along the creek or sharpshooters perched in the trees along the ridge.

Zelma perused both banks of the creek. There wasn't any sign of Billy Yank, let alone of battle. The willows were the first trees Zelma had seen in weeks that weren't all shot to hell, reduced to armless stick figures.

Slowly Zelma rose. She shook the red book clean of leaves and dirt and remembered one of its blue-scrawled adages. Water leaves no trail, whether in footprints or in scent. Zelma slid her feet into the creek and sloshed upstream.

But she didn't venture far before she slowed to a stop. A moan souged through the woods. It sounded like a ghost among the willows. Which wouldn't have surprised Zelma at all. So many boys had been died between here and the mountains of Tennessee. Why wouldn't the soul of some poor Georgia farm boy, slain on Lookout Mountain, try to find his way back home?

Then there was the color of the creek. It had turned as red as the book in her arms.

Zelma peered into the ravine's gloom. Ahead she saw what looked like a raggedy scarecrow slumped against the trunk of an old willow on the creek bank. A busted musket lay at its side.

Sharpshooters be damned. Zelma splashed through the creek toward the figure.

It was a man, all right, although he barely looked it. His arms and legs were splayed about him like a lifeless string puppet. Zelma knelt beside him and put down the red book. She seized one of his bare arms. It felt like an icicle, stiff and cold. The man shivered even though it had to be at least 90 degrees.

But he wasn't dead, leastways not yet. His head jerked up, revealing a white face blackened with gunpowder, encrusted with dirt and wrinkled like a prune. He could have been Zelma's grandpappy.

Zelma knew better. This was a boy of 17. "Moses?"

Moses' parched lips cracked open, revealing a handful of brown teeth.

"Where you hurt?"

Moses' head slumped onto his chest. His scraggily bearded chin pointed to a bloody splotch on the heart of his tattered butternut wool shirt. From under the shirt blood trickled down his leg and into the creek.

Gingerly, Zelma pulled up the shirt. There in Moses' breast was a hole the size of a chestnut. It was encrusted as if he'd about bled himself dry.

"Moses, don't you fret none." Zelma seized the red book and held it up. "Look here what I got."

Moses smiled weakly.

"Damn straight," assured Zelma, "this'n book saved a plenty more worse off than you."

Zelma flipped open the book and thumbed through pages as thick as bark and just as rough. Her thumb stopped midway through the book. "Mercy yes," Zelma muttered, running a finger along a line of blue scrawl. It read: "Stanch a bleeding heart with bloodwort and fire lichen."

She spilled out the contents of the burlap pouch strung around her waist. A cracked but hardened chestnut mortar and pestle thudded to the ground. For the moment she let them lie.

Using her fingernails like the edge of a bayonet, Zelma shaved a fallen log bare of orange lichen. Then she snatched a handful of little red mushrooms known as bloodwort.

She upturned the mortar and tossed in the orange lichen and bloodwort. Then she went to the creek bank and scooped up a heaping dollop of wet clay. She slapped that into the mortar, too.

Not bothering with the pestle, Zelma mashed up the clay, lichen and bloodwort with her bare hands. In no time she'd made what looked not unlike a soggy, spent plug of chewing tobacco.

Zelma lifted up Moses' shirt and jammed the muddy plug into the hole in his heart. Moses barely groaned, no more than gurgle really.

As Zelma smoothed the mixture into Moses' wound there was a thunderous clap. A high whistle sounded overhead and a mizzle of green leaf rained down on Zelma and Moses.

"Hellfire and damnation!" hollered Zelma.

Somewhere up on the ridge above the ravine a cannon barked in retort. This time a ball landed in the creek not 50 feet from Zelma and Moses, slathering them in muck.

Zelma ought to be right honored that some gunner boy thought her worthy of two cannonballs. Instead, she fretted, pressing the muddy plug with all her might into Moses. Any moment now the fire lichen and bloodwort should begin to work its healing magic.

Indeed, Moses suddenly lurched upright, as if arising from the grave.

Zelma beamed triumphantly, but Moses looked anything but saved. "Dawg-gum-it," he thundered at Zelma. "Git."

"You ain't right yet," Zelma admonished.

Again the cannon roared. This time the ball struck not 25 feet from Zelma and Moses. That gunner boy was getting a bead on them.

The next shot was even closer. The ground shuddered so hard that Zelma's hand slid from her brother's chest and the plug flew out. Zelma lunged after it.

"Leave it be," wheezed Moses.

"Like hell I will."

Moses picked up the red book in one hand while his other seized Zelma's ankle. "Leave hol't of me," she cried, struggling to free herself, but Moses was powerfully strong for a dying boy. Not even when she dragged him through prickly bushes in search of the medicinal plug did he let go of her.

"You listen up now, hear?" Moses wheezed. "I'm a goner, but I don't mind. I done my duty. Now it's time for you to do your'n."

"My duty is saving your sorry sack ol' bones."

"Now you know'd that for a lie," Moses said. "You got to save the book and, If'n you stay here, you are as good as caught."

Moses always had a way with words. In better times he might have been a preacher.

Zelma glanced toward the ridge to see blue skirmishers creeping down the steep slope of the ravine.

Moses released Zelma's ankle and tried to rise up on an elbow to hand her the red book. But his strength finally gave out and collapsed face first into the dirt.

There he laid, a mouthful of leaves and twigs, the book in his twisted, outstretched hand. "Sure as rain," Moses rasped, "there's a body who's gonna need this'n after you and I are long passed."

## Chapter 2

# Trouble in boots

Trouble slurped down the aisle of the school bus toward Zelma Dupree. It came in the form of a boy whose heels rode up and down in a pair of laceless yellow boots, unscuffed from work.

The boy's name was Bunky Odom. What Bunky didn't know about fashion was a lot, thought Zelma. Not that she was any fashionista. But at least she knew enough to stick to one theme: black on black with candy cane striped stockings.

Bunky, on the other hand, wore a grab bag of styles. Baggy shorts hung below his knees while a forest of greasy platinum spikes poked up from his head. It was as if Justin Timberlake had been crossbred with Snoop Dogg, a homey dipped in white chocolate.

If Bunky were unsure about whom he was he didn't show it. He smirked as he loped toward Zelma. A diamond stud in one ear flickered as if winking hello.

Zelma didn't wink back.

She bowed her head over clinched fists and prayed. Oh Gamby Esmeralda, wizard of the hillock, red queen of blue magic, grant me the power. Let me melt this boy with the heat of my displeasure.

Now look up, Zelma commanded herself. For once she must face her nemesis head on. Haltingly, Zelma raised her head. She imagined her eyes, wing-tipped in black eyeliner, as dark crystals. They harnessed the scorching rays of the Georgia sun on this late afternoon in August. Her narrowing gaze locked on the approaching boy. To bolster her flagging courage, Zelma chanted softly, "Burn, Bunky, burn."

But Zelma's eyes might as well have been dead coals. Not a greasy spike on Bunky's head ignited. If anything her glare seem to egg him on. Down the aisle Bunky sauntered toward Zelma.

All right, then, let him come, Zelma thought, trying to steady herself. After all, today she'd brought a secret weapon. She slipped a hand into the deep pocket of her long black skirt with the saw-tooth hem. Inside her fingers found a leather pouch and loosened its draw-string. They wriggled into the pouch and fingered some gritty powder. It was the remains of a bat, charred to a crisp and then pulverized.

The bat grit emboldened Zelma. For the first time, she didn't curl away from Bunky, a black orchid folding in on itself. Still, she couldn't quite bring herself to look him in the eye, either. So she stared down at the book he clutched in one hand as if some cherished hymnal. It was titled "The Right to Idleness."

How appropriate, Zelma thought. She mustered the nerve to raise her head to half-mast, just enough for Bunky to glimpse her expression of contempt.

Her contempt fazed Bunky not in the least. His eyes slithered down Zelma's henna-tinted black hair and onto her blouse of the same color. From there Bunky's gaze ambled down her skirt and to her black and pink candy cane stockings. At the sight of her black slippers, Bunky's brow furrowed, as if he were trying to imagine the shape of her slender white toes.

Blushing, Zelma curled her slippers under the seat.

Bunky frowned as Zelma's feet disappeared. But he soon beamed again as if a wonderful notion had popped into his head.

"Yo, Broomhilda," he boomed, turning to gaze invitingly at the kids seated around the two of them. "There's something different about you today."

Not likely, thought Zelma. She wore the same black-on-black outfit she'd worn every day since she began attending Peachwood High School two weeks ago. Only the stripes of her candy cane stockings ever changed. One day they were pink and black; the next white and lime.

Still, heads began to turn toward Zelma. Bunky's attentiveness cast her in a spotlight. There was no way now she could slink down out of sight, forgotten.

"Yes," said Bunky, warming to the growing attention enveloping him, "there's definitely something off."

"You mean," snapped Zelma, "like carrying around a book about the virtues of laziness?"

Bunky arched an eyebrow.

Truth was, no one was more astonished than Zelma at her sudden retort. Never, in two weeks of continual torment, had she dared to challenge Bunky. The charred bat must be starting to work its magic. Zelma fingers caressed the gritty powder.

Bunky lowered his arched eyebrow and smiled now as if Zelma had paid him a compliment. He brandished the book proudly for all to see. Then he laid it on his lap and began stroking his chin, feigning deep thought.

Suddenly his eyes sparkled. "I know," he pronounced loud enough for everyone on the bus to hear.

What he knew, Bunky didn't say right off. He paused, waiting for the bus to fall silent, every ear to turn his way.

Even Zelma had to admit Bunky was quite the showman. She felt the rising expectation of Bunky's audience. It weighed heavy on her bony shoulders.

"It's your broom," Bunky announced with satisfaction.

"What broom?" scoffed Zelma.

"Exactly! Even Belinda, the good witch of the north, had a broom."

Snickering rippled through the bus.

If only Zelma had a broom. She would have used it to part Bunky's greasy spikes. Zelma's hand clinched inside her pocket and her skirt bulged.

Bunky nodded toward the bulge. "Whatcha you got in there, fairy dust?"

Again the bus snickered.

"Not exactly," said Zelma.

Bunky lowered his head, sniffing.

"You really want to see?"

"Sure," said Bunky.

"Then come closer."

Bunky about stuck his nose in Zelma's pocket and she pitched a pocketful of bat cinders into his face. Bunky's head disappeared under a sooty cloud.

There was a collective gasp. Some of those sitting closest to Zelma gagged and pinched their noses. She didn't blame them. The smell was enough to curl the nostrils of a bloodhound.

Zelma's eyes watered, too, but she didn't recoil. Instead, she spread her fingers over the sooty cloud and began to chant:

"Goodbye to the boy,

who dared to make fun.

Who questioned blue magic,

Talk about dumb.

Send him back, send him back,

No one will mourn.

Turn him back, turn him back,

As if he'd never been born."

Okay, so Gamby's spell hadn't called for any chanting. But Zelma thought it added some needed drama, something to spook onlookers into thinking she really did know what she was doing. It certainly boosted her confidence.

Zelma half-raised an eyelid. Bat cinders blackened Bunky from greasy spikes to Adam's apple. He looked not unlike Daffy Duck after Elmer Fudd had blasted him with his shotgun. Unfortunately, like Daffy, he didn't look blown away; just slightly put out – and that for only a moment.

Bunky's blackened lips parted to reveal a gleaming smile of white teeth. "Am I a newt yet?" He patted himself down and then frowned. His hands found the same old lanky body.

The bus rocked with hooting laughter. Once again Zelma had been upstaged – and by a cretin slumming in baggy shorts who worshipped laziness, no less.

Zelma's chest heaved as she struggled to smother a rising sob. She turned sharply away from Bunky, expecting her gaze to be greeted by a busload of faces contorted with laughter.

She was wrong.

Zelma was already forgotten. Everyone either stared out the window or chatted with friends. Everyone, except two kids. One was a bamboo shoot of a girl in a frayed Hello Kitty tee shirt with thick glasses who looked as if she were ready to cry. The other was a blond in a checkered black and grey cardigan. She glared at Zelma with piercing blue eyes.

Zelma winced as if she'd been stabbed in the heart.

## Chapter 3

# Bubba Largemouth

Having successfully humiliated Zelma yet again, Bunky decamped for the long seat at the back of the bus. There, he and his buddies yucked it up, at Zelma's expense no doubt.

Zelma pretended not to hear. She smooshed a raven eye into the window, attempting to lose herself in the world passing by outside the bus. It wasn't easy. Scratches fuzzed the window. Trying to see out was like looking through a veil of tears.

No matter. Zelma would know this world blindfolded. Through the fuzz of scratches she could still make out the pink flowering leaves of the crape myrtles lining Confederate Avenue. It was always a wonder to Zelma how these bushes could hold their flowered heads so high in the oppressive August heat.

Confederate Avenue ran smack into the center of town, Peachwood Square. For more than a century the square had been dominated by a single figure. He loomed ahead, rearing up on a stallion perched atop a high marble pedestal. This was General John Bell Hood, or Ol' Stumpy as Zelma fondly called him. Miraculously, he held onto the horse with only one arm and one leg. Ol' Stumpy had lost his other limbs in the War of Northern Aggression, incorrectly known to some as the Civil War.

Rumor had it that his arm – a skeleton still sleeved in a grey uniform - laid somewhere in the thick woods of Kennesaw Mountain. Its forested hump loomed in the distance just north of Peachwood.

Ol' Stumpy was the most revered figure in town. Chiseled into his marble pedestal were the names of 5,000 reb soldiers. Most of them hadn't been much older than Zelma. They'd died trying to parry Gen. Sherman's thrust into Georgia.

On Confederate Memorial day in April, Ol' Stumpy's pedestal disappeared under a mound of red, white and blue bouquets. These weren't the colors of the stars and stripes, mind you, but that of St. Andrew's Cross, the confederate battle flag.

Never mind that the war ended 140 years ago. Ol' Stumpy had no peace. He'd been cast facing North toward Kennesaw Mountain, fiery eyes ever watchful for a renewed Yankee assault.

Problem was, the town had faced him the wrong way.

This time the aggressors had invaded from the south. They'd crept out of Atlanta, 20 miles downstream of Peachwood. At first they'd been content to just lay siege, encircling the town with soaring homes of chicken wire slathered with stucco.

But lately the invaders had dared to enter Peachwood proper. Armored divisions of suburban tanks, cars bigger than the pick up trucks that had long dominated Peachwood, clogged the town's narrow streets. Their exhaust yellowed the air until you couldn't see Kennesaw Mountain on a summer day.

As the school bus turned now from Confederate Avenue onto the Square, it ran smack dab into a skirmish between the old Peachwood and the new. At the foot of Ol' Stumpy's pedestal a gleaming Chevy Suburban had locked grills with a rusting Ford pick-up. The narrow intersection clearly wasn't big enough for both cars to pass simultaneously, but neither driver was willing to give way to the other.

Of course the school bus couldn't get through the narrow intersection either and it began to back up.

Zelma craned her neck to watch the unfolding battle in the Square. In the street stood both drivers, one a chubby man in greasy overalls; the other a woman in a pin-striped pant suit teetering on thin ankles in high heels. The two hollered at one another until their faces reddened.

The tide of battle turned when the chubby man withdrew a giant wrench from the deep pocket of his overalls. He advanced on the woman, swinging the wrench as if it were a saber.

Armed with only a sliver of a cellphone, the woman wobbled backward in retreat. She climbed into her Suburban, rolled up the window and locked the doors.

The man pressed his sweaty face against the window, grinning as if he'd single-handedly won the Lost Cause. That's what old timers called the War of Northern Aggression.

Zelma wanted to believe the man had won, too, but she knew better. Almost all the stores she'd grown up with had vanished from the Square. Gone were the bait shop where daddy used to buy his worms and Marley's ice cream parlor. It had sold milk shakes thicker than sorghum on a winter's day for 88 cents – and let you pay by check, no less.

In their place had come new shops with names like the Bearded Lizard, the Videorama and the Java Queen. It sold something called café latte for a regal \$3 a cup. Zelma couldn't afford a \$3 cup for some drink. Nor could anyone else she knew.

As the square changed, so had Ol' Stumpy. He'd turned ever greener. Zelma's science teacher attributed it to oxidization; she swore it was from nausea.

One prominent holdout who hadn't changed, although she'd nauseated plenty a patron in her time, was Egg Betty. She was a chain-smoking woman more wrinkled than a stick of beef jerky. Betty ran a 24-hour diner. It had been around so long no one remembered any more whether Betty had named the diner after herself or had been nicknamed after the diner.

Egg Betty's occupied a sooty, one-story red brick building on the square under a red neon sign that promised "Good Eats." Inside a cloud of stale cigarette smoke lingered above red and white-checkered plastic tablecloths pockmarked with little round burn holes.

The diner may not have looked like much, but to Zelma, it would always be special. It was here that she'd spent many a Saturday morning as a child. Perched atop her daddy's knee, Zelma would listen as he regaled the boys, as he called his diner entourage, with colorful stories of town lore.

Daddy was the Uncle Remus of Peachwood, a man who had a tale about every family, building and snarl of fishing line along the Chattahoochee River. The tale daddy loved to tell best was his never-ending quest to catch Bubba Largemouth.

As daddy told it, Ol' Bubba was the biggest and wiliest bass to ply the murky waters of the Chattahoochee as it ambled through Peachwood. That fish had outsmarted him in more ways than the roadrunner had Wily Coyote. It had tied his line around overhanging branches, hooked his anchor to sunken trees, and capsized his rotting flat bottom boat time and again.

Daddy could have told Bubba stories all day, if momma hadn't eventually come down to chase him back home to do some chores.

Thinking about her daddy made Zelma forget all about Bunky and Peachwood High. Through the fuzzed glass Zelma desperately tried to make out Egg Betty's as the bus rounded the Square. Thank goodness, its neon "Good eats" sign still glowed, although it flickered something awful.

Truth was, it was a miracle the sign was lit at all. You didn't see many people these days coming in and out of Egg Betty's. This afternoon, though, the diner looked like it had a live one.

A man bulbous in layered clothing stood with his stubbly face pressed against the diner's window. Scrunched back on his head was a grey kepi, the regulation cap issued to confederate foot soldiers.

This one looked like it had seen plenty of action. Its homespun wool was darkened with years of hardened sweat. The bill was bent nearly in half. All the same, many a man in Peachwood would have given his right arm for such a cap. It was a rare find, a collector's item.

Zelma should know. Her daddy had one just like it, handed down from his great grandpapi. He'd fought with the 44th Georgia, a regiment that battled Sherman from Lookout Mountain in Tennessee to its final surrender in the Carolina swamps.

Daddy never went out on a Saturday without his great grandpapi's kepi, whether it was 40 degrees or 90. He swore the cap brought him good luck, especially when fishing. Never mind he hardly ever brought home more than a couple of wormy bream.

Zelma strained now to see under the cap, but she couldn't make out the man's face through the fuzzed window.

"Stop the bus," Zelma hollered.

She jumped to her feet and pattered down the aisle. When Zelma reached the driver she menaced him with her raven eyes. He opened the door and Zelma fluttered out onto the street.

## Chapter 4

# Chasing a lost kepi

Had she finally done it? thought Zelma, heart pounding. Lord knows she'd tried hard enough.

Zelma had just about singed off her eyebrows as one concoction after another exploded in her face. She'd steeped yellowing snippets of daddy's tee shirts in broths of horny goat weed, moonwort and woadwaxen. Nothing had summoned him back, or so it had seemed.

The asphalt of Confederate Avenue seared the bottom of Zelma's slippered feet. It was one of those ovens of a day. Zelma tippy-toed along the cracked sidewalk. Ol' Stumpy eyed her with curiosity as she inched toward Egg Betty's, two blocks away.

Ahead the man continued to stare into the diner's window. The way he was dressed, you'd have thought it was the dead of winter. A crusty plastic slicker enwrapped an unbuttoned denim jacket, which bulged out around a flaming red University of Georgia Bulldogs sweatshirt. From underneath it all protruded the ragged hem of a tee shirt.

Zelma squinted through the glare of the blazing sun, trying to see the face under the bent bill of the kepi. She still couldn't make it out and she began to creep toward the man. When she was less than a block from him he suddenly turned to face Zelma.

She waved; the man bolted.

"Wait," Zelma cried.

If he heard Zelma the man didn't stop. In fact, his pace quickened. The man moved surprisingly fast, given that he was a walking Goodwill outlet. Zelma struggled to catch up, the gritty sidewalk biting into the soles of her slippered feet.

She followed the man as he entered a warren of low-rise brick buildings, wedged between the Square's storefronts and the railroad tracks. The air smelled faintly of vinegar and

burnt cooking oil. Signs bearing Chinese characters hung from laundries, dry cleaners, grocery stores and restaurants.

Zelma knew this cubbyhole of a neighborhood as home to the descendants of indentured Chinese laborers. After the War of Northern Aggression, planters had lured impoverished peasants from the Chinese countryside, hoping they would replace their freed slaves. The Chinese might have been poor, but they weren't stupid. Like the slaves before them, the Chinese, too, soon ran off. They ended up in North Georgia, working to rebuild the railroads in towns such as Peachwood.

This neighborhood was apparently no stranger to the man in the grey kepi. He zipped through as if long familiar with its streets and crossed the railroad tracks.

On the other side lay a no man's land of crumbling brick warehouses and shuttered factories. The man navigated this decrepit labyrinth of streets as if he'd walked them his whole life. He darted down a narrow alley and then vanished.

Zelma raced up and down the alley, but there wasn't a trace of the man. He'd vanished like the White Rabbit, down some hidden burrow.

Winded, Zelma stopped in the middle of a pot-holed alley. She bent low, hands on knees, struggling to catch her breath. Think, she told herself. If this man were her daddy, where would he go?

The answer came to Zelma in a flash of inspiration. Off she charged into the crumbling maze. Zelma didn't stop until she reached a high brick wall with a rusting metal gate. Behind the wall loomed the darkened hulk of Faircloth Mill.

Zelma had grown up with the ka-chunk of the mill rattling her morning bowl of Count Chocula. Sometimes the house shook so hard that the books piled high on Zelma's nightstand toppled off. Zelma never minded. She knew the harder the rattling, the better things were. It meant everyone in the Milltown neighborhood of town was working hard, making underwear that warmed bottoms the world over.

Her parents used to brag that they'd never paid for a pair of underwear in their life. Not even their only daughter's most cherished pair, imprinted with the sneering likeness of Disney's Ursula the Sea Witch.

Now the mill had been silenced, its plug pulled, an abandoned hulk that was beginning to cave in on itself. The thought that her daddy might be inside such a forsaken place raised the hairs on the back of Zelma's neck.

She studied the wall and gate for signs of the man in the kepi. Was that a thread of grey wool on the rusted gate? Zelma reached for the thread, but it blew away in a gust of wind.

No matter. Zelma had seen enough. She turned sideways and tried to wiggle through the narrow space between the gate's bars. But even she wasn't skinny enough to squeeze

through. She was, however, big enough to become stuck, wedged between the bars as if trapped between two worlds.

Zelma rattled the imprisoning bars. "Daddy!" she hollered.

There was no response.

Where was the man who'd once chased off the boys who pelted her long hair with itchy balls?

## Chapter 4

# Mistaken identities

Behind Peachwood's shuttered mills ran the Chattahoochee River. It was on the Chattahoochee's slippery clay banks that the town had first struggled to take root. Over the next century Peachwood had clawed its way up a forested slope to gain a better footing on a plateau overlooking the river basin. Ambitious merchants had cleared the plateau of its giant chestnuts and built the Square.

A series of hills overlooked the south end of the plateau. There was one hill that stood higher than the others. One family, the Faircloths, had laid claim to it. They'd crowned the hill with a colonnaded aerie known as Faircloth Manor. For as long as anyone could remember, the manor's white pillars had gleamed down on Peachwood like a patronizing smile.

At one time the Faircloths had owned all the land between the Chattahoochee and their hilltop perch. Some old timers said the family had even claimed that part of the river running through town. Daddy used to wisecrack that the Faircloths pocketed a nickel every time you took a bath or flushed the toilet.

To Zelma this was no joke.

Feet throbbing in tattered slippers, a rusty orange stripe running down the center of her black blouse, Zelma stood now before a wrought iron gate. It was engraved with a golden "F." Behind the gate a gravel road wended up through a forested slope. When a breeze rustled the leaves you could glimpse the columns of Faircloth Manor.

From her skirt pocket Zelma retrieved a skeleton key. She inserted it into a gate keyhole. As usual the lock resisted the key. "Joking Jesus," Zelma muttered. This was her new favorite expression. Momma wasn't found of it, but Zelma thought the phrase captured her state of affairs about right.

As Zelma struggled to unlock the gate she heard a car pull up and stop alongside the curb across the street. She glanced over her shoulder to see a Chevy Tahoe. Out the window leaned an Asian couple, craning their necks to look up at the manor. The woman clutched a tattered copy of "Gone With the Wind" to her breast.

Zelma had seen this before. Some of Peachwood's newcomers were convinced Faircloth Manor was Tara, the O'Hara's plantation house in "Gone with the wind."

That was just plain apey, as momma would say. Why, anyone at Egg Betty's could tell you that Margaret Mitchell had dreamed up Tara in the basement of a boarding house in downtown Atlanta. Mitchell was a big city girl who'd had never even been to Peachwood. Faircloth Manor was no more Tara than the Beverly Hillbillies were Southerners.

When Zelma tried to point this out this simple truth in history class at Peachwood High her fellow students just smirked. You'd have thought they'd grown up in Peachwood – not Zelma. To Zelma's classmates, Tara was as real and enduring as Ol' Stumpy was to the regulars at Egg Betty's.

None of the diner's patrons ever wondered how a one-armed, one-legged man could straddle a rearing stallion. Nor did the kids at Peachwood High question how the O'Haras could have grown cotton on the manor's rocky hillside. It all made Zelma wonder if Jesus weren't indeed joking.

With a sigh, Zelma turned back to struggling with the rusty gate. At last it creaked open and she climbed up the winding gravel driveway. From behind she heard the couple in the Tahoe jabbering away in what sounded like Japanese. You'd have thought they'd just seen the ghost of Scarlet O'Hara.

If only they knew the truth.

## Chapter 6

# Faded glory

Up close Faircloth Manor sure wasn't any Tara. Its veranda sagged. The paint of its front columns had yellowed and blistered. The Faircloths looked awful poor for rich folk.

Zelma knew better.

She ascended the veranda's creaking steps. The double doors of the entrance opened as if the manor were expecting Zelma. In the doorway stood a plump, redheaded woman bulging out of a black dress with a lacy white apron.

At the sight of the uniform Zelma groaned. She hated to see momma dressed up in this way. It made her look like a character out of the Addams family. But Miss Gracious insisted momma wear the uniform on the rare evenings she was home for dinner.

Murdis Honeycutt Dupree didn't greet her daughter with a smile, either. She cocked her head sideways, lips curled down in disapproval. "Sweet weeping Jesus, what happened to you?"

Zelma looked down at her tattered slippers and the rusty stripe dividing her heart. It had taken a good deal of wriggling to free herself from the gate. But Zelma didn't tell momma about all that. "I had a little accident in shop class."

"Since when have you been taking shop?"

"I don't tell you everything."

"Ain't that the truth."

Zelma didn't respond. Instead, she tried to push passed her mother, who stood plugging up the doorway. Momma's nose crinkled up. "Mercy, what's that smell?"

"Nothing." Nothing, that is, if you were accustomed to the stench of charred bat.

Momma scowled. "You been brewing up trouble again?"

"No!" Zelma insisted, a little too adamantly.

"I knew it," huffed Momma. "Where's that book? I'm gonna burn it at the stake!"

Then you might as well throw me on the pyre too, thought Zelma, but she kept her mouth shut. She didn't have the strength left to cross sabers with Momma this afternoon. Besides, she had the advantage. Momma didn't know where to find the object of her wrath.

That didn't mean momma had given up trying. Her steely gaze probed Zelma's defiant expression for any clue of the book's whereabouts. Zelma struggled to keep her mind a blank.

Finally, Mrs. Dupree relented and stepped aside. "Go on, then, change for dinner. Miss Gracious is home."

Zelma passed into the manor pouting.

"None of your lip, hear?" Mrs. Dupree barked.

"I didn't say anything."

Momma grunted and she shook her head. "I swear, if you ain't twice the trouble of your two brothers - combined."

As if to confirm her mother's assessment, Zelma left a trail of slender little muddy footprints across the manor's wooden foyer.

Mrs. Dupree threw up her hands in exasperation. "Take off those slippers," she thundered and then stormed off to get a mop.

Zelma slipped off her shoes. Slippers dangling from the tips of her fingers, she trudged up the long winding staircase at the back of the foyer.

Why was Miss Gracious home, anyway? Dinner was her busiest time of day. Surely the art museum needed yet another wing, the country club a new green. Miss Gracious was the Rubber Chicken Queen, endlessly attending charity banquets. It was said that she could charm gold out of Scrooge himself. All she needed was a little champagne and chateaubriand.

Zelma winced at her own cattiness. She wasn't mean by nature. But Miss Gracious brought the devil out in her. She pretended to be so high and virtuous, but Zelma knew better: Miss Gracious was a do-gooder up to no good. Why couldn't anyone else see it.

## Chapter 7

# Bats in the belfry

As far as Zelma was concerned there was only one Faircloth worth a hoot. She stopped at the top of the stairs and cupped a hand to an ear. Was that he calling her now? Coming, my darling, Zelma whispered.

Her candy cane-striped toes pranced along the convex wall of the second floor hallway. It was lined with oil portraits of Faircloths dating back three hundred years.

At the far end of the gallery Zelma stopped in front of a portrait of a young cavalry officer in grey uniform, red sash and saber. Dead a hundred and forty years and General Eustice Horatio Faircloth still slew her. He'd fallen in the closing days of the war while rescuing a woman from pillaging Yankees.

A hand on the hilt of his saber, General Eustice's mournful eyes studied Zelma. Did he see that she too was a damsel in distress?

Zelma closed her eyes and imagined the general astride his white stallion. It kicked in the manor's front door and charged up the winding foyer staircase. Down the second floor hallway General Eustice charged. When he reached Zelma he scooped her up in a mighty arm. Her cheek chafed against the coarse wool of his uniform. With teary eyes she looked up into the general's face. Perched atop his head was a dingy kepi.

"Zelma!"

General Eustice froze. His grip loosened as if he'd begun to wonder whether the damsel in his arms was worth the risk. Momma called again, this time her voice rattling the picture frames like an artillery barrage too close for comfort. The general dropped Zelma and galloped off.

Only Zelma's pride was bruised, but it smarted plenty. She trudged back to the top of the stairs. "What?" she grumped.

Momma stood at the foot of the stairs, hands on hips. She hollered up at her daughter, "Stop your dawdling, hear?"

Zelma heard, all right, and continued her journey down the second floor hallway. This time she veered off before the portrait gallery and down a small hallway. It led to what looked like the door of a linen closet. In fact, the door opened to a steep staircase.

Up the stairs Zelma scurried. At the top she entered a long rectangular room with a slanting ceiling. Here in the attic of Faircloth Manor she and her mother lived like bats in a belfry.

They slept in two low wooden beds, tucked into the narrowing wedge of the slanted ceiling. In these beds had once slept slaves. "Do you know how valuable those beds are today?" Miss Gracious had boasted to Zelma, as if she and her mother should be honored to sleep where slaves once had.

Zelma's nose wrinkled. Joking Jesus, what smelled? Then she remembered: her cauldron. She'd forgotten to clean it out before leaving for school that morning.

Zelma dashed to a heavy red curtain strung on a pole wedged between two narrowing walls. This oriental drapery cordoned off an alcove at the far end of the attic. The curtain served as a line in the sand, a DMZ even Zelma's mother thought twice about before crossing.

Behind the curtain lay Zelma's lair, such as it was. A coffee can served as her cauldron; a can of Sterno as her bonfire. She brewed potions head bent beneath a slanting ceiling. It was a setup that would have made the Wicked Witch of the West blush with shame.

Zelma slipped behind the velvet curtain and surveyed her unprepossessing lair. Strung along a clothesline was her wardrobe: black blouses, striped stockings and jagged hem skirts. Slippers dangled over the line from their tied laces.

In the center of the alcove sat a massive roll-top desk. It was padlocked against the iron grip of her mother. Zelma retrieved a small key hidden in a dangling slipper and unlocked the desk.

A pall of black smoke enveloped Zelma and she gagged. Who knew a charred bat would stink so bad? Thank goodness momma had never come back upstairs during the day. Not even the padlock would have stopped her from ripping open the desk.

Holding her nose, Zelma seized the blackened coffee tin and carried it to one of the attic's window. She threw open the window and shook out the can. Then she opened the second window on the opposing wall. A breeze swept through the attic and chased off the stench.

All the same, Zelma wasn't relieved. Her mind kept puzzling: Why hadn't her spell vanquished Bunky in a cloud of bat soot?

It was a conundrum that required consultation with a power far greater than Zelma. And now was the time to do it, while momma was tied up getting dinner on the table.

Zelma returned her tinny cauldron to its hiding place. Then she dropped to her belly and slid beneath the desk. There she grabbed the tips of two floorboards. Zelma jiggled the boards until they came loose. The boards' edges had been painstakingly sanded until they fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. In the dim light of the attic they looked like all the other boards in the floor.

Out of the hole in the floor Zelma retrieved a thick book bound in red velvet. She carried it lovingly to her low bed, where she plopped down cross-legged. Nestled in her lap, the book cracked open.

Zelma spread her fingertips across a page of grainy homemade paper. A blue script that looked like it had been scratched out with a raven's claw covered the page. She closed her eyes. "Oh red book of blue magic," murmured Zelma, "speak to me."

The attic rattled with a thunderous retort. But it wasn't the book speaking; just momma calling Zelma to dinner.

## Chapter 8

# Dining on brat-worst

Zelma sat wedged between eight-year-old Ambrose and Ashley Faircloth, or as she called them, the brat-worst twins. The three of them occupied the left hand side of a long wooden dining room table. In front of each sat a steaming plate of fillet mignon, collards and mustard mash potatoes. Zelma totally adored mustard mash potatoes, yet she paid them no mind.

Her gaze fixed on a mirage. Reflected in the polished sheen of the table was the image of a willowy woman. She sat erect, her hair done up in a stiff blond bouffant. One hand fingered a pearl necklace while the other held ever so lightly a salad fork.

At the woman's elbow hovered Mrs. Dupree, a towel draped over the arm of that horrid servant's uniform. She stood ready to whisk away the salad plate at the first sign that Gracious Faircloth, or Miss Gracious to all who knew her, was finished.

It was a tougher job than it looked. Miss Gracious never cleaned her plate. That, as the matriarch of Faircloth Manor would say, wouldn't be lady-like. So Momma had to sense the moment her appetite waned.

A good servant, counseled Miss Gracious, was bond to her master heart and soul. Or like a ball on a chain, if you asked Zelma. She frowned at the reflection of her mother waiting hand and foot on Miss Gracious.

Oh for some spell to wipe the table clean of this image.

As if Zelma's wish had miraculously been granted, a shadow blotted out the reflection of Miss Gracious. It turn out, though, not to be the long reach of the red book of blue magic; just a little arm creeping up on Zelma's plate.

There was a sickening splat. Zelma looked down to see a forkful of collard greens slopped onto her plate. "Hey," Zelma protested. She looked right to see a smiling Ambrose.

No sooner had she looked away from her plate than Ashley attacked from the left. He scraped Zelma's mustard mash potatoes off her plate and onto his own. "You little brat-worst," hissed Zelma.

Snickering, Ashley curved a protective arm around his plate.

Zelma raised her fork to retrieve her beloved mustard mash potatoes. But Zelma's counterattack faltered as she felt something tickle past her right knee. She looked down to see a cloth napkin draped atop her slipper.

Ambrose sat back, arms crossed, lips pursed as if to say, "Well?"

Well, nothing. Zelma would rather choke a monkey than pick up the fallen napkin.

Ambrose turned to face her mother and whined, "Zelma won't pick up my napkin."

Zelma felt another napkin flutter down, this time onto her left foot.

"Me either," seconded Ashley.

Mrs. Dupree's gaze shifted from Miss Gracious' hovering fork to Zelma. Her eyes narrowed.

Joking Jesus, did she too expect Zelma to pick up the napkins?

"Now, now," said Miss Gracious, lowering her fork. "Zelma is not a servant."

"She's not?" said Ambrose, perplexed.

"Of course not, darling," Miss Gracious mildly scolded.

"Then what is she?" asked Ashley.

"Well..." Miss Gracious hesitated, as if unsure herself. Then her brown eyes flashed with inspiration. "Think of her as your big sister."

"She isn't!" protested Ambrose.

"Well, no, not technically, dear," said Miss Gracious. "But can't you think of her as one?"

Now Zelma supposed she should have felt honored to be considered like a daughter to Miss Gracious. Certainly most girls in town would have. Yet to Zelma it just didn't feel quite right. Not after Miss Gracious had closed the mill.

The twins didn't feel quite right about Zelma, either. They frowned at the girl sitting trapped between them. If only their mother would sour on adopting Zelma, too.

Fat chance.

“Murdis,” said Miss Gracious, turning to flash Mrs. Dupree a smile of perfect white teeth. “I’ve had the most wonderful idea.”

Zelma cringed. Now what? She had a drawerful of pendants, broaches and earrings, all gifts from Miss Gracious that Zelma couldn’t bring herself to wear.

“The Sunday after Labor Day is the annual mother-daughter tea at the club,” said Miss Gracious. She turned to beam at Zelma as if she were about to offer her a vat full of mustard potatoes. “How would you like to come as my guest?”

As phony mother and daughter? Zelma turned to look at her mother in desperation. Surely even she wouldn’t stand for this. But Mrs. Dupree nodded to urge Zelma to say yes.

Zelma said nothing, hoping Miss Gracious' offer would wither away in the silence.

No such luck.

Mrs. Dupree took it upon herself to answer for her daughter. “Why Miss Gracious, Zelma would be down right honored.” As she spoke Mrs. Dupree fixed her daughter with a glare so chilling it froze Zelma's lips shut.

Which made Zelma wonder: just who was the real witch in her family?

## Chapter 9

# How could you

As a child Zelma would have never dared crossing her mother. Not after she'd watched momma dunk her six-foot teenage brother Zeek head first in a backyard bucket of water on a freezing day. He emerged gasping, strands of hair frozen into icicles.

Zeek's offense? He'd dared to complain about the rusting Taurus daddy had given him as a present on his 16th birthday. What Zeek wanted instead was the same cherry red mustang convertible as his best friend.

It wasn't that momma was mean. She just wouldn't brook any whining. If your limbs were unbroken, your belly full of food and a roof covered your head, than you had nothing to complain about. Momma may have been no Dr. Spock, but she knew how to raise boys hardened for a tough life. Zeek was now a Marine captain stationed in Iraq; Daniel skippered an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. Momma was right proud of both of her sons.

She had big plans for Zelma too, although they didn't involve marrying her off to some marine captain, the hope of many a Milltown momma. No, ever since Zelma had been crowned spelling bee champion of the third grade, momma had been dead set on one goal: Her daughter would become the first Dupree to attend college. Preferably out of state.

Except for the part about leaving town, Zelma had bought into momma's scheming on her behalf. She let momma drive her hard to excel in school. Zelma learned how to slam dunk a history or English exam the way Zeek could a basketball.

It took a heap of studying, reading the likes of Dickens, Homer, Shakespeare and even the autobiography, God forbid, of William Tecumseh Sherman. Turned out, funny enough, this most detested of Yankee generals actually liked Southerners. He was just doing his job as a good soldier. Giving the rebs a whipping for their own good. Try telling that to the boys down at Egg Betty's.

All this reading had changed Zelma in some funny, unexpected ways. It had unsweetened her syrupy drawl and scrubbed Zelma's speech clean of ain'ts and y'alls. She could talk now just like those Yankee boys who attended Peachwood High. That is, if she so pleased. And it pleased momma for her to do so.

Sometimes she did; sometimes she didn't. Zelma had become like one those preachers who could speak in tongues, switching voices as it suited her. It plum exasperated daddy. He swore he couldn't understand a word she said anymore, especially when she went on like some Yankee girl.

Yet learning how to carry on like some Yankee girl had served Zelma well. It led to the crowning achievement of her academic career. Last April she'd been named captain of Pleasant Crump's academic Olympiad team. She'd led it all the way to the state playoffs.

Never mind that her team was eliminated in round one. Folks were still mighty proud. It was the first time anyone in Milltown had made the television news not in handcuffs.

Now that victory seemed as hollow as Ahab's discovery of his great white whale. It just didn't seem to matter any more who was captain and who was mate. Not if the ship had capsized. Not if she and her mother slept side by side in the same low beds, more fellow refugees than mother and daughter.

Zelma's fear of momma had vanished with her old life. She felt free for the first time to fume at her mother. And fume she did tonight. How dare momma give away her one special day of the week! Saturday was the only time she had to herself, to huddle in her lair, cooking up potions and scheming how to summon daddy home.

Zelma snatched a long black skirt off the mound of wrinkled laundry at her feet and cracked its ragged hem like a bullwhip under momma's nose.

Momma, who sat across from Zelma, didn't flinch. In fact, she hummed a happy ditty as she added a pair of striped stockings to the rising pile of folded laundry atop the slave bed. You'd think it was any old weekday evening, mother and daughter enfolded in each other's laundry.

Her mother's happy indifference boiled Zelma's already hot blood. "How could you?" she hissed.

"How could I what? Let Miss Gracious do something nice for you?"

"Nice?" Zelma sputtered. "Momma, she just wants to trot me out like some new filly for her friends to inspect."

"You should be flattered."

Zelma whinnied in protest.

"Mind yourself," momma scolded. "If it weren't for Miss Gracious we'd be in the streets."

Would they? Wondered Zelma. True, Miss Gracious had taken them in when no one else would. But if it weren't for Miss Gracious wouldn't they be back in their own home? Trusting in Miss Gracious felt like a betrayal of her missing father. "We don't need Miss Gracious."

A sad smile crossed momma's face, as if wishing it were true.

Zelma leaned forward, seizing her mother by a sleeve. "I saw him, momma, right in the square."

"Now don't go starting that again," said Mrs. Dupree, shaking off Zelma's grasp.

"It's true. Daddy's coming."

"And what, whisked us away, just like that reb horseman you fancy?"

Zelma blushed. How did momma do it? Read her heart as if it were stitched onto the saw-toothed hem of her skirt. It was down right unfair.

"You'll see," said Zelma jumping to her feet, pointing an accusatory finger at her mother.

"See what?" said momma, tightening the knotted stocking in her hands.

"Daddy's out there right now looking for a job. And he's going to find one real soon. And then he'll come and rescue us."

"Elwood Dupree?" momma snorted in derision. "That man can't save himself, let alone his own family."

Zelma's outstretched hand clenched into a fist. Another slap at her father and, by god, she'd knock her mother silly.

Momma eyed the trembling fist raised in her face and smiled coyly. "You still fixin' on going to college?"

Zelma didn't answer. Momma knew she was. It was her only sure ticket out of the Faircloth Manor.

"Then you listen up, hear," said momma laying her knotted stocking down on the bed. "There's only one person I know got the means to send you to college – and we both know who that is. So you best have tea with Miss Gracious and learn how to act like a lady."

## Chapter 10

# Pretty in peach

Come on, come on, where was Charles? Miss Gracious' chauffeur was never late. Please don't let this be the first time. Zelma wanted to get this day over with as quickly as possible.

She stood on the manor's sagging porch, anxiously eying the gravel driveway. What she saw only deepened her concern. Up the driveway rattled an aging copper Mercedes Benz. Where was Charles' black limo?

The Mercedes stopped in front of Zelma and she squinted to see through its darkened windows. Down slid the front passenger seat window.

Zelma cautiously stepped down the porch steps and peered inside the Mercedes.

"Hop in," chirped Miss Gracious, reaching over from behind the steering wheel to open the door for Zelma.

"Where's...where's Charles?"

"I gave him the day off."

"And the limo?"

Miss Gracious didn't answer.

Zelma recoiled. At the very least she deserved an air-conditioned ride in a chauffeured limo. Otherwise the deal she'd cut with momma was off.

She turned to head back inside the manor, but smacked face first into a fleshy wall. It was momma, who'd snuck up behind Zelma. Momma seized her daughter by the shoulders and steered Zelma into the front seat alongside Miss Gracious.

The door shut and Zelma heard the click of automatic locks. Up rolled the windows as the Mercedes rattled down the driveway.

“My, aren’t we a sight,” said Miss Gracious, as she guided the Mercedes through the already opened gate and onto the street. “If you’re not the spitting image of my cousin Lulu.”

Zelma was a Lulu, all right. Dressed from head to toe in peach, from pumps to frilly dress. Even a peach ribbon pulled back the curtain of hennaed black hair that usually hid Zelma's downcast face.

This fashion nightmare began the moment Zelma had awakened. Her first sight was of momma standing overhead, brandishing a frilly peach dress as if it were a magic wand. It was supposed to transform Zelma into Kathy Cotillion, princess of the tea social.

Not in this lifetime. Zelma had bolted out of bed for the safety of her curtained lair. There she made a terrible discovery. Her clothesline hung bare. Panicked, she rummaged through her lair but couldn’t find a single black skirt or candy cane stocking.

Momma stood behind Zelma, chuckling. Then she raised the peach dress again. Wear it, momma warned, or Zelma could kiss her Wiccan wardrobe goodbye.

Zelma squirmed in the Mercedes. The peach pumps scrunched Zelma's toes. They were used to spreading out, shaping the soft leather of the slippers to the contours of her feet. The stiff collar of the dress chafed Zelma's neck. She felt a stranger in a strange dress.

“Are you all right, dear?” asked Miss Gracious.

Without answering Zelma glared out her window. Its tint darkened an otherwise sunny day.

She could feel Miss Gracious' gaze boring into the back of her head, trying to read her thoughts. She hoped her thick skull was impenetrable.

“You know, Mister Faircloth wasn’t from this part of town, either,” said Miss Gracious. “In fact, he wasn’t from Peachwood at all.”

It was the first time Zelma had ever heard Miss Gracious mention her husband. Still, Zelma didn’t answer, although it became a bit harder to stare out the window as if she couldn’t care less about Miss Gracious and her family. If Miss Gracious wanted to talk, she was going to have to talk to herself. Which is exactly what she did.

“Yes, Eustice Horatio grew up on a pecan plantation outside of Albany.” She pronounced the name of the small city like a South Georgian, “All-bean-nee.”

At the sound of her cavalry officer’s name Zelma instinctually sighed.

“Eustice III was the spitting image of his great grandfather. You know, the portrait of that dashing Confederate cavalry officer in the portrait gallery.”

Great grandfather, Miss Gracious had married her own kin? Why, that was about as white trash as you could get. Zelma struggled to smother a rising interest in Miss Gracious' family history. She must have not done a very good job, for Miss Gracious smiled at Zelma.

"Yes, Euie was my second cousin, on my father's side. We were quite close as children. We used to run wild among the pecan groves of my great uncle's plantation. You ever been in a pecan grove?"

Zelma couldn't say that she had. Then again, she didn't say anything at all.

"A pecan tree is nothing more than a big ol' hickory, limbs as thick and bushy as an ogre's arms." Miss Gracious chortled at her own description.

A giggle tried to bubble up Zelma's esophagus but she choked it back down.

Luckily, Miss Gracious' tone turned serious. "In a pecan grove it's almost as dark as night. It's easy to get lost and nearly impossible to see anything clearly. While I was running myself silly, I didn't see what was happening around me."

Zelma couldn't help it but Miss Gracious' story struck a chord. She too had missed the signs of impending disaster – even though they were right in front of her nose. Did Miss Gracious know this, too, is this why she was telling Zelma her life story?

"My daddy was a schemer and he was scheming how to retire to the country. His dream was to play plantation owner, like something out of "Gone With the Wind."

"Well, he knew my uncle was what you call land poor: He had thousands of acres of pecan trees but not a nickel to his name. So daddy offered to buy my great uncle's groves on one condition: That Euie and I be married. It was, my father gloated, his deal of all deals.

"You see, daddy didn't think a woman could run the family business. Now, in marrying me off to Euie, he found not only a man to run his business but one of the same bloodline.

"At first I didn't mind. It made daddy happy and I'd known Euie since I was a babe in the woods. Besides, he was so dashing.

"Too dashing, I soon learned. Euie dashed out of Peachwood as quick as he could. He was always off hunting boar or some other wild thing.

"Morocco, Sumatra – I couldn't even begin to pronounce the names of half the places he went to. Eventually, I lost all track of him.

"It broke daddy's heart when he saw Euie was no businessman. He left behind his beloved pecans and came back to Peachwood. He struggled to save his business but dropped dead soon after of a stroke.

"Euie never came back to help. Then he too died – in a plane wreck in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco.

“That left me to figure out how to run the mill.” Miss Gracious sighed. “I guess I made a mess of it.” She glanced at Zelma.

Zelma turned to face Miss Gracious, but she didn't look her in the eye. Instead, Zelma's gaze focused on Miss Gracious's pearls and bouffant. Had she really suffered too in the closing of the mill, as *momma* had intimated? Or was her story something *momma* had cooked up and then spoon-fed to Miss Gracious? That's certainly what Zelma wanted to believe.

## Chapter II

# Kathy Cotillion

The Mercedes turned into a passageway between two towering square hedges. Ahead sprawled a vast rolling emerald green carpet of grass. Down the center of the carpet ran an asphalt drive. The drive ended at a slight rise, atop of which sat a high white brick building with columns. It lorded over the carpet sprawled at its feet. This was Peachwood Country Club.

Hunched over the steering wheel, Miss Gracious sped along the drive. You'd have thought she didn't want to be seen. At the high steps of the club the Mercedes sputtered to a stop as if winded.

Again Zelma heard the click of automatic locks. "You go on in," said Miss Gracious.

"By myself?" Zelma recoiled at the thought.

"Go on," urged Miss Gracious. "I'll be along."

It was the first time Zelma had ever heard Miss Gracious sound nervous. She didn't move to get out of the car.

Miss Gracious reached across Zelma, opened the door and then pushed her out. The Mercedes sped off before Zelma could jump back inside.

Zelma was left, ankles wobbling in high heels, at the foot of the club. She eyed the high steps. They looked awful daunting. She hesitated, scoping out the scene around her.

An unlikely mix of cars began lining up in front of the club. There were the expected showboat Lincoln Town Cars and Cadillac Seviles of Peachwood's gentry. These were the families who'd supplied Faircloth mill with power, water and cloth. They'd long made the club their sanctuary. Zelma didn't know any of the daughters of these families, except by sight. And she didn't care much what they might think of her.

What did disturb Zelma was the sight of the Navigators, Tahoes and Land Rovers mixed in among the Lincolns and the Cadillacs. These were the cars of the people who sent their children to Peachwood High.

What were they doing here?

The doors of the SUVs opened and out waltzed girls in white, pink and peach frilly lace dresses, a gaggle of pretend Scarlets. These were faces Zelma recognized from school.

Zelma's face flushed the color of shame. No one here would be fooled by the deceit of her peach dress. She no more fit in here than a black swan in a flock of flamingos. Everyone would know it. Zelma would be a laughingstock come Monday at school.

Her first instinct was to run away back down the drive. But that would require navigating a growing maze of cars pulling up in front of the club. No doubt someone would recognize her before she cleared the maze.

The only practical escape was up. Giant potted hibiscuses, lush with red flowers, adorned the top of the stairs. Zelma could hide behind them until all the girls had entered the club and then take off down the drive. Miss Gracious be damned.

Up the high stairs Zelma dashed as fast as her badly wobbling ankles would carry her. At the top she stumbled into the bushes. Peering through the flowers, Zelma watched girls stream into the club. No one seemed to notice her.

Zelma shifted her gaze to the grounds of the club, searching for her chaperone. She didn't want to accidentally bump into Miss Gracious on her way out. Finally, Zelma spotted her walking slowly up the club's long driveway. The Mercedes was nowhere in sight, as if Miss Gracious had purposely hidden it.

Dang, there was no way to avoid Miss Gracious. But Zelma bet she could outrun her, especially if she slipped off these awful shoes.

As Zelma reached down to slip off her pumps a hand gently seized her by an elbow. Startled, Zelma's wobbly ankles finally buckled. She would have fallen face first into the hibiscus, but the hand holding Zelma's elbow held her upright.

Zelma turned to look up into the face of a courtly gray-haired man in a blue blazer. "This way Miss Zelma."

"Do I know you?"

The man smiled faintly, holding Zelma firmly by the elbow.

"Miss Gracious suggested you might need some help finding your way," said the man, as he guided Zelma into the club.

Zelma struggled to wriggle free of the man's surprisingly strong grip. He finally released her inside a grand ballroom. Then he bowed and exited.

The room hummed with the slurping of tea, the munching of cookies and the murmuring of gossip. What Zelma didn't hear was the low buzz of sneering. Not a face smirked at her.

Momma had been right, if for the wrong reason. Lulu's dress had indeed worked a kind of magic. Not that she had become some kind of tea princess. But no one recognized Zelma stripped of raven eyes, black skirt and candy cane stockings. Here she was just another leggy young flamingo.

So camouflaged, Zelma could see without being seen. What she saw reminded her less of a tea party than the dance hall scene in *West Side Story*, with the Jets huddled on one side of the gymnasium and the Sharks on the other.

At Peachwood Country Club it was the Cadillac Sevilles versus the Chevy Suburbans. The Sevilles were the decidedly smaller group, an endangered people that represented the likes of the Stillwaters and the Ridgedales. These were the clans that had once controlled the high ridge of Peachwood Heights.

Their remaining female prodigy huddled in one corner. They were dressed elegantly but simply in plain skirt suits of olive and ochre. Golden broaches adorned the lapels of their blouses. There wasn't a lacy bow in the bunch.

Every so often one of the mothers would glance disdainfully over at the fluttering Scarlets gathered in an opposing corner. Decked out in frilly dresses of pink, white and violet, the Scarlets pretended to ignore the disdainful glances.

In her lacy peach dress, Lulu was ahead of her time, thought Zelma, an unrecognized – or willfully ignored - omen.

There was a clear DMZ between the two clans that led to a back door. Did it lead to the outside and freedom? Zelma intended to find out tout de suite, as her French teacher would say.

She moved toward the door but was stopped after only one step, lassoed around the waist by a slender arm. "There you are!" cried Miss Gracious, tightening her grip on Zelma.

What was it with mothers? Zelma fumed. No matter what their girth they all seemed to have grips of steel.

"Shall we mingle?"

It was not a question. Miss Gracious dragged Zelma toward the mothers and daughters of Peachwood's dwindling gentry. "Look, there's the Stillwaters. Isn't Louisa your age?"

Zelma did indeed know Louisa. She was one of those who laughed hardest when Bunky tormented Zelma on the bus. If Louisa recognized Zelma now she didn't let on. She looked past Zelma, eyes glassy, smiling sweetly.

Maybe Louisa didn't want to be here any more than Zelma. Maybe her mind had crept off to some dark fantasy world. Then again, Louisa had never exhibited any signs of an imagination. Her stories in English class had about as much character as an empty closet.

Miss Gracious and Mrs. Stillwater embraced each other ever so lightly, with fingertips manicured into sharpened claws. Then they stepped back to eye each other warily.

"Did you hear?" chirped Miss Gracious, "we've raised nearly \$5,000 to refurbish the confederate memorial in the Square."

Mrs. Stillwater looked unimpressed. "I'm afraid that still leaves us \$5,000 shy of our goal."

Smiling hard, Miss Gracious said, "I'm sure we'll raise the rest."

This was darn curious, thought Zelma. Sure, the Stillwaters were an old family with a big house, but it didn't sit atop its own knoll. Yet here was Miss Gracious almost groveling for Mrs. Stillwater's approval.

Was it because Mrs. Stillwater's family had suffered too in the closing of the mill? Or was it that Miss Gracious had disgraced herself in marrying such a rake – supposedly, that is.

Mrs. Stillwater's gaze drifted to Zelma. "Why Miss Gracious, I didn't know you had a daughter?"

"I don't, of course. But Zelma and I are pretending for the day. Aren't we dear?"

Zelma didn't answer.

Mrs. Stillwater eyed Zelma's dress as if wondering whether the heart of a daughter of the Lost Cause beat under all that frilly peach lace. "You must tell me about this faux daughter of yours."

Miss Gracious smiled nervously, suddenly at a loss for words.

Go on now, Zelma's gaze egged on Miss Gracious. Spew out some fanciful tale to explain this make-believe daughter at your side. You can do it. Just like that hokum in the ride over to the club.

Zelma's heart sank with the tormented look on Miss Gracious' face. You'd have thought she'd never fibbed a day in her life.

Well, there was no way Zelma was going to let Miss Gracious blab that she was the daughter of a maid, a servant child who lived in the attic of Faircloth Manor.

Not with Louisa's glassy eyes starting to focus on Zelma. Imagine what Bunky would do with the real story of Zelma's life. He'd put her in the laughingstock hall of fame.

"My daddy's in the foreign service," Zelma blurted. The words had just popped out. Still, Zelma liked the sound of them.

"Is that so," said Mrs. Stillwater, glancing at Miss Gracious for confirmation.

Miss Gracious smiled weakly.

"Yes," said Zelma, glancing both ways, "it's all very hush, hush."

## Chapter 12

# Elwood of Arabia

“You can tell us, child,” encouraged Mrs. Stillwater. “We’re all family here, aren’t we Miss Gracious?”

Miss Gracious silently fumbled with her pearl necklace.

Zelma, however, confidently eyed Mrs. Stillwater. Storytelling was as powerful as any magic. And she’d learned its secrets well, perched atop the knee of a master at Egg Betty’s. In his honor, Zelma would cast a spell that would leave Peachwood’s tea and cookie crowd in awe of her daddy.

“Truth is, I don’t know where my daddy is,” said Zelma.

“That’s terrible,” said Mrs. Stillwater. “And your mother?”

“She’s with daddy, as always. He wouldn’t dare such a dangerous mission without her.”

Zelma paused as other mothers and their daughters began gathering around, drawn by the rapt look of the Stillwaters.

“Yes,” Zelma sighed, “no one has heard from my parents since they crossed into Kazakhstan.”

“Kazakhstan?” said Mrs. Stillwater, “where on earth is that?”

“Imagine a high arid grassland filled with warring nomadic tribes no one has ever conquered. That’s Kazakhstan.”

“My lord, child, why would anyone go there?”

“Oil, Mrs. Stillwater, oil.” Zelma lowered her voice, forcing everyone gathered around her to lean in if they wanted to hear more. “There’s so much oil in Kazakhstan it lies puddled atop the high plains. Big oily bubbles of it float in the nearby Caspian Sea.”

Eyes grew wide trying to grasp the enormity of Kazakhstan's oil wealth, which happened to be true. Zelma had learned about it while researching a geography assignment. Who knew such seemingly useless information would one day come in so handy?

"My parents mission is simple: Persuade the warring tribes of Kazakhstan to open their oily desert to American companies. If they do there will be enough oil to fuel every Cadillac and Land Cruiser in Peachwood for a century."

For a moment a hushed adoration enveloped Zelma. Then a note of skepticism pricked the bubble of awe.

"That's not what I heard."

The piercing words came from somewhere in back of the crowd of women, who parted to see who had spoken.

There stood the blond from the school bus. She wore a silky white blouse that draped a small but shapely bust. Her face was as smooth and as shapely as an opal, with full lips and arched, pencil-thin eyebrows. She would have been beautiful, if not for her cutting blue eyes. Zelma felt them probing again for her heart.

"Alyssa Johnson, what are you going on about?" said Mrs. Stillwater.

"Why don't you ask Zelma," said Alyssa.

Mrs. Stillwater turned to face Zelma. "Well?"

No answer was forthcoming. Where Zelma had once stood a peach ribbon fluttered to the ground.

## Chapter 13

### Bee charmer

All her life Zelma had heard tall tales about her Gamby Esmeralda. How she danced with woodland spirits in the moonlight and cured the lovelorn with brews of hogwort and sarsaparilla. Gamby could reach deep inside a tree trunk swarming with bees and retrieve fresh honeycomb. Never had she been stung.

“Yessir,” said daddy, “she was a real bee charmer.” He’d been the one to tell Zelma all these tales.

“Sweet weeping Jesus,” momma growled every time daddy when on about Gamby.

She’d rather swallow a heaping spoonful of Castor oil than say a word about her own mother. That’s why momma had come down out of the North Georgia mountains: to find her a man who’d rescue her from a life of bee charming.

Momma had found her savior, all right. Little did she know that city folk had charmers of their own, although of a different sort. Daddy was no good at saving lost souls, but he sure knew how to hold a bunch of good ol’ boys spellbound.

Daddy never would hush up about Gamby. It was as if he’d found a kindred soul. On and on he’d jabber about her. Zelma's favorite story: The time Gamby had scared off the state highway men.

The story began when the state decided to build a new road right through the rocky hillock Gamby called home. The highway men offered her a good price. All the same Gamby said she wasn’t selling.

Well, those highway men weren’t taking no for an answer; they meant to have their road. Bulldozer after bulldozer was dispatched to flatten Gamby’s hillock. Not one of them got closer than a hundred yards.

The plow fell off the first bulldozer. Every tire blew out on the second. And the third's engine exploded in flames. After that no bulldozer would raise its plow against Gamby. The road was rerouted around her house.

"Hogwash," said momma. "Never happened."

Maybe not, but it was daddy Zelma chose to believe. You see, Zelma had actually met Gamby, if only once. Still, it was a visit she'd never forget.

Zelma had been six. She'd been dropped off at Gamby's for the day so Momma and daddy could attend the funeral of some distant relative.

She found herself looking up at that indestructible hillock of a house. It had a grassy roof hung low over two narrow windows like shaggy eyebrows, giving the house the face of a grumpy old wizard.

Gamby greeted Zelma at the door dressed head to toe in black. Gray hair cascaded down her broad shoulders and she carried a gnarled wooden broom with straw bristles. Gamby looked the picture book image of a witch, except for the ruddy face that beamed a toothy smile.

Zelma followed Gamby inside to find a dwelling more cavern than home. Ledges had been carved out of the stone walls. Jars upon jars crowded the ledges filled with beetles and grubs, lichens and moss, roots and bark.

It turned out that Gamby's cavern was the Egg Betty's of backwoods Georgia. People came day and night to sample her cooking, if you could call it that. Her menu represented what the town dump might serve, and it smelled like it, too. Yet no one complained as they slurped down teas of cicada wings and ginseng.

As she cooked Gamby consulted a tome bound in red velvet. She read aloud from the book, dispatching Zelma to scale up the rocky sides of the cavern to fetch jars of ingredients. It was great fun and Zelma was an eager helper. Gamby smiled approvingly at Zelma's enthusiasm.

"Did you know that you're named after my mother?"

"Momma never told me that!"

"I image not."

"What was she like, Gamby?"

"Why she was a bona fide hero during the war."

"No!"

"Yessiree, she saved the life of many a poor reb soldier."

Gamby might have well have told Zelma she were descended from royalty.

“And she did all with this here book,” added Gamby, holding up the red tome.

After that first visit Zelma nagged momma to take her back to Gamby’s, but she never would. Then it was too late.

In the March of Zelma's 10th year a rare blizzard struck. It was especially harsh in the North Georgia Mountains. At the height of the storm, Gamby had donned a black shawl and wandered out into the blinding snow. She was never seen again; no body ever found.

Or so said the mountain folk. Daddy said it was as if Gamby had chosen the moment of her own death. Momma scolded him to stop such talk in front of Zelma.

While gone Gamby made sure she wasn’t forgotten. Three weeks after she disappeared a package arrived for Zelma. It was quite exciting, since she rarely got even a letter. Now here was this lump of a package that looked like a wedge of granite wrapped in homemade paper and tied up with vine. There was no return address.

Zelma tore open the package to find the red book of blue magic. Momma clucked with disapproval, but daddy wouldn’t let her throw it out.

At first Zelma didn’t know what to make of Gamby’s book. The words shone like the blue of a robin’s egg, scratched onto the rough-hewn paper as if by a raven’s claw. They were beautiful yet slightly menacing – and totally indecipherable.

For weeks after school, Zelma sat with the red book cradled in her lap, trying to decipher the blue scrawl. Finally momma threatened to burn the book if Zelma didn’t get back to her homework. Zelma stashed it out of momma’s reach, behind the books on her highest shelf. The red book was so well hidden that Zelma soon forgot about it herself.

Then one day the book reached out to Zelma. It did so at the single most horrible moment of her life.

## Chapter 14

# Embrace the wind

Yellow pollen dusted Zelma's hair as if she were pixilated. It was a beautiful late April day and school would be out in a month. Zelma meandered home from Pleasant Crump Middle School through the back streets of Milltown, lost in a daydream.

Faircloth Mill had reopened. Daddy was working again as the mill's chief mechanic. He'd stopped drinking and momma had let him come home. Now he sat on the front steps of their house. Kepi in hand, he waited for his only daughter, his Princess Brainiac.

As if indeed a dream come true, a bulky figure hunkered down on the curb at the end of the street. The figure waved something at Zelma. Was it a battered kepi? Zelma took off, her backpack clattering like the hooves of galloping horse. But her pace slowed to a wary trot as she neared the figure.

There was something waving, all right, but it wasn't a kepi in her father's hand. A pair of Mickey the Sorcerer underwear flapped in the breeze. It dangled from the upturned base of a standing lamp. The lamp base protruded from a tangled pile of clothes, bedding and furniture heaped on the curb.

At first Zelma tried to pretend she was staring at the innards of some stranger's house. An unmistakable giveaway foiled her pretense.

The bloody red spine of Gamby's book jutted out of the top of the heap. Its velvet cover was tattered and smeared, as if the book had clawed its way up from the bottom of the pile, determined to grab Zelma's eye. She seized the grimy book and clutched it to her breast.

The red book of blue magic was the only thing saved from the eviction.

Momma didn't even take her favorite spatula, half-melted from flipping countless battered legs of fried chicken. It was amazing how she could molt one life to make way for a new one, shedding her years in Milltown as she had her upbringing in North Georgia.

Not Zelma. Milltown was a life she didn't care to discard. It fit her like a favorite, if worn, pair of underwear.

Zelma swore she'd find a way back to the world she'd lost. And she was convinced the secret to the journey home lay within the red book of blue magic. Why else had it reached out to her? It was as if Gamby had left Zelma the red book knowing this day would come.

This time Zelma studied the red book like an archeologist trying to decipher hieroglyphics. It was slow going. Weeks passed before Zelma could make out words from the blue scrawl. Slowly words formed sentences, sentences whole passages.

Understanding the passages was another story. Gamby's book read like a cross between the Bible and the Southern League cookbook, a faith revealed through cryptic musings and recipes. They were utterly mystifying yet irresistible. Zelma began to obey every word as if it were scripture.

"Live life in the shadows," the red book advised. "The better to watch than to be watched." So Zelma had shucked her blue jeans and sneakers for black skirts and slippers.

The red book said: "Embrace the wind, ever ready to be swept away." No one was more wind-ready than Zelma, in her slippers and billowy skirt.

"If you must step from the shadows, make the world stand back, wary."

After reading that, Zelma had painted her eyes up like a raven and donned candy cane stockings.

And the red book said: "Chase away an ill wind with a foul odor. A bat should work nicely. Char until crisp. Pulverize and pitch into the offending wind."

If ever there were an offending wind it was Bunky. Yet the bat cinders had done him no more harm than if Zelma had dusted him with powdered sugar.

After more than three months of hard, reverent study, most of the red book still mystified. Nowhere could Zelma find the answer to how Gamby had stopped the bulldozers of change from flattening her burrow of a house. And why, after such sweet victory, had she wandered off into oblivion?

Zelma did find this: "The grindstones of life are ever turning. Standstill and become the grist for misfortune."

Dang if Zelma knew what that meant.

## Chapter 15

### Old Nellie big cheeks

“You come on out of there, hear?” Miss Gracious’s head poked out of the rolled down window of the Mercedes as she peered into the dark ravine that ran along the backside of the club.

Zelma heard, all right, but she stayed put, hidden behind a veil of wisteria.

She had dashed out of the club like Cinderella racing against the clock. Sure as rain, Alyssa Johnson meant to turn Zelma back into a servant girl and her father into a mouse. There was no point in sticking around to see that pumpkin gored.

What Zelma hadn’t expected was to be chased. Miss Gracious had doggedly tailed her in that sputtering Mercedes. In desperation, Zelma had veered off the road and into the ravine. Low creepers had immediately snagged the heels of Zelma’s pumps. She fell face first into the forest’s rotting branches and leaves.

From behind Zelma heard the Mercedes pull alongside the curb bordering the ravine. She jumped up in her stocking feet and scampered behind some wisteria. Through the veil of silvery thin branches she could see the peach of her abandoned pumps strangled in some creepers. Did Miss Gracious see them, too?

“Zelma Dupree, you come on out of there this minute.”

Why couldn’t Miss Gracious just leave her be? Zelma had a mind to never come out. She didn’t fancy having to explain to momma why’d she lied and then run off. Or facing kids in school come Monday. Alyssa was sure to tell everyone about her fanciful tale. Imagine what Bunky would do with such material.

Miss Gracious called until her voice grew hoarse, but still Zelma couldn’t bring herself to come out of her hiding place. Finally, she heard Miss Gracious’ Mercedes grumble away.

Now what?

Zelma's gaze sank to the ground. Tiny red mushrooms blanketed the forest floor. They reminded her of one of daddy's favorite tales.

Down at Egg Betty's daddy liked to brag about the time he'd discovered Bubba Large-mouth's secret lair. Yet his words weren't boastful, but rather hushed and reverent, as if telling of a Holy Quest.

For a month he'd tracked Bubba along the wilder reaches of the Chattahoochee. He lived off wild berries, grubs and mushrooms. When lucky, he'd spear a baby trout with a sharpened stick.

Zelma had never fancied herself a nature girl, but could she learn? Mushrooms blanketed the floor of the ravine as far as the eye could see. There were surely enough of them to sustain a scrawny teenage girl for a while.

Zelma plucked a mushroom at her foot. It was the color of a swollen blister and about as appetizing. Still.... a girl had to do what a girl had to do. She raised the mushroom to her mouth, but she couldn't make her lips open.

Then, from behind, Zelma heard the kudzu rustle. She turned sharply. There creeping through the vines was a figure with a touch of grey.

Could this be where daddy had been hiding out all these months, living off mushrooms and other somesuch? Zelma could kick herself for not having thought of it sooner.

"Daddy!" Zelma's cry rang out like the crack of a rifle shot.

The figure bounded off like a startled deer. Still, Zelma could make out a worn grey kepi moving through the vines and branches.

Zelma jumped to her feet. She tried to chase after the worn kepi but soon became entangled in kudzu and creepers. How did daddy do it? Zelma's gaze searched for a safe passage up the ravine. There, about 20 feet to her left, ran a brook. It trickled down the gentle slope of the ravine.

Zelma struggled through prickly underbrush that tore at her dress and stockings. Finally, she reached the brook and jumped in. The water was ankle deep. Her feet sank into silky mud that soothed her scratches.

For a moment Zelma stood sighing. Her gaze snagged on the trunk of what looked like an ancient willow. Was that a red blotch on its bark? Zelma splashed to the tree and touched its trunk. There were butternut wool threads snagged in the grooves of the bark.

A shiver ran up her spine. Was daddy hurt? She looked up for the kepi, spotted it, and sloshed up the brook in pursuit.

The ravine ran up the backside of Peachwood Heights. It was here the Stillwaters and their ilk lived. None of these families had earned enough to buy the Heights all to them-

selves, the way the Faircloth's had their own knoll. But they did well enough to build big houses along the Heights' crest. Their homes looked down on the simple folk in the river basin.

The families of Peachwood Heights had commissioned a sculpture to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the opening of Faircloth Mill, founded in 1867. Without that mill the town would have been another Jonesboro or Chattanooga, a charred wreck that took a century to recover from the War of Northern Aggression.

They'd hired a famous Dutch artist with a name that sounded to Zelma's ears like Poopenscoopen. And, true to his name, he'd made a sculpture that looked not unlike a giant pair of iron bloomers. Perched atop the Heights, its impressive cheeks mooned the square.

The sculpture soon became the butt of jokes down in Milltown. Daddy christened it "Old Nellie Big Cheeks," the patron saint of Peachwood. He swore the bloomers were modeled after the reputedly mammoth dernier of Miss Nellie, the Faircloth family matriarch. It was she who'd built the mill with money borrowed from Yankee financiers.

Zelma hadn't seen old Nellie Big Cheeks mooning the square in some time. She'd figured kudzu had finally swallowed her up. If true, wouldn't that make Old Nellie, entangled in thick vines, the perfect hideout? Daddy could live in such a kudzu cave sheltered from sun and rain.

Zelma splattered up the brook, certain she'd cornered her elusive father at last.

## Chapter 16

### Limestone majesty

Just beneath the crest of Peachwood Heights, Zelma stopped cold in her tracks, breathless at what she beheld. Gone were the big houses that had crested the Heights, standing shoulder to shoulder, as if fighting for a spot atop this hilltop perch.

In their place now stood a single house. It sat askew – neither facing the street nor the ravine. The place was baronial in its limestone majesty. Zelma counted eight – eight! – towering one-piece limestone columns. Each was crowned with a hand-carved Corinthian ornamentation.

Along the second floor was a cast iron terrace fronting 10 French double-door windows. Jane Austin's Mr. Darcy would have felt quite comfy here. The only thing missing were the lobster footmen.

Speaking of missing, where was Old Nellie? Woe to the owner of this askew palace if he – or she - had flattened Old Nellie, too. In a panic, Zelma ran across a pink cobblestone driveway and onto a vast lawn.

Her gaze swept the estate, from the stone fence enclosing the manor to the giant carved lions standing at either side of the front door. Finally, she spotted a promising clue to Nellie's whereabouts. Alongside the road, just outside a far corner of the stone fence, stood a high clump of kudzu. It aped a shape not unlike somebody's sizeable hindquarters.

Zelma raced across the lawn, scrambled over the stone fence and leaped onto the tangle of kudzu. She dug her feet deep into the vines. At last her soles found the gritty surface of rusting iron. Old Nellie lived.

Atop the kudzu-entangled sculpture Zelma had quite a view. Her gaze again swept across the estate and nearby ravine, but she didn't find any charred patches of former campfires or trodden circles of grass. No reclusive hermit in a grey kepi had curled up here for the night.

What she did see was why the limestone palace had been set askew. Its French doors looked eye to eye with the windows of Faircloth Manor.

If this were a stare down, the Faircloths were faring none too well. From where Zelma stood their manor looked no more than a carriage house in comparison to this new mansion. The manor also seemed to be slipping down its knoll, as if slowly but surely losing its footing.

Indeed, all that Zelma had once known seemed to be slipping away: The old houses of Peachwood Heights, Marley's, and Old Nellie.

Zelma cast her gaze far and wide, desperately seeking anything familiar. On the other side of Peachwood she found it. A jaunty neon green smile beamed at her from Milltown. The smile belonged to a porcine face under a paper grocer's hat. It was the icon adorning Wig Piggler's, Milltown's supermarket.

"Y'all come on down," Zelma crooned, mimicking the pig's familiar television jingle. "And get the best pork ribs in town."

Zelma leaped off Old Nellie. She hit the street in stockings worn out at the toes. In a tattered, green-streaked peach dress, Zelma trooped down the face of Peachwood Heights.

In no time she was completely lost.

## Chapter 17

# Stucco

Zelma found herself in a labyrinth of new streets, where every street she tried looped back on itself, like a snake trying to bite its own tail.

The naming scheme wasn't much help, either. Peachwood Heights Terrace, Peachwood Heights Drive and Peachwood Heights Circle. You couldn't tell one street from another. Nor were there any landmarks - a big oak or a corner grocery to get a co'cola and some directions - as there were in Milltown.

In fact, everything looked maddeningly alike on the face of the Heights. There was one walled compound after another, each with a largely identical village of large stucco homes. Every house had a giant garage and a tiny yard. The only thing that varied was the name of the compounds. There was a Giverny, a Versailles and a Mount Saint Michel. What did these people think, that some fancy French names might turn a fraying underwear town into gay "Paree"?

Zelma stopped in front of a compound named Chemonceau. Hadn't this been home to the Ridgedale stables? Now there were a dozen some odd homes.

Looks like Mrs. Stillwater wasn't such a gullible old fool after all. She'd done all right for herself. Her grand house, stable and gardens must have fetched a pretty penny.

Why hadn't Miss Gracious sold out, too? Her house would have fetched three times that of the Stillwater's. Not that Zelma wanted Miss Gracious to sell out, mind you. Still, Miss Gracious' tenacity defied reason, like General Hood, who refused to surrender even when encircled.

As she resumed walking, Zelma felt not unlike a lone soldier behind enemy lines. There was plenty of traffic now, but she was the only walker. Not surprising, really, given that there weren't any sidewalks.

Now Milltown had sidewalks, Zelma remembered proudly. Well, the remnants of sidewalks, since the roots of ancient oaks and sycamores had sundered most of them. Nobody, of course, had the money to repair the fractured concrete.

Land Rovers and Navigators rumbled passed Zelma. Faces pressed against the windows gawked at her. But none of them stopped to offer help or directions. Joking Jesus, Zelma didn't understand these people.

If only she'd paid more attention on the way home from school. These were the same streets her bus traversed every weekday.

Tired and bewildered, Zelma could see only one avenue of escape from the Heights: a desperate downhill charge. It would mean scaling walls and crashing through manicured shrubbery. No doubt she'd have to brave thorny rose bushes and a Doberman or two. Her only weapon would be a rebel yell that could rattle the flowerpots off window sills.

As she steeled herself for the charge, Zelma glimpsed a familiar face. It belonged to the Asian girl with thick glasses from the school bus. The girl peered out from the rear window of a Nissan Pathfinder, which had paused ahead at a stop sign. Her brow wrinkled, as if she understood that Zelma was lost.

For a hot moment Zelma flushed with shame. Even this girl recognized that Zelma was a stranger in her own town. Zelma wanted to turn and hightail it back to the ravine.

What stopped her was the Asian girl's sudden urgent beckoning. Would the Pathfinder lead her out of Peachwood Heights? Zelma swallowed her pride and began trotting behind the SUV as it lumbered through the maze of streets.

Sure enough, Zelma found herself at the foot of the Heights. Ahead loomed Ol' Stumpy in the square. Head down, she barreled through the square, hoping no one would recognize her. Zelma had almost made it across when her gaze snagged on something outside the Videorama.

It was a gleaming silver skateboard. Zelma was no stranger to skateboards, having grown up with two brothers. But those boards had all been wooden. This one looked made of silver yet dangled from a boy's fingertips as if no heavier than a feather. It must have been constructed out of some lightweight metal used in space flight. Such a thing must have cost a small fortune.

Unable to resist, Zelma glanced up at the face of the skateboard's owner. It was Bunky. He stood with his back toward her, talking with a bunch of other boys.

Zelma looked back down at her feet and sped by, hoping Bunky wouldn't recognize the passing muddy peach blur.

Soon Zelma reached the tracks behind the square, wincing as her now bare feet crossed the rusting metal. She zoomed through the no man's land of crumpling brick buildings.

On the other side of the old factories and warehouses was a neighborhood of brick and clapboard bungalows that sloped down toward the river. Many of the houses, especially those closest to the tracks, were shuttered and gangrened with moss.

Beyond these downtrodden houses glowed Zelma's beacon of hope. Wig Piggler's neon smile beamed as bright as if the mill were still spinning underwear day and night.

Zelma's heart quickened. Judging by the peaking heat of the sun, it must be about 4 p.m. Which meant that Andrea should be showing up any minute for her shift as cashier at Wig Piggler's.

No one had better mastered the fine art of contempt. Andrea's lips, ever so faintly sneering, could silence a chatty customer at 20 paces.

Zelma broke into a victory trot toward Wig Piggler's. Now she'd prove momma wrong. Faircloth Manor wasn't their home. Not now, not ever.

## Chapter 18

### The brain and the brawn

Momma never cared much for Andrea, with her studded leather jacket and skull-decaled skateboard. None of that bothered Daddy. Not as long as Andrea continued to slam dunk Pleasant Crump girl's basketball team to championship after championship. It was the school's only winning team. Daddy never missed a game, cheering Andrea on from the front bleachers.

Zelma loved Andrea, too, although not for her dunking prowess. The two girls had first met in the sandbox battleground of the First Baptist Church. Zelma couldn't have been more than five at the time.

It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon in September. Lost in her own fantasy world, Zelma built castles in the sand. She never saw Hootie Babcock as he crept up on her from behind. A cupped hand proudly held aloft dog poop so fresh it was still warm. Hootie swung out in front of Zelma and smeared her favorite Merlin the Wizard tee shirt with poop. Zelma shot up, bawling in helpless indignation.

Hootie dropped to his knees and howled. Tears of laughter blinded him to the girl in the ragged sleeveless tee shirt who now crept up on him from behind. She seized Hootie around the chest. He gagged in mid-howl as the girl lifted him off the ground. She threw him face first into the sandbox. Now it was Hootie's turn to bawl.

A finger wagging playground monitor rushed out of the church. She didn't scold Hootie but the pint-sized she-Hercules. Outraged, Zelma charged to defend her knight in scruffy black tee shirt. She brandished her poop-smeared tee shirt in the face of the monitor, who hightailed it back inside the safe confines of the church.

Then and there Zelma and Andrea found themselves bond in an unspoken alliance, forever sealed in dog poop. From kindergarten through 8th grade Andrea served as Zelma's protector. No one dared pummel Zelma for dragging out class with her ceaseless questions. Not even Jo-nella Brown and her gang of ring-studded ruffians.

In return, Zelma did most of Andrea's homework, helping to keep her grades just high enough to stay on the basketball team. Together they were a dynamic duo: Zelma and Andrea, the brain and the brawn.

At Pleasant Crump Zelma was beloved. Not for her academic prowess, per say. No one save momma cared much that she was a straight A student. Everyone just loved how she kept the school's star player on the basketball court.

After Zelma moved into Faircloth Manor she'd tried valiantly to stay in touch with Andrea. It wasn't easy. For one, Momma was glad to be rid of Andrea. So Zelma had to call her old friend when momma was out of the room. But only the downstairs salon and foyer had a telephone, both of which were rotary. Zelma hated to admit it, but she wouldn't mind having one of those cellphones all the girls had at Peachwood High.

Still, Zelma had managed to sneak in several calls to Andrea. Each time Andrea was out, and she'd never called back. Or, Zelma suspected, she had indeed called back, but momma had picked up the phone and never relayed the message. That would be just like her. Always trying to control Zelma.

Now, at long last, here was Andrea. Zelma could see her clearly as she entered the bustling parking lot of Wig Piggler's. Andrea sat atop a wobbly plastic table in front of the supermarket, in studded jacket and red high-top sneakers. Arms crossed limply over a knee, cigarette dangling from her fingertips, Andrea looked disgusted with her own boredom. At Andrea's side, in matching leather jacket and sneakers, stood Jo-nella, her back to Zelma.

How queer. Andrea had never smoked. Nor had she ever given Jo-nella the time of day. The two had long been rivals, with Jo-nella envious of Andrea's athletic prowess. Now here they were joined in some kind of unspoken pact of leather-studded boredom.

No matter, Zelma reassured herself. One look at Zelma and Andrea would forget all about the pugnacious Jo-nella. Andrea too had become lost and confused. Zelma shuddered at all the whacked things she'd done since her forced separation from her best friend.

"Hey-ay," Zelma hollered out across the parking lot in her thickest drawl.

Andrea continued staring blankly at the pavement. Zelma's call must have become lost in the din of rattling shopping carts, shouting children and honking cars. Guess Zelma would just have to surprise her old friend. What could be sweeter?

Zelma imagined sneaking up on Andrea and socking her in the arm. "Hey, Brawn," she'd taunt.

"Brain," Andrea would sneer and then hook her pinky with Zelma's. They'd wrangle in a brief tug of war that Andrea would easily win. Then all would be right again.

Zelma weaved through the parking lot, navigating an obstacle course of cars and grocery-laden shopping carts.

All the while she tried to keep her gaze locked on Andrea. But out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed a most disconcerting sight: Alyssa Johnson meandered across the parking lot, still in white dress from the country club. Head cocked sideways and teeth bared, she gnawed on a stick of beef jerky.

Zelma couldn't help it. Her head turned 180 degrees to behold this spectacle. In her white dress, Zelma's nemesis looked out of place here, yet strangely familiar as she chewed that jerky like a dog with its favorite bone.

Alyssa's head suddenly jerked erect. Her eyes darted about the parking lot. Although she never spotted Zelma, Alyssa thrust the gnawed, drool-slathered jerky down the breast of her dress - and then sped off.

Zelma couldn't stop gawking, her eyes bird-dogging Alyssa as she fled the parking lot. Her feet, though, continued to stride toward Andrea.

Thunk!

Zelma rammed into a bony wall of leather and studs. It collapsed and Zelma toppled over. At least she didn't hit concrete. The leather cushioned her fall. Sprawled face up, Zelma found herself looking up into Andrea's startled face.

Zelma had surprised her best friend, all right, if not exactly as she'd planned.

## Chapter 19

# You're the lucky one

The leather and bones beneath Zelma turned out to be Jo-nella. "Dawg-gum-it!" she barked and flexed a scrawny back of surprising strength. Zelma bounced off Jo-nella as if she were no more than a rubber ball. Again, she lay supine on the concrete, but this time without any leather cushioning.

Jo-nella sprang to her feet, ring stuffed-fists raised for combat. She looked down at Zelma as if she were a stranger.

"It's me," groaned Zelma.

"Jo-nella's eyes widened with recognition. "Brain?"

Zelma nodded.

"Well, I'll be." Jo-nella lowered her fists and studied Zelma with a growing smile. "Whadja do, fight your way out of some cotillion?"

Zelma looked down at herself. The peach dress was streaked green and splattered orange with mud. Zelma's stockings had worn away clear up to her knees. "Kinda."

Jo-nella snorted in approval.

Andrea, though, didn't look at Zelma. Instead, she glared at the crushed cigarette in her fingers.

Zelma tried to get Andrea's attention. "So how's them rebels? Clinch the playoffs yet?"

"Gawd," sneered Jo-nella, "where you been?"

"Right here," said Zelma defensively.

Jo-nella snorted again. "Everybody knows Andrea don't play for the rebels no more."

Zelma sat up. "Say what?"

"Got bounced from the team," explained Jo-nella matter-of-factly. "Flunked history or somesuch."

Andrea's glare shifted from the crushed cigarette to Zelma.

"Sorry," mumbled Zelma, "I didn't know." She stared at her swollen and blistered feet for a long moment. Then her eyes brightened. Why, with Zelma's help, Andrea could be back on the team in no time. She looked up to tell her friend so, but Andrea cut her off.

"I hear you're doing all right."

Stunned, Zelma croaked, "Who told you that?"

"Oh hell," said Jo-nella, "everybody knows you're living all high and mighty up at the manor." She spat out the words in way that made Zelma feel like a Benedict Arnold.

"That's not true," protested Zelma, turning to glare at the smirking Jo-nella.

"Now how's that?" said Andrea.

"Well," Zelma tried to begin, but she couldn't bring herself to continue. The story of her journey to Faircloth Manor wasn't one she relished telling.

"I bet it has something to do with her daddy running off," quipped Jo-nella.

Zelma jumped to her feet, eyes challenging. Jo-nella had the neck of a chicken, made for throttling. If only Zelma had momma's steely grip.

"Don't pay her no mind," said Andrea, waving a dismissive hand at Jo-nella. "She just likes trouble."

"That's mighty white of you," said Jo-nella, grinning at the description of herself.

Zelma's gaze drifted back to Andrea, who had suddenly come to her defense. Or had she? There wasn't a trace of sympathy in Andrea's expression. It was as stony as the face of Stone Mountain. "You should be happy," Andrea said.

"Happy?" said Zelma as if she'd just been slapped.

"Sure," said Andrea, nodding toward the supermarket behind her. "At least your daddy don't work alongside you bagging groceries."

Zelma pictured daddy bagging cans of Beanie Weenies and Beefaroni for the same men he'd held spellbound at Egg Betty's. It about made her sob aloud.

"I hear tell," said Jo-nella, winking at Andrea, "that Miss Gracious has adopted Zelma as her own kin."

“That’s a damned lie!” Zelma raised a clinched hand in Jo-nella’s face.

Jo-nella snickered at Zelma's puny fist.

“Is it now?” said Andrea, eyeing Zelma's tattered peach dress.

## Chapter 20

# Astray

Go on," barked Jo-nella. "beat it."

Obediently, Zelma scurried off, but not toward the manor. Instead, she meandered the narrow streets of Milltown like a stray dog.

Zelma knew she should head home. It was dusk now. Surely momma would be fuming. What an earful momma must have gotten from Miss Gracious when she returned home without her daughter not-wanna-be.

Every minute Zelma dawdled would only stiffen the severity of her eventual punishment. At this rate, she'd be scrubbing the twins' bathroom on her hands and knees with a toothbrush.

Still, Zelma's bare feet would not head back to the manor. Released from the imprisoning peach pumps and stockings, they wandered with a mind of their own. Zelma's body was too weary to resist. All she could do was follow.

Her feet led Zelma down Jeff Davis Avenue. At Howell Cobb they turned right. Six blocks down her feet turned left onto Magnolia. Finally, at number 1864, they came to a stop.

Zelma found herself standing in the yard of a little clapboard bungalow with a carport. It was a house she had expected to find ramshackle and abandoned. Instead, blades of freshly cut grass tickled her toes. Silhouettes moved behind curtained front windows.

The silhouettes could have been shadow puppets performing scenes from Zelma's own life. At a card table behind the curtain a pot-bellied man played checkers with a girl who looked about eight. The man slapped his forehead in mock dismay as the girl jumped three of his checkers. The girl clapped while bouncing around the table.

The game ended abruptly when a burly woman waddled into the room. She pointed at what could have been a wall clock and then wagged a finger at the man. He shrugged, pushing back from the card table.

Ear cocked toward the window, Zelma thought she heard the word, "homework." The girl threw down her handful of captured checkers in protest. Unimpressed, the woman marched the girl out of the room.

Zelma had a pretty good idea where she was headed. Crouching, Zelma skulked behind a bushy hedge of Ugly Agnes that ran alongside the front of the house. At a window adjacent the carport she stopped.

Sure enough, the window above Zelma lit up. She rose slowly, expecting to peer into a place she knew better than any other.

Zelma's own daddy had built this room out of a small garage. While Zeek and Daniel had to bunk together, one atop of the other, she'd had this room all to herself, the only one in her family so privileged. How better for Zelma to study, daddy had told an initially skeptical momma.

Where was that room now? What Zelma saw through the window belonged to some stranger. Gone were the trophies and plaques, honoring Zelma as Queen spelling bee, quiz bowl master and student-of-year two years running. Nor were there any books, let alone bookshelves.

The little girl sat atop a bed, ankles crossed and leaning against a big pillow. She read a comic book. On the cover Betty chased Archie, who chased Veronica.

Well, now, Zelma had been mistaken. There was one book. It was a library copy of "Matilda," and the book lay unopened atop a notebook and pencil at the girl's feet.

"How's that book report coming?" the woman called from outside the girl's room.

Without looking up from the comic the girl hollered back, "Almost done, momma."

Zelma would never have dared lie to her momma as a little girl. Nor would she have wanted to. Zelma loved to read and "Matilda" was one of her favorite books.

Oh what Zelma wouldn't have given now for some of Matilda's powers. Imagine if she could do to Bunky what Matilda had done to the Trench Bull, tossing him out some window.

With a sigh Zelma sank to her knees. The soft blanket of cut grass provided little comfort. Zelma no more fit into this house, this neighborhood, this world than her big feet would have in the bunny slippers she'd worn everywhere as a child.

Where, then, did she belong?

## Chapter 21

# Lost World

Mercy, momma, Zelma pleaded on bended knee. Please don't banish me. And not - of all places - to the Lost World of Faircloth Manor.

The darkened heart of the manor was a place that stank of moldering damask. Generations of dust blanketed the furniture. Under the lightest step the warped floorboards groaned.

It was the place momma always banished Zelma to when she wanted her daughter to consider the error of her ways.

This Saturday afternoon Zelma trudged off, feather duster in hand, chin down, a smile tucked behind a curtain of dangling hair. Her deceptive plea would have made Uncle Remus' wily Brer Rabbit proud. He always tricked his nemesis Brer Fox into thinking that throwing him into a briar patch was a fate worse than death. In fact, it was the place he felt most at home.

Zelma now meandered a maze of gloomy corridors, a place where an electric light bulb was as common as a cane fishing pole on Peachwood Heights. Most lighting fixtures were for either candles or gas burners.

If you veered off the main corridors you entered a world where one room led to another and then another. There were few doors. Thick dusty damask curtains hung between the rooms. In the dim light it was easy to lose your way and wander in circles for lord knows how long. There weren't any clocks. Time was a stranger in the lost world of Faircloth Manor.

The Faircloths themselves rarely, if ever, ventured into their Lost World. Much reduced in number, they'd long ago retreated to a handful of rooms along the front of the manor.

Momma, the dutiful servant that she was, had taken it upon herself to keep clean the abandoned inner reaches of the manor. She didn't do it herself, mind you. The job fell to Zelma, usually as punishment for disrespecting momma or Miss Gracious.

That was momma for you: always finding a way to kill two birds with one stone. Her preferred stone more often than not was Zelma.

At first, banishment to the Lost World had been effective punishment. Zelma had inched along its corridors, back pressed against the wall. Her blouse fuzzed grey with dust, as if she were a human feather duster. At the slightest creak Zelma just about leaped out of her candy cane stockings.

Now Zelma found such memories an embarrassment. She'd come to feel as comfortable in the Lost World as a shadow in a dimly lit room. It was her kind of place. And, given how often she'd been banished there, Zelma had grown to know it well.

This time even Zelma agreed she deserved to be punished. After all, hadn't she run off from the club, embarrassing Miss Gracious in front of all her friends and then ruining Lulu's priceless heirloom of a dress?

Here was the funny thing, though. Miss Gracious had never told momma about Zelma's fish tale about daddy. It was the offense that would have made momma angriest of all.

At first Zelma had been relieved. Now she wasn't so sure. Surely Miss Gracious hadn't forgotten the fib. It was unforgettably good. No, Zelma decided, Miss Gracious had pocketed the lie as if a stub lying claim to Zelma's soul. The only question was: when and how would Miss Gracious collect?

Zelma didn't like to think poorly about anyone, but Miss Gracious gave her no choice. In the darkened hallways of Faircloth Manor it was becoming increasingly clear why Miss Gracious wanted Zelma as a daughter: To ease her guilt about closing the mill and ruining Zelma's life.

Well, Zelma couldn't just up and forgive Miss Gracious, could she? That would be like forgetting the Confederate surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. It was down right disrespectful. Not only to daddy, but to all the men who'd lost their jobs at Faircloth Mill.

The thought steeled Zelma as she crept along the manor's hallways, a feather duster clutched in her hand like a saber. She knew better than to wander the darkened heart of Faircloth manor unarmed. There'd been too many chance encounters with the creepy and the bizarre. Already she could feel unseen eyes stalking her. Zelma flicked the feather duster at a passing shadow, hoping to chase away any hidden danger.

At a doorway with a blood red curtain she stopped. Zelma reached into a pocket and retrieved a tall candle and some matches. She lit the candle and peered into the room.

The flickering light illuminated a room adorned with the snarling heads of lions, tigers and bears. Zelma paid them no mind. Her eyes went straight for the high mantle of the room's fireplace. There stood a doll with a yellowing lace dress encased in glass. She looked none too happy about it, either. Her painted smile had flaked off into a scowl.

With a shudder Zelma crept off down the hall.

Soon she reached her favorite room. It sported what at one time might have been a cheery yellow curtain but now had faded to the color of canned corn. Zelma reached through the curtain into the room, her fingers crawling like spider legs along the inside wall. They felt a turnkey. She gave it a crank and heard a low hiss. Quickly Zelma put the flame of the candle to the nozzle of the gas burner. There was a pop, followed by a low fizzle. Then the room glowed with a faint light.

Zelma blew out her candle and waltzed into the room as if she were the lady of the house. At the center stood a grand piano, its lid raised as if ready for a recital. Three flowered divans formed a semi-circle in front of the grand. Zelma plopped down on one of the divans. She was immediately enveloped in a cloud of dust.

Had the Faircloths no respect for their own property, no idea what a gold mine they had in their decrepit manor? Zelma wiped the dust out of her eyes, struggling to see color again in the faded pink walls.

With a good scrubbing, there was no reason this room couldn't serve as a parlor right out of "Gone with the Wind." It wasn't hard to imagine Ashley Wilkes at the piano. On opposing divans, Melanie and Scarlet swooned at Ashley's playing.

Certainly that Japanese couple outside the manor's gates could imagine such a scene. Zelma bet they'd pay good money to see it, too.

Imagine. Charging people to see a made-up scene from a place that never was. Joking Jesus, now that was a good one, thought Zelma, slapping her thigh.

Maybe her coming to manor wasn't such a tragedy after all. Maybe momma was right. Miss Gracious was their salvation, although not quite how she thought.

Zelma leaped off the divan. There was only one place to be when her imagination was afire.

She raced through the maze of rooms, finally, stopping at a utility closet tucked away in a back corner. Zelma threw open the door and out spilled old straw brooms, string head mops and metal buckets. Fetching up a bucket, she placed it upside down inside the closet. She stepped atop the bucket and reached up to grab hold of a cord dangling from the ceiling.

Down tumbled a frayed rope ladder. Zelma scaled the ladder to a trap door, feather duster clutched between her teeth. At the ceiling she thumped a trap door with her shoulder. It

popped open and Zelma climbed through it and into the open air. She stood in a cupola atop the manor. Town lore had it that this was the highest point in Peachwood.

Zelma hooked her spindly legs through the cupola's railing. She imagined herself astride a great broomstick, soaring high above any earthy troubles. A breeze billowed her black hair like a Jolly Roger, a witch flag of defiance.

Atop Faircloth Manor Zelma could see far and wide. No one – not momma, Miss Gracious, Alyssa nor Bunky - could creep up and surprise Zelma up here. And that made her feel strangely safe, safer than if her two feet were firmly planted on solid ground.

Zelma's imagination soared with the breeze. She saw herself as a tour guide, leading visitors to believe every nook and cranny of the manor was from a scene out of GTW. And she ran a gift shop, too, which sold locks of Rhett Butler's hair.

Let's see, as for momma, she would keep the manor spotless. She would also run a restaurant serving corn pone, collards, grits and black-eyed peas.

There'd even be a job for daddy. He could fix anything that broke and something was always breaking at the manor. Once they'd gone a week without hot water.

Really, the Faircloths didn't deserve their manor. Not only would the Duprees take better care of it, but they'd give the manor new life as well. Zelma imagined a freshly painted golden "D" adorning the manor's front gate.

Inside the manor, daddy leaned against a fireplace mantle, cigar in hand, his potbelly ballooning silken pajamas. Next to him lounged momma on a divan. In her raised hand was a Champagne glass, waiting to be refilled. Now she was one of the served, not the serving.

There was only one hitch to her plan and she showed up as if on cue. From below Zelma heard the crunch of tires on the driveway. The copper Mercedes rattle up to the manor's front door.

How to wrest control of the manor from the undeserving Faircloths? It was a challenge worthy of any witch wanna-be.

## Chapter 22

# The day the beer mugs stood still

Momma swore she was no more a soothsayer than Egg Betty was a chef. Yet there was no denying that she foresaw the closing of Faircloth Mill. And she saw it a year before the mill actually closed, saw it when no one, at least in Milltown, would have imagined such a thing possible.

Momma's premonition struck on a day like any other. Zelma walked into the kitchen to find her transfixed. Which was quite unusual. Momma usually thundered about day and night in an endless series of chores.

But now she stood still, eyes fixed on beer mugs dangling from a wooden rack on the kitchen counter. Momma had the same look of furrowed concentration as Gamby when she'd studied the gnarled branches of a twisted root.

Zelma looked at the mugs, too. Sure enough, there was something different about them this afternoon. Not a one rattled from the driving ka-chunk of the mill. Zelma took it as a sign that daddy was hard at work fixing jammed looms. Indeed, he returned home late that night. He looked exhausted, yet his overalls were unstained with the grease of hard work.

Momma saw something different, too, although she never said as much directly. The evening the mugs stood still she greeted daddy with his favorite supper: chicken fried steak drowned in thick brown gravy. Such a feast, on a weekday no less, immediately aroused daddy's suspicion. He growled, "Now what do you want, woman?"

Momma smiled and said nothing. Nothing, that is, until daddy had a mouthful of country fried steak. "You ever consider taking night classes at Peachwood Community College?"

Daddy just about gagged. "What the Sam Hill for?" he finally managed to sputter.

"I hear tell them computers are always breaking down. A man who can fix'em would never want for work."

Zelma knew that for a fact. The one computer at Pleasant Crump, a single machine that held the library's catalogue, was forever on the blink.

"I don't want for work," laughed daddy. "Never have."

"Still, couldn't hurt to learn something new," said momma.

Daddy spit out a mouthful of steak. "Jesus, woman," he said, storming out of the door. "Can't a man even eat his dinner in peace?"

Later that evening Zelma found daddy holding forth at Egg Betty's. He gulped down a plateful of scrambled eggs more rubbery than Zelma's old yellow goulashes.

Daddy's little tantrum didn't intimidate momma. She left a community college catalogue on his La-Z-Boy. Daddy used it to swat flies. As for the beat up old computer momma bought him at a yard sale, daddy used it as an anchor for his bass boat. He swore it was the best ever.

When the mill did close, momma pressed daddy harder than ever about night school. But he shrugged off the mill closing as if it were no more than a fishing trip canceled on account of a passing thunderstorm. He had no doubt the sun would shine again and the mill would re-open. No need to do anything rash, such as going to night school. Heck, he'd barely passed day school, daddy joked.

Until the mill re-opened, daddy assured momma, he would get by doing odd jobs. Heck, he knew just about everyone in Milltown and all of them needed something fixed. That was true, all right, and daddy's plan worked for a while. But soon no one could afford to hire him. They were all out of work, too, and broke.

Daddy took to his La-Z-Boy, drinking Dixie beer and giving momma the evil eye. You'd have thought it was her fault the mill had closed, to hear daddy tell it. If momma had only shut up about that dang computer school. Why, she'd put a hex on the mill with all that talk. "You ain't no better than that witch doctor momma of yours!"

Well, daddy might as well have called momma a lazy good for nothing. From that day on he was unwelcomed in his own house. When Momma hid what little savings they had left, cutting off daddy's beer fund, he stopped coming home.

Daddy didn't leave town, though. Zelma could still find him most days at Egg Betty's. There he hung out in a back booth, kepi pulled down low over his watery eyes.

He held forth, as always, but his stories had changed. Bubba Largemouth had given way to dark tales about the Faircloths. Miss Gracious, daddy confided, planned to tear down the mill and sell off the property piecemeal to the people moving up from Atlanta. There'd be no more underwear jobs for the likes of them in Milltown.

Cast as Cruella DeVille, Miss Gracious proved more popular than Bubba Largemouth. An ever-growing crowd was drawn by daddy's dark tale. Heck, wasn't much else to do but listen to loose talk.

Zelma found these new stories disturbing. She'd grown up thinking of the Faircloths as benevolent monarchs who took care of the little people of Peachwood. And Zelma had never heard her daddy badmouth anyone. This wasn't her daddy, Zelma told herself, but some imposter.

He'd go away in a while, especially if Zelma stopped favoring him with her attention. Which momma was encouraging her to do, anyhow. They had to fend for themselves now, she said, "just us girls." There was no time for daddy and his fanciful stories.

In fact, momma made sure Zelma had no time for daddy. She drove her daughter harder than ever. Excelling at Pleasant Crump was no longer good enough. Zelma had to be the best darn student in the whole state. How else to win the scholarships to pay for college? And that was the only way Zelma was going to be able to go now.

While momma kept Zelma away from daddy, she still hoped he'd come to her. She popped up from her desk at every tap on her bedroom window. It was daddy for sure this time. He'd come to tell Zelma he'd found a job and un-puckered. Wouldn't she please help him get back in momma's good graces?

Turned out every time that it was just some branch tapping on Zelma's window.

Finally, sick to death of studying, Zelma snuck out of the house and down to Egg Betty's. She was all worked up, ready to give daddy the scolding of his life. Why hadn't he come to see her? Surely he wasn't that afraid of momma.

At Egg Betty's Zelma found daddy's booth empty. She jumped for joy. See? She had been right all along. Daddy had found a job.

Egg Betty soon dissuaded Zelma of that notion. She charged up to Zelma, jabbing a finger in her face. "You tell that good for nothing daddy of yours he owes me \$100 – and I ain't forgetting."

Zelma stammered, unsure what to say. On the one hand she was thankful the stranger posing as her daddy was gone. But, then again, he'd taken her father with him.

## Chapter 23

### Lili is not a wallflower

The two girls stood side by side on the gym's hardwood floor, each alone yet somehow united in their undesirability. No one else in class had picked either of them as a rope-climbing partner.

Zelma glanced at her fellow untouchable. It was the bamboo shoot of a girl from the school bus. The one who'd led Zelma out of the suburban labyrinth of Peachwood Heights. She wore a pair of black-framed eyeglasses with lenses as thick as a magnifying glass. Behind her glasses two small brown eyes loomed.

In the girl's thick lenses, Zelma saw a fleeting image of herself barefoot in tattered peach dress. She sidled away from the girl. Or at least tried to.

"And where do you think you're going?" It was Ms. Warden, or The Warden, as everyone in gym class called her. She blocked Zelma's escape.

Hands on hips, a metal whistle dangling from around her neck, The Warden eyed Zelma and the girl standing beside her. "Well, well," The Warden said. "Looks like you two are a team. Lili and Zelma." She pronounced Lili's name like the flower, the lily.

Lili bowed her head ever so slightly, as if honored.

"All right, you two, hit the ropes," barked The Warden.

Zelma hesitated, which proved a big mistake. The Warden's whistle shrilled and Zelma just about leaped out of her gym shorts.

Not Lili. She coolly eyed the gym teacher through those magnifying lenses.

It was the first time Zelma had ever seen The Warden squirm. You'd have thought Lili had X-ray vision, which could pierce the Warden's baggy tee shirt and shorts to expose a belly as soft and shapeless as pizza dough.

“Go on now,” growled The Warden, pointing to the last free rope dangling at the back of the gym. Her cheeks swelled as if preparing another whistle blast.

Zelma trudged off across the gym, her sneakers squeaking in protest. She doubted anyone heard, given the din of grunting girls who struggled up the ropes.

Zelma stopped in front of the one free rope and looked down into the shallow pit that lay beneath it. Pillows filled the pit, but they looked as if they’d had the stuffing knocked out of them. Zelma imagined the yellowing bones of fallen girls under the battered pillows.

A faint but pungent smell of garlic and ginger wafted into Zelma's nostrils. She turned to see Lili peering over her shoulder into the pit.

“LEE-lee,” murmured the panther of a girl.

“What?”

“Name LEE-lee. Not Lily.”

“Oh,” said Zelma, as she once again tried to sidle away from Lili. She lost her balance, toppling into the pit. Zelma landed on her knees. She’d been right about those pillows. They provided about as much cushioning as cotton candy.

“Much sorry.” Lili nodded slightly.

As Lili’s head straightened, her gym tee shirt scrunched up, revealing what looked like a clove of garlic tape to her belly button.

“What in the Sam Hill is that?” said Zelma.

Lili beamed as if she’d done something very clever. “For rope climb. Ward off dizzy spell.” She peeled off the taped clove and held it out to Zelma. “Want?”

Now Zelma liked garlic fine, but in collards - not in her navel hair, thank you very much. When she didn’t take the clove, Lili happily re-taped it to her belly.

Joking Jesus, who was this girl? Lili talked as if she’d learned English from Jackie Chan. A teddy bear looked more threatening, yet Lili had the stealth of a panther. And that gaze. Was it any wonder no one wanted Lili as a climbing partner?

Lili trained her magnifying glasses on Zelma. “What with eyes?”

“Say what?” said Zelma, caught off guard. Her raven-esque makeup had long ago lost its power to unnerve.

“Eyes. Eyes. Look like crow.”

Zelma narrowed her blackened eyes to a menacing glare.

Lili looked anything but frightened. "You Lacha?"

"Huh?"

"Ah...how you say...naughty spirit?"

Zelma liked the sound of that and smiled.

Lili smiled back.

"Enough yammering, you two," commanded The Warden. She stood behind Lili and pointed at the rope. "Start climbing."

Zelma rose up off her bruised knees. "I'm going," she grumped. Zelma seized the rope in both hands. Her fingers barely encircled the thick cord. She jumped up, wrapping her legs around the rope. It looked as if she might actually start climbing.

The Warden wasn't fooled. She stood there until Zelma indeed began struggling up the rope. When the Warden finally left Lili dropped into the pit. Arms upraised, she said, "You fall; I catch."

Not likely, thought Zelma. I fall; you squashed. She doubted Lili's scrawny body would provide any more cushioning than the battered pillows.

Zelma looked up. The ceiling looked awful far away. She glanced to the rope at her right, seeking inspiration.

There beside her dangled Alyssa. White-knuckled, arms quivering, Little Miss Stiletto Eyes hung on for dear life. She looked as helpless as Zelma on the school bus. If only Mrs. Stillwater and all those other fine ladies at the club could see Alyssa now.

Zelma snickered. How could she not?

Alyssa turned to face Zelma and was transformed. It was as if Zelma's snickering had cast a spell – her first successful one ever - on the struggling Alyssa. Sinewy biceps bulged from her trembling arms. Up the rope Alyssa climbed, all the while sneering at Zelma.

Zelma's raven eyes narrowed. Inch by painful inch she too began to pull herself up the rope. Zelma ascended the rope alongside Alyssa, white knuckle to white knuckle. Her arms felt like rubber bands stretched to the snapping point, but Zelma didn't stop.

From below Zelma heard Lili clapping. She glanced down. There beside Lili stood The Warden. She gawked up at Zelma, her whistle silenced.

No one had ascended higher than Zelma. Not even Alyssa, who began slipping back down the rope, her arms giving out.

Never underestimate the power of spite, thought Zelma. She looked down at the girls squirming and grunting beneath her. The view made Zelma feel as she did atop the cupola: not so much atop the world as beyond its reach.

Then reality gave her a good thumping.

Zelma's head rammed the ceiling. Stunned, she let go of the rope. Down she plummeted. Zelma had been right about Lili. She no more broke Zelma's fall than would a bamboo mat. Zelma squashed her right through the pillows.

If grievously wounded Lili didn't show it. Rather than cry out in pain she chortled. You'd have thought getting squashed were about the best time a girl could have.

And people thought Zelma was queer.

## Chapter 23

# Supermarket magic

Freedom tromped into town like a stranger indifferent to where it stepped. The Freedom chain of supermarkets built a glassy hulk of a store in what looked like any muddy field on the outskirts of town south of Peachwood Heights.

Yet this field was sacred ground. Here barefoot farm boys, standing in trenches armed only with squirrel-hunting muskets, had beaten back wave after wave of Sherman's troops. They'd smeared the field blue with Yankee dead.

Every June 3rd, Confederate Memorial Day, the regulars at Egg Betty's re-enacted the battle, even if they could only muster three or four people to play Yankees.

Daddy spent many a happy Confederate Memorial Day in these trenches. No one was a better bloater. He was always the first to fall. There he'd lay in the trench, swelling up like a balloon, face blackening with pursed lips. You'd have thought his corpse had been rotting all day in the June sun.

No one at Egg Betty's would shop at Freedom. Neither would momma, who'd lost a great grandfather on Peachwood Heights. But when momma moved into Faircloth Manor she seemed to have forgotten all about her Confederate heritage. Not only did she shop at Freedom now. She raved about its bright airy aisles, which easily accommodated her girth. No more squeezing through the musty aisles of Wig Piggler's for momma. She even hummed the supermarket's TV jingle: "The Freedom to shop 'til you drop."

At first Zelma too had steered clear of the new supermarket. After her run in with Andrea, Wig Piggler's seemed ever farther away. The time had come to see what momma was going on about.

Zelma found Freedom a two-mile stroll south of the manor. She had chosen to check out the supermarket on a beautiful Sunday in the first week of October. It was still warm, but

the sun had lost its fire. Winds blew up from the Gulf, sweeping the air clean of smog and muggy haze. Again Kennesaw Mountain towered clearly above Peachwood.

She stooped now in an aisle of Freedom, holding up the hem of her skirt. A bony white ankle jutted through a tear in her black and white striped stocking. In her free hand she held two spools of thread against the tear, one black, the other red.

The black thread perfectly matched the color of the torn black stripe and would conceal the tear. But red, red would stitch a blood-like line across her ankle. And what if the stitch were jagged, like a knife wound that wouldn't heal? Yes, that might do nicely.

A shadow crossed Zelma's bare ankle and her nose wrinkled with the smell of fresh Nau-gahyde. She turned to look up. There standing over her was Bunky. He grinned wickedly as he balanced a broom across his shoulders.

Bunky swung the broom down off his shoulders and Zelma cowered, flinging an arm across her face to deflect the expected blow.

The broom, however, swished safely overhead.

"Look what I found," said Bunky, holding the broom lengthwise across his upturned palms. He offered it to Zelma as if presenting her with the sword of a vanquished rival. Alyssa perhaps?

Zelma didn't rise to accept Bunky's offering. The broom surely was part of some new melodrama he'd dreamt up, and she wanted no part in it. Zelma rose up on her toes, ready to bolt at a moment's notice.

Yet Bunky just stood there grinning. And, Zelma had to admit, the setting was all wrong for any melodrama. There wasn't another soul on the aisle, no audience to impress. Save Zelma, of course. Still, she couldn't bring herself to accept Bunky's offering.

The broom began to droop in Bunky's hands and he frowned, a rare sight. But the frown was fleeting.

Soon Bunky beamed with the look of inspiration. Thrusting the broom between his legs, he said, "Hey, check it out." Bunky bounced on his heels as if revving the engine of a motorcycle. "Not bad, not bad. But the real question is, how does she fly?"

Bunky winked at Zelma and then took off down the aisle. He swooped side-to-side, hooting and hollering as if riding a winged Harley.

Zelma swallowed a rising hurrah.

At the end of the aisle rose a towering pyramid of Oreos. Bunky galloped toward the stack of cookie boxes. He tried to buzz the stack like a stunt flyer would a church steeple. Except Bunky was no Evil Knievel. The end of the broom handle clipped the bottom of the pyramid. Oreo cookies rained down on a sheepishly grinning Bunky.

He kicked aside the boxes and then circled back toward Zelma. With a loud squeak of his boots he stopped right in front of her. He dismounted the broom and thrust it in Zelma's face, his eyes challenging.

This time Zelma jumped to her feet. She seized the broom. The moment had come to make Bunky eat all his taunts, to show him that he wasn't the only show off in town. "You're pathetic," she sneered. "Let a professional show you how it's really done."

"As you wish, your raven-ness," said Bunky, stepping back with a sweeping bow.

Zelma mounted the broom as if it were a feather. Her fingers lightly held the broomstick. She steered it with the touch of her knees as she breezed down the aisle. Anyone would have thought she'd spent her whole life cruising rooftops.

It wasn't long before her performance began to attract children. They gathered amid the fallen cookie boxes, pointing at the girl with raven eyes and a flowing black skirt, who swished past shoe polish and mending thread.

Zelma threw back her head and cackled.

Her young audience squealed and clapped.

Riding high, Zelma turned back toward Bunky. She circled him, patting the broomstick behind her. "Dare to see if she'll hold two?"

Bunky answered by leaping aboard behind Zelma.

He radiated a sticky heat that sent a shiver down her spine. Zelma's flowing hair stuck to his wet lips, but he didn't wipe it away.

Boots and slippers scampering in sync, Zelma and Bunky zoomed down the aisle toward the growing beehive of kids. But this was Zelma's show, and Bunky let her lead the way.

She buzzed the front row of kids, cackling and glaring with raven eyes. The kids stumbled backward, their faces contorted with expressions of fearful delight. Even Bunky hooted Zelma on from the rear.

Zelma circled in a wide arc back down the aisle, preparing to buzz her audience once again. But this time when she swooped toward the crowd there was a new face.

Alyssa stood in back of the crowd, towering over the children. Her piercing blue gaze took aim, but this time it didn't stab Zelma. From behind she heard Bunky suddenly gag as if choking on his own laughter. His boots staggered to a stop.

Zelma flew head over heels off of the end of the broomstick. The kids howled as if she were Wily Coyote barreling over some precipice. Zelma landed fanny first on the linoleum floor with an embarrassing loud smack. She shot Bunky a pained look of incomprehension.

He offered no explanation - nor sympathy. His grin had morphed into a sneer. Bunky shook his head in mock condemnation. "And you call yourself a witch."

The broom clattered to the floor from between Bunky's legs. He stepped over the fallen Zelma and pushed his way through the kids. Alyssa reached out and lassoed him with a slender white arm, bringing Bunky to heel at her side.

Alyssa and Bunky a couple? That made about as much sense as Zelma befriending Jonella. It just wasn't natural. Why, Alyssa could have had the captain of the football team as her boyfriend. Instead, she chose a greasy-haired prankster in baggy shorts who worshipped idleness and rode broomsticks.

Yet Alyssa clung to Bunky as Miss Gracious did to her manor. Which explained why Alyssa was stalking Zelma.

Oh yes she was, all right. How else to explain Alyssa popping up all over Zelma's life: at the country club, at Wig Piggler's, and now here at Freedom.

Two could play the stalking game, especially if one were a witch who knew how to make herself invisible. Well, pretty sure. Zelma hadn't actually tried it yet. But the time had come to try. She needed to find out the truth about this girl who gnawed beef jerky and fancied herself a junior Miss Gracious.

## Chapter 24

# Academic jousting

At Pleasant Crump, kids were happy to step aside and let Zelma climb to the top of the honor roll. Who needed all that schooling, anyway? It wouldn't help you run a loom, spinning out underwear any faster. And the more pairs you spun out, the bigger your Christmas bonus. If you were really fast, and the foreman noticed it, you might make foreman yourself one day. Then you'd get to sit up at the front table with the Faircloths during the annual Christmas party.

At Peachwood High, her classmates weren't as accommodating. There, schoolwork was a contact sport. Coached after school, trained in academic boot camps during the summer, students came to Peachwood High ready to mix it up.

No wonder Zelma often felt out-muscled, academically speaking. She sure was starting to feel that way right now, here in American history, her strongest subject, no less.

"Georgia left the Union over state's rights, plain and simple. We were exercising our constitutional right to resist federal tyranny." A no-brainer, or so Zelma had thought.

"Why then," scoffed Bunky, "did Georgia only evoke State's Rights over slavery?"

"Evoke?" What kind of word was that? It sounded like something someone from Atlanta – or maybe even New York – might use. Besides, what did Bunky know, anyway? On top of his desk lay the "Right to Idleness." Zelma glared at Bunky as if he were bluffing.

Unfazed, Bunky declared: "Georgia - and the South - fought to keep its slaves." He turned to grin at Mrs. Stottlemeyer, who sat on the corner of her desk in front of the class. She began to nod as if swayed by Bunky's argument.

Back at Pleasant Crump such talk would have gotten Bunky tarred and feathered.

Zelma looked around at the nodding heads. Would no one come to her defense?

A girl in blue jeans and a frayed Hello Kitty tee-shirt rose in the back of the class, bowing slightly.

Lili wore that tee shirt as if it were a security blanket she couldn't let go of, thought Zelma.

Giggling rippled through the class. How many times had Mrs. Stottlemeyer told Lili she needn't stand and bow if she wanted to speak in class? While amused everyone turned to hear what Lili had to say.

"Jiaoshou, if please, both right."

"Say what?" said Zelma.

Lili lowered her eyes, refusing to engage Zelma's challenging glare.

"It's all right, Lili," coaxed Mrs. Stottlemeyer, "go on."

"Fire-eater plantation owners use State's Rights to try and save slavery," said, speaking to the flowering lilies embroidered her black slippers.

Zelma snorted in disagreement.

Slowly Lili's head rose. She trained those magnifying glass eyes on Zelma. "Did great grandfather own slaves?"

All eyes turned to Zelma. By the looks on everyone's faces you'd thought she were Mr. O'Hara.

"Of course not," Zelma shot back. "Nobody around these parts owned slaves. We were just poor dirt farmers. Only the rich plantation owners in South Georgia had'em."

"Dui ya!" said Lili, sounding as if Zelma had given the answer she'd expected.

Exasperated, Zelma said, "And your point is?"

"Fire-eaters tell poor whites: if federal government can take away our slaves, then it take your little scrap of land, too. Slave owners small in number but big in talk. Scare poor whites into fighting for them."

"Are you saying my great grand daddy was duped?"

"Much sorry."

"Touché!" exclaimed Mrs. Stottlemeyer, hopping off her desk. She strode to the back of the class and embraced the slight Asian girl with the big glasses.

Lili lowered her gaze, face reddening.

"Well," said Mrs. Stottlemeyer, "I think we know who should captain our history team at this year's Academic Decathlon."

“Now wait a gosh darn minute,” Zelma began to object. But she shut up when nobody else spoke up in protest. If that didn’t beat all. Wasn’t Lili the same girl who none of her classmates would partner up with in gym? Yet here they were crowning her captain of the history team.

At the end of class Zelma tried to slink unseen out the door. But Mrs. Stottlemeyer caught sight of her in the doorway and beckoned Zelma to her desk. Lili already stood there, head bowed. Again Zelma found herself standing shoulder to shoulder with this panther of a girl.

“Zelma, don’t you think Lili is qualified to lead our team?”

“Yessum,” Zelma mumbled.

“Good, for I want you on the team – if Lili will have you, of course.”

Lili’s face shined like a polished apple.

“Then it’s settled,” said Mrs. Stottlemeyer, “but Lili?”

Lili looked up.

“I want you to coach Zelma,” said Mrs. Stottlemeyer. “Her understanding of the Civil War is a bit, well, dated.” She turned to look at Zelma. “All right?”

Zelma smiled as sweet as pecan pie, but inside she was all pickled green tomatoes. The sheriff of Rabun County had a better chance finding the frozen body of her lost Gamby than Lili had in changing Zelma’s notions about the Lost Cause.

## Chapter 25

# On the prowl

This Saturday morning Zelma fancied herself a Jeb Stuart in black skirt and candy cane stockings. As the elusive Confederate horseman had stalked unsuspecting Yankee troopers, Zelma now too crept up unseen on her own enemies.

The night before she'd steeped herself in a murky soup of elderberries and prickly pear. It was a brew that, as best as Zelma could make out in the red book, would make you invisible to your enemies. Soaking in the attic's claw-footed porcelain tub, Zelma had studied a raised foot, faintly empurpled. She could barely make out her toes in the dim light of the 60-watt bulb that dangled overhead.

Still, Zelma decided she wasn't taking any chances. In the morning she'd donned her blackest outfit. Even her stockings today were the color of abyss.

From the manor Zelma had slunk from shadow to shadow to the Square. There she'd picked up the trail of her prey. She ducked into the gloomy doorway of the tiny 88 Mart, some kind of Chinese shop, which sat next door to the Videorama.

On the curb in front of the arcade stood Alyssa and Bunky. The amazingly featherweight skateboard dangled from the fingertips of one hand; Alyssa's hand dangled from his other fingertips. Bunky didn't look particularly attached to either girl or skateboard.

That is, until a gaggle of boys skateboarded up to the Videorama. At the sight of Bunky they stopped to gawk. It wasn't his skateboard that earned their awe. All eyes were on Alyssa.

She turned to peck Bunky's cheek.

"Oh man," moaned one of the skateboarders.

At the sound of the boy's longing, Bunky's fingers entwined with those of Miss Stiletto Eyes.

Alyssa stepped off the curb with Bunky in tow and began to sashay across the Square.

Zelma hesitated. Dare she step out of her shadowy roost to give chase? She cast about for a promising sign that one of Gamby's spells might actually be working.

She found it in the window of the shop behind her. There stood the ancient Chinese owner. In his big black-frame glasses, he stared right through Zelma as if his doorway were empty.

Emboldened, Zelma stepped out from the cover of the doorway and into the morning light. She crossed the street right in front of the gaggle of skateboarders. Not one turned to look her way. Their eyes were still locked on the sashaying Alyssa.

In broad daylight, Zelma tracked her prey, although she was careful to lag behind by at least a block. She followed Alyssa and Bunky as they ascended Peachwood Heights.

Alyssa's long legs strode up the winding streets, head swiveling as if looking for someone, anyone.

Not so Bunky. His big boots slowed, filing with some invisible sand as he clomped out of range of those envious skateboarders. He began to drift behind Alyssa, his grip of her hand ever weakening. You'd have thought he dreaded the Heights as much as Zelma.

Alyssa's head suddenly stopped swiveling. She smiled like a fox that has spotted a wayward hen caught outside the safety of its coop. She pranced over to a driveway. The lagging Bunky stumbled to keep up.

By the driveway's curbside mailbox stood Louisa Stillwater chatting with another girl. Zelma recognized this girl from school but didn't know her name.

At the sight of Alyssa the girls stopped talking. They eyed her warily. That didn't stop Alyssa from beginning to yammer. Nodding absent-mindedly, Louisa and her friend listened, but their gaze drifted toward Bunky. They ogled him as if he were some prize bull at the county fair.

Zelma stood in the shadow of a big-limbed Sycamore tree. She could see the foursome just fine, but Alyssa's words were no more than a murmur.

Curiosity tempted Zelma. She emerged from the Sycamore's shadow and stepped into the street. As she inched toward Alyssa, Zelma kept one eye on a lush holly bush. It sat on the edge of a nearby lawn and might prove handy if a quick escape were suddenly required. Who knew when Gamby's spell might wear off?

For now, Alyssa didn't seem to notice anyone but herself. Zelma was close enough to begin catching snatches of Alyssa's words. She prattled on about how she and Bunky had done this, and how they'd done that. With every account Louisa and her friend struggled harder to maintain their forced smiles.

As for Bunky, he retreated into his baggy tee shirt and shorts. He might have slipped right out of his clothes and run away, if Alyssa hadn't entwined an arm around his waist.

Zelma had crept to within spitting distance of Alyssa when her nemesis abruptly stopped talking in mid-sentence. Alyssa's head swung sharply to look down the street. She might have seen Zelma for sure, especially if the spell had worn off.

Luckily, Zelma had plunged head first into the holly bush. Crouched in a ball at the roots, Zelma watched as Alyssa's piercing blue eyes swept the street.

Her gaze reached the holly bush and lingered. Alyssa's nose wrinkled as if catching whiff of elderberries gone rotten. Without saying goodbye to Louisa and company, she turned on her heel. Back up the Heights Alyssa marched, with Bunky galumphing behind in tow.

It might be best, Zelma decided, to give Alyssa a good head start this time. Not until she could only see the tips of Bunky's blonde spikes did Zelma begin to rise. But she soon stopped short.

Goosebumps rippled up her spine. As in the darkened heart of the manor, Zelma felt unseen eyes watching her. She sank back down into the holly and turned to look behind.

At the end of a vast emerald lawn stood a palatial stucco house. Two Palladian windows on the first floor looked out onto the front lawn.

Rimmed in black, the windows looked not unlike a giant replica of Lili's glasses. Indeed, reflected in the windows was a shimmering blur of a purple girl in a holly bush.

Was someone stalking the stalker?

## Chapter 26

### Who's stalking whom

Zelma scurried away until she was out of sight of those Palladium windows. Unfortunately, she was also out sight of Alyssa and Bunky. She wandered the circular maze of streets on Peachwood Heights. Lost again in her own town.

"Psst, psst."

Zelma turned in circles trying to spot whom was calling out to her. All she saw were the maples and sycamores that lined the street.

There was a long passage about trees in the red book. It said they hear all, see all. If you were lucky the trees might share with you all they'd witnessed. The trees of Peachwood Heights seemed to so favor Zelma now. A lofty whispering guided her through the streets.

"No, that not way," sougled some Chinese maples. "To the left, the left," added a row of dogwoods. "Turn right. Quick."

Lead by the ear, Zelma managed to stumble again upon Alyssa and Bunky. They stood in front of a high wall that bricked in a subdivision of stucco homes.

Zelma ducked behind a pick up truck loaded with pine straw parked outside the brick wall. She peered around the high bumper at her nemesis.

Alyssa seized Bunky by the collar of his tee shirt and mashed his lips into hers. He wriggled like a worm trying to free itself from a hook. When finally released Bunky sprang back. He looked stunned, not so much from the power of Alyssa's kiss but by his sudden freedom.

With a simple nod, Bunky bid Alyssa good-bye. Then he turned his back on her and galumphed up the Heights. Bunky's skateboard swayed in sync with his gait. He hummed the buzzing arpeggio of Nirvana's "Heart-shaped box."

Alyssa stood in front of the brick wall watching as Bunky disappeared over the rise of the upward sloping street.

Keeping one eye on Alyssa, Zelma turned to study the walled subdivision. Was this where Alyssa lived? If so it figured. The place had crowned itself The Tuileries, after the former French palace of the same name.

It wasn't hard to imagine Alyssa's house: some Disney-esque Versailles, slapped together out of chicken wire and blown plaster. Something a tornado could easily blow to hell.

Again Alyssa surprised Zelma. She didn't enter The Tuileries. Instead, Alyssa descended the Heights.

Was it a trick? Zelma froze with uncertainty. Maybe Alyssa had known from the start she'd been followed. Now she planned to lead Zelma astray.

"Shoo, shoo."

Zelma jumped out from behind the gardening truck. The words seemed to come from right over her shoulder. "Who's there?" she blurted. She half-expected to find Bunky, sent by Alyssa to creep up behind her as part of the trap. But there was no one.

A faint breeze rustled some young pear trees planted along the subdivision's wall. Their branches brushed against the brick wall. "Shoo, shoo."

What were the trees trying to tell her now? Zelma laid a hand on her chest, trying to calm her pounding heart. She looked toward Alyssa.

If Alyssa had heard Zelma's outburst she didn't show it.

Staring determinedly ahead, Alyssa strode down the Heights.

Zelma raced off in pursuit.

It turned out to be quite a chase. Zelma like to think she knew every back alley, forgotten weed-choked lot and dog path between Milltown and the Square. Truth was, Alyssa was teaching her a thing or two. She traveled a devilishly circuitous route that sidestepped the Square.

Three blocks down from Wig Piggler's, Alyssa's strange journey finally came to an end. She entered a sad sack of a bungalow with dingy, mismatched colored siding, cracked front steps and a sagging roof. This bungalow wasn't more than a half-mile from Zelma's old house in Milltown.

Why, now that she thought about it, Zelma knew this house. It belonged to a girl who'd gone to elementary school with her. But this girl had dirty brown hair and buckteeth with braces, the only one to have them in the fifth grade. She was also the only one Zelma had

known who took French and English riding lessons. No one in Milltown could afford such things, not even in the best of times.

Rumor had it, at least down at Egg Betty's, that this girl was the illegitimate child of some cotton trader up on the crest of Peachwood Heights. The girl sure liked to carry on that she was the daughter of some big shot. In school, she was always bragging that some day she would discard Milltown like a pair of worn underwear.

Sure enough, the girl never showed up at Pleasant Crump. Everyone had forgotten all about her. Even Zelma, until now, that is.

The bungalow's door opened and Zelma blurted, "Zootie Hornbuckle, it is you!"

Alyssa, a.k.a. Zootie, stopped cold on the cracked front steps. This time her eyes froze blue with fear.

At last Zelma understood Alyssa's hatred. She must have believed that Zelma had known of her true identity all along. Zootie feared Zelma would expose her. Truth was, even if she had known, Zelma wouldn't have cared – as long as Alyssa had left her in peace.

Hatred melted Alyssa's frozen stare. "You shut your mouth, hear?"

Ah, so Alyssa too could change tongues like a backwoods preacher. "How'd you get into Peachwood High, anyway?" taunted Zelma.

"Never you mind about that."

"It isn't on account of you using someone's address up on the Heights, now is it?"

"I told you, shut your mouth."

"Or what?" scoffed Zelma, bucking out her front teeth.

Alyssa charged down the front steps, driving an elbow into Zelma's solar plexus. Zelma collapsed to her knees, gasping for air.

"You think that hurts?" menaced Alyssa, standing over the doubled-over Zelma.

Zelma still couldn't speak, so she juttled out her front teeth again.

This time Alyssa kicked Zelma in the stomach.

Since when had they started equipping loafers with steel toes? Zelma keeled over with a groan. She curled into a fetal ball as Alyssa cocked back her foot to strike again.

The blow, thank goodness, never came. Instead, something across the street distracted Alyssa. She lowered her steely loafer and stomped off, muttering something about fixing Zelma for good.

The next thing Zelma knew a pair of thin arms enveloped her. The arms lugged her upright.

“Ai ya! You purple!”

Zelma gazed at the reflection of her own pain-creased face in a pair of thick black-rimmed glasses. Now Zelma knew she should have been grateful. Another blow from that steel-toed loafer and she might have upchucked breakfast. Yet pride got the better of her. She’d been upstage again by a girl who wore a clove of garlic taped to her belly button. “How dare you,” gasped Zelma, clutching her stomach, trying to muster some rage. “You followed me!”

“Good thing, too,” said Lili.

“I don’t need you,” scoffed Zelma.

Lili looked skeptical.

Frankly, Zelma didn’t blame her.

## Chapter 27

### Page of hate

A great stream of clattering, chitchatting kids surged through the narrow concrete-block halls. It was a white noise that usually worked like laughing gas to numb Zelma to the pain of attending Peachwood High.

But this Monday morning there was a new, discomfiting riff in the sound mix. Above the din floated the whispering of her name, a cabal of witches chanting a curse.

It was Zelma's imagination, that's all. Why would her name, of all people, be on anyone's lips at Peachwood High? Still, there was no mistaking the stolen glances and the muffled smiles on many of the faces she passed.

Head down, Zelma plowed crosscurrent, clinking backpacks and knocking elbows. She made for her locker. There she'd bury her face inside the little metal box, pretending not to hear the murmur of her name, waiting for the bell to summon her to homeroom.

At least that was the plan.

Out of the corner of her eye Zelma saw a forest of blonde spikes rippling toward her through the stream of kids. A hand seized her by the wrist and yanked Zelma aside. She stumbled into a corner and found herself face to face with Bunky. "Joking Jesus," said Zelma, shaking her wrist free of his grasp.

She should have fled, Zelma knew, but Bunky looked so compellingly odd. Was it his spikes? They wilted, as if bowed in contrition. He also gaped. Whatever Bunky wanted to say hung back in his throat, strange for a boy rarely at a loss for words.

"Oh, hello." Alyssa breezed into the corner. She'd recovered her prep school accent.

Zelma marveled at Alyssa. The girl had some kind of emotional radar, and it was set to the ping of Bunky's heartbeat. Zelma bet she could track him through a blinding sand storm in the Kazakhstan desert.

If Alyssa were upset to find Zelma and Bunky alone she didn't show it, at least not openly. She pinched Bunky's elbow and his gaping mouth shut like a trap door. All the while Alyssa beamed at Zelma, but her eyes glinted like the blue steel of a saber.

This time Zelma didn't hang around to get skewered. She darted back into the stream of kids.

She didn't get far.

Again she was commandeered. A tiny hand entwined its fingers with Zelma's own, and then pulled her toward the media center at the end of the hall.

"Hey!" Zelma protested, but Lili wouldn't let go. She dragged her into the media center and kept going until they reach a bank of computers lining the back wall. There she dropped Zelma in a chair in front of a computer, which looked like a giant neon-colored gumdrop.

Given what she'd seen at her old school library, Zelma didn't trust computers. Not even ones that looked like candy. She tried to stand but was blocked by Lili, who leaned over Zelma's shoulder. Her fingers clacked away furiously on the computer's Chicklet-like keys.

Across the screen a series of images flipped pass like the turning pages of a book. Finally, Lili stood up. She pointed a finger at the computer screen, commanding Zelma to look.

At first Zelma couldn't make out much. The image was too out of focus. But slowly, as if emerging from a fog, it sharpened into a color photo. The clearer the picture became, the less Zelma wanted to look at it.

In stunning Technicolor, Zelma and Lili were entwined. They looked like a pair of grappling mud wrestlers. In truth, Zelma was desperately trying to disentangle herself from Lili in the pillow pit.

You'd never have known that from the bold pink headline running across the top of the photo. It read: "Out of the locker at last? Peachwood High's hottest new lovers caught in the act."

At Pleasant Crump, Zelma had been tripped, shoved and punched. How many times had Jo-nella rifled a basketball into her chest? Yet now was the first time Zelma had been knocked breathless.

"But...how?" Zelma sputtered. She tried in vain to imagine how someone had smuggled a camera past The Warden, let alone got a picture from it onto a computer in the library.

"Must be digital," Lili said, as if she'd seen this kind of thing many times before. "Tiny like deck of cards. Easy to sneak into gym shorts."

Zelma tried to imagine such a camera. It seemed like something out of Inspector Gadget's arsenal, cartoonish and unreal. Yet here was proof that such a thing existed.

Munchkin cameras. Gumdrop computers. All of it seemed like toys from hell. If only she were a raven. Her talons would shred this monstrosity of a gumdrop. Short of that, she'd smash it to the ground. Zelma seized the computer in both hands, but the damn thing wouldn't budge. How could a stupid piece of plastic weigh so much?

"Bolted to table," Lili said matter-of-factly. "Beside, break computer, make no difference."

"How's that?"

"Picture stuck on Internet. There for all to see. Anytime, anywhere. Maybe forever."

If Lili was trying to console Zelma it wasn't working.

"Last month? I slip on green Jell-O in cafeteria. Land face first on mouth of toothless janitor. Snap, snap. Next day I big hit on Page of Hate."

Zelma imagined the hapless Lili kissing the foul-mouthed, toothless janitor. "Page of Hate?"

Nodding toward the computer's screen Lili said, "Except for Alyssa, everyone end up on Page of Hate. It like homecoming. Big part of Peachwood High."

Homecoming never had been Zelma's thing.

"You want get even?"

Revenge? Now that was more Zelma's cup of bitterroot tea. She released the computer from her death grip.

"What need is Gung-Gung."

Gung-Gung, was that Chinese for meat axe? Somehow, given the little she knew about Lili, Zelma didn't think so. Still, the strange word did conjure up an image. It was of the shriveled Chinese man who'd stared at her through the window of his dark store. What did he sell in there, anyway, arsenic, rat poison?

"Of course," mused Lili. "Gung-Gung never help."

Like heck he won't, thought Zelma.

## Chapter 28

# Shop of shadows

It was a languid Sunday afternoon, the air heavy with the damp threat of a drenching rain. At Zelma's feet swirled dust devils. In vain, she tried to stomp out these emissaries of the coming storm.

Zelma stood cloaked in the protective shadow of Ol' Stumpy. As he warily eyed the hump of Kennesaw Mountain, Zelma staked out a little shop across the street. She'd often seen the wizened owner sweeping the curb outside his shop, inscrutable in thick black glasses. His name, Zelma had heard, was Mr. Wong. Now she wondered, given the striking similarity in eyewear, if he were Lili's grandfather.

If so, Lili were a strange duck indeed. For Mr. Wong owned the queerest of shops. It was no more than a dark pause between the Videorama and Rue de Paris. A peek through the dusty storefront window revealed only gloom; the shop's sole identification a gold stenciled "88 Mart" above the front door. No one Zelma knew had ever ventured inside the shop.

That's not to say the store had no customers. Zelma had seen plenty of people enter the 88 Mart. But almost all had been the elderly Chinese women who lived in the cramped red brick neighborhood around the corner. Every once in a blue moon she and her family would venture into the neighborhood for some chow mein or BBQ spare ribs.

For an hour now Zelma had been eying the 88 Mart and she didn't have much to show for it. She couldn't even tell if the place was open. No light emanated from inside; not a soul had come in or out. Still, the glass door clacked open and shut with the rising wind, as if beckoning her to come inside.

Dare she?

In the end the heavens decided for her.

Billowing sheets of rain poured suddenly down out of the sky. The dark clouds whitened with flashes of lightning. There was a loud crack, as if a heavenly bullwhip had been snapped over Zelma's head.

Soaked to the bone, Zelma bolted across the street. Another flash of lightning cracked at her fanny and Zelma scooted inside the 88 Mart.

She might as well as have stepped through a dark portal into another dimension. The shop's gloom was as thick as molasses. It smelled like Amelia Island at low tide: a mixture of sun-baked kelp, barnacles and rotting horseshoe crabs. The air was as gritty as a wind-blown beach.

Zelma gagged on her first breath inside the shop. Through watering eyes she saw what looked like dwarfs waddling in disorderly columns. She inched backward to the door. It slapped shut behind her.

At the same moment the storm wandered off. A shaft of sunlight sliced through the shop's front window. It illuminated a smog of granular residue hovering over a maze of wooden barrels.

Zelma should of run but curiosity got the better of her. She wandered about the shop. What she found were barrels full of whole dried fish, seaweed, roots and mushrooms.

She meandered among the barrels, finally ending up at a glass counter at the back of the store. Behind the counter rose stacks of wooden drawers. Above the drawers rose shelves, each crammed with glass jars. Topping it all was a green jade Buddha, who sat cross-legged in the middle of the top shelf. He smiled with eyes closed. A yellow gem in his forehead peered down at Zelma.

Zelma had seen plenty of queer stuff in her time: enflamed lichen, club-footed mushrooms and roots so gnarled they looked like witches' toes. And there was much of this in Mr. Wong's jars. But they also held stuff so dried, so twisted, and so bizarre that it defied identification. Were those a pair of eyes staring down at her from the second shelf? The hair on the back of Zelma's neck began to bristle.

"Mr. Wong?" Zelma whimpered.

No one answered, but she didn't feel alone. It was if the silence were alive, a thing on the prowl. She imagined long shadowy fingers inching toward her throat.

A scream began to rise up Zelma's esophagus. It ebbed when she heard the front door opening.

An elderly Chinese woman stepped into the shop.

Zelma heard an almost imperceptible flutter, like a moth parting dust. She turned to her left to see Mr. Wong morph out of the gloom. He shuffled past Zelma as if he didn't see her at all, even with his coke bottle glasses.

Mr. Wong greeted the woman with a slight bow and said "Lao Tai Po."

The woman began chattering away in rapid singsong Chinese.

Zelma didn't understand a word, of course, but she got the gist of it through the minor key in which the woman spoke. There was something terribly wrong, although Zelma didn't see any wound. Nor did the woman look in physical pain.

Mr. Wong listened silently, but his gaze bored into the woman as if he could see straight through to the bottom of her soles. After a while Mr. Wong began to stroke an earlobe. Then he turned, shuffling around Zelma, and went behind the counter.

From a corner Mr. Wong retrieved a tall wooden ladder on wheels and laid it against the wall of drawers and shelves. He ascended the ladder, gathering pinchfuls from various jars. When he held barely a cupped handful of ingredients Mr. Wong descended the ladder.

He dumped his handful of ingredients into a mortar on the counter and picked up a pestle and began to grind. He ground so hard that it looked as if he were pressing a part of himself into the mixture. A fine cloud rose from the mortar.

In the swirling cloud Zelma saw a face. Was it Gamby, smiling approvingly?

## Chapter 28

# Chinese sweepstress

On the charred bottom of the coffee can lay all that Zelma had to show for three months of hard work: two strands of graying black hair, the snout of a seahorse and a shriveled fish eye. Each had been smuggled from the 88 Mart, where Zelma now spent the good part of every Saturday.

Zelma stared into the can, chin resting on upturn palms, elbows on her desk. How to mash, boil or char these gleanings into some potion that would force Mr. Wong to make her his apprentice? She imagined herself as Mistress Zelma, Chinese sorceress, sweeping through town in silky black robes embroidered with fiery red dragonheads.

The fish eye looked up at Zelma doubtfully. Beside the coffee can laid opened the red book. Zelma closed her eyes and let a finger flipped through the pages of blue scrawl like the pointer on an Ouija board. Finally, her pointer came to a stop. Zelma opened her eyes and read the line under her finger.

“Don’t use the wind for brains.”

Zelma slammed close the red book and the attic rafters shook with the sound of her name. It was momma calling up from the first floor.

“What?” Zelma hollered back.

“Telephone.”

Telephone? Now who’d be calling her, unless....

Zelma jumped to her feet. Of course! Andrea must have come to her senses.

Down through the house raced Zelma. She found momma in the kitchen. In her hand was the leaden Bakelite receiver of a rotary phone. There was a curious smile on momma’s face as she handed the phone to her daughter.

Zelma immediately grew suspicious. "Hello?"

"Please, when come study Civil War?"

"When Ol' stumpy grows a new arm." Zelma hung up.

Mrs. Dupree stared at her daughter with arms crossed.

"What?"

"Why are you so afraid of that girl?"

"Of Lili?" Zelma scoffed.

True, Zelma didn't relish crossing swords with Lili about the War of Northern Aggression. Her English might be none too good, as they said in Milltown, but Lili had a mind like a rapier. No bubble was safe around her.

Zelma sure could have used such a girl when she was captain of the Pleasant Crump debating team. But not any more. Why, talking with Lili now would be like peeling off the scab of a wound that had just started to heal. Yet Lili kept pestering her in school: "Please, when we meet, when you come study."

"I'm not afraid," insisted Zelma to momma. "I'm mad."

"Sometimes fear comes out looking angry."

"Not with me it doesn't." And with that retort Zelma turned on her heel and left for the 88 Mart.

As usual, no one paid any mind to Zelma as she entered the 88 Mart. In her raven outfit, she was just another shadow in shop full of shadows.

Still, things could be worse. When Zelma first began haunting the 88 Mart back in October she'd spend the day perched atop two briny barrels stacked atop one another in a far corner. Imagine sitting hours on end atop a piece of driftwood. That's what the barrel felt like. But what her perch lacked in comfort it made up for in view. She could see and hear all that went on in the 88 Mart.

Luckily, not all Mr. Wong's customers spoke in Chinese. Zelma listened as they asked him to cure heartburn, punish a cheating husband, chase away evil spirits or bestow good luck on a son taking the SAT.

As for Mr. Wong he rarely spoke. He preferred to speak through gesture. Mr. Wong bowed in greeting, stared as he probed his customers, nodded to signal he heard them as they spoke and stroked his earlobe when he'd diagnosed their problem.

When Mr. Wong did speak it was never in anger. Nor would he grant any vengeful request. A woman asked him to blacken the teeth of a cheating husband, so as to drive away

his mistress. Instead, Mr. Wong suggested she steam his favorite dumplings, night after night, until guilt drove the man to beg for her forgiveness. "Vuh, vuh, vuh," the woman clucked in disagreement, but Zelma heard later that she'd taken Mr. Wong's advice anyway, with great success.

By the beginning of November, Zelma's invisibility had become as comfortable as her saw-tooth skirt. She began to wander from her barrel perch. Scooping up spilled seahorses and wiping away cobwebs with the hem of her skirt, Zelma became a benevolent spirit. But she always gave a wide berth to Mr. Wong and his customers.

Then, on the first Saturday of December, Zelma had arrived to find a surprise. A broom lay across the top of her barrel. She turned to look at Mr. Wong. He stood upfront, nodding as a customer complained about a disobedient daughter. Zelma was still just a shadow.

She picked up the broom and began to sweep. At first she kept to the back of the shop. But slowly over the next several weeks she inched closer and closer to Mr. Wong, until finally she swept behind his back. Still, neither he nor his customers paid Zelma any attention.

All that would change today.

It was nearly closing time and the store was empty. Zelma slumped atop her old barrel perch, broom resting across her lap, exhausted from having swept the store spotless. She watched Mr. Wong at the glass counter. Amazingly, he still had the strength to ground up his 20th portion of the day.

Without looking up he spoke. "Want learn?"

Zelma turned to look toward the door. A final customer must have crept in. Yet she saw no one.

Mr. Wong looked up, training those coke bottle glasses on Zelma for the first time. Her heart felt like a melon some invisible fingers were probing for any rotten spots. He arched an eyebrow as if asking his question again.

Zelma was too stunned to speak, but Mr. Wong read her silence as an answer.

"Ready, then, to study Civil War with Xiao ji zhen?"

Despite the rise in his intonation, Mr. Wong wasn't asking.

## Chapter 29

# Xiao ji zhen

If dog and master could come to look alike, could home and resident grow to resemble one another, too? Zelma had to wonder as she stood again on the emerald lawn, studying the reflective black-rimmed Palladium windows. They were Lili's eyes writ large.

From those windows Lili must have espied Zelma as she dove for cover. In a town overgrown with holly, Zelma had chosen to hide in the one bush on the lawn of Lili's stucco house.

Oh how she was stucco now. No make friend with Lili, a.k.a., Xiao ji zhen, no learn Chinese magic.

Like momma, Lili greeted Zelma in the open doorway of her house. What she saw took her aback.

Gone was the Lili in ratty Hello Kitty tee shirt, worn like some comforting blanket. In her place stood a girl that looked resplendent, even regal. Lili wore a royal blue silk blouse with a stiff high collar. Radiant cherry blossoms were embroidered on sleeves that stopped at the elbows. Lili bowed the most gracious of bows. "Huan ying guanlin," she said in greeting.

Zelma eyed Lili's stiff-collared blouse nervously. She didn't know how to act so high-toned. So Zelma did what she always did when nervous. She made a joke out of it.

Zelma bowed, too, although not nearly as graciously as her host. If Lili were offended she didn't show it.

"Xiao ji zhen," Zelma said as she rose from her bow.

Lili blushed.

"That's not your real name?" asked Zelma.

"Lili," real name. "Xiao ji zhen baby name."

"What does it mean?"

Lili really blushed now and hesitated.

"Come on," nudged Zelma.

"Mean 'my little chicken gizzard.'"

"Chicken gizzard?" Zelma guffawed.

Lili nodded and smiled, too.

"I wish I had me a name like that," teased Zelma.

"Maybe I think one up for you."

Giggling together, the girls entered the house.

The place reminded Zelma of the High Museum of Modern Art, which she had once visited in downtown Atlanta on a school field trip. Smoky glass vases of lime, purple and grey sat in square holes punched out of the pristine white walls. In one corner stood a giant up-turned metal corkscrew. It had a point that would have impressed Vlad the Impaler.

In fact, all the furniture, what there was of it, was either steely, pointed or razor-edged. Even the sofa looked chiseled out of white granite.

Zelma looked in vain for signs of human life. There wasn't a crease in the couch. Every corner of the house was dustless.

"You live alone in a tree outback?" Zelma asked, half in jest.

Lili smiled sadly.

"Oh I get it. You hacked up your parents and hid their parts in the basement pipes."

"Ai ya! Why say such dark things?"

Zelma thrust her arms up overhead and twirled on a slippered toe. "Because I'm Peachwood's own princess of darkness."

Lili cupped a hand over her mouth, trying in vain to suppress a giggle.

"What's the matter, allergic to laughing?"

"Bad luck to laugh at guest."

"Me, a guest? I'm flattered."

Lili bowed slightly again and so did Zelma.

As they began moving through the empty house Zelma asked, "So, then, where are your parents?"

"No parents. Just Wongs."

"Okay, where Wongs?"

The girls entered a cavernous kitchen. Zelma smiled knowingly as they passed a basement door.

"Wongs in basement, yes," said Lili. "But not chopped up. Promise."

"Uh huh," said Zelma.

Lili lead Zelma up one flight of stairs and then another. It turned out that Lili, too, roosted in a belfry, except that hers was magnificent.

There was a long door along the back wall that stood ajar. Zelma walked to the door and slid it open all the way, revealing a cavernous closet nearly bare. A pair of black slippers lay on the floor. From a long bar hung two pairs of blue jeans and the Hello Kitty tee shirt.

"Is this your only shirt?" Zelma blurted out. It seemed absurd, given Lili's luxurious accommodations.

Lili walked up to finger the fraying hem of the tee shirt as if it were spun from gold. "Not want others."

Zelma turned to check out of the rest of the room. What caught her attention next was a chest-high bed fit for a queen. A red and gold comforter embroidered with snarling dragons swathed a wide mattress.

Zelma's back, sore from too many nights on the wooden rack of her own bed, ached to try Lili's. She bounded toward Lili's bed and landed bottom first. She grimaced in surprise.

"You like?" Lili asked hopefully.

Zelma didn't answer, but thrust a hand under the comforter. She half-expected to find a concrete slab instead of a mattress. Nothing about Lili was as it appeared at first glance.

Which, of course, only made Zelma more curious about this curious girl. She surveyed the room from atop the bed. At the foot of the bed sat a low table set for tea with matching flowered teapot and cups. Two cushions were tucked underneath the table; alongside it towered a stack of books.

Across from Zelma were a pair of dormer windows that looked out on the front lawn. An open red pagoda the size of dollhouse sat on a low table under the windows. At the foot of the table lay a cushion deeply grooved with the impression of two bony knees.

Zelma slide off the bed for a closer look. She knelt into the grooves of the cushion, peering into the dollhouse pagoda.

A line of melted candles lined the floor. Behind the candles stood a framed photograph of a grey-hair couple wearing what looked like canvas sacks. They smiled toothlessly. The photo smelled faintly like the dried fish in the 88 Mart.

Alongside the photo stood a slender green jade figurine of a woman. Two braids ran down her back, and the figurine's hands were tucked into the opposing sleeves of a loose, waist-length gown. She had a smile that was irresistible.

Zelma couldn't help but pick up the figurine.

"That Lady Sorrowfree. Chase away hurt feelings."

"Hmm," said Zelma, stroking the figurine's long braids.

"Close eyes. Make wish."

Zelma did as she was told and imagined the dingy kepi dangling again from the hat rack of her old home. Her forehead began to grow warm. Zelma opened her eyes to find Lili staring at her with those magnified eyes. She sidestepped out of Lili's tracker beam of a gaze. "I'm not here to talk about me," said Zelma.

Lili blushed and lowered her gaze. Which made Zelma wonder. Were the Chinese like Southerners, who considered it rude to inquire about someone's person life without expressed permission?

"Right, of course" said Lili, raising her gaze. "We talk about Civil War."

"You mean, The War of Northern Aggression," Zelma corrected.

"Not argue," said Lili. "Please, invite to have tea." She extended a hand toward the table at the foot of the bed.

Zelma sat down at the table and saw that this was no ordinary tea setting. A constellation of tiny porcelain cups of assorted sizes circled the teapot, which sat atop a little burner.

One cup dwarfed the others. A strainer filled with what looked like tiny twigs straddled its wide brim.

Lili sat down across from Zelma and lifted the teapot. In a swirling motion, she poured hot water through the strainer. It produced a liquid the color of pine bark.

Zelma looked askance at Lili, who reassured, "Not drink yet."

Lili poured the dark red water into two narrow three-inch high cups and then gave each a quick swirl. Then she emptied them into two other tiny shallow cups.

The whole procedure reminded Zelma not so much of a tea party as of a conjuring. She cocked her head and eyed Lili carefully. Was she, too, an aspiring sorceress, her ratty tee shirt the equivalent of Zelma's black blouse?

Lili raised one of the empty tall cups to her nose and closed her eyes. Jiggling the cup, she sniffed deeply. "O," she sighed in a throaty, rising tone.

After a long, seemingly blissful moment, Lili set down the tall cup and raised one with dark liquid. She sipped daintily and then nodded for Zelma to follow her example.

Zelma hesitated. What if Lili were as inept a witch wannabe as Zelma? A vision of Alice in Wonderland flashed before Zelma's eyes. She half-expected Lili to shrink to the size of a mouse or her neck to shoot up to the ceiling.

"Sniff," Lili urged, nodding to one of the tall cups.

With a sigh, Zelma reluctantly obeyed. She, too, found her eyes closing as she sniffed the cup. It smelled heavenly, like roasted apple dipped in caramel. Thirstily, she grabbed the remaining tiny cup with dark water and gulped it down.

Zelma nearly gagged. "What do you call this stuff?" she croaked.

"Goddess of Mercy tea."

"Mercy me, if it don't taste like acorns."

Lili smiled as if this were a good thing. She delicately put down her cup and said, "What mean: War of Northern Aggression?"

Zelma glanced at the books stacked along side of her. Every one appeared to be about the war. No doubt Lili had read them all.

"Shoot, you don't me to explain anything," said Zelma. "You don't need anybody. You can win the history bowl all by yourself."

"Not true," protested Lili. "Books no good."

Zelma looked again at the stack. All the books had titles such as "The Hopeless Struggle" and "Why the South Lost the War." Maybe Lili did need help. "All right," said Zelma, crossing her arms, "What do you want to know?"

"Why, please, town honor John Bell Hood."

"Ol' Stumpy? Heck, he's our hero."

"But lead hopeless charge. Wipe out own army. Not better to retreat to higher ground. Let enemy attack you uphill?"

“Retreat?” Zelma spat out the word as if it were a lemon peel. Lili really didn’t understand the war at all. “Where’s the glory in that?”

“What glory? Lose war.”

“Oh really?” Zelma puffed out her chest. “Who won more battles, scared off more generals and killed more soldiers? We did! And we did it even though we were outnumbered and out-gunned.”

“Still, lose war.”

“That’s your opinion,” snapped Zelma.

“Not opinion. Fact.”

“Not in this town. There isn’t a family I know who didn’t lose kin fighting with Ol’ Stumpy. Even the sorriest mill hand believes there’s heroic blood flowing through his veins.”

“That why always re-fight lost battles?”

“Beats talking about how you lost your job and aren’t likely to find another,” quipped Zelma.

“Why not leave town? Start over.”

Zelma threw up her hands in exasperation. There was no reasoning with this girl. She stormed toward the bedroom door.

Lili stepped between Zelma and the door, blocking any escape. Head bowed, she said, “Please forgive. I apologize to ancestors. I’m sure all great heroes.”

Zelma shook her head. Lili looked so woefully sorry that she couldn’t stay angry. “Oh forget about it.” Zelma just wanted to get home for dinner. Her stomach growled, warning Lili to step aside.

“Sorry, cannot,” said Lili, eying Zelma’s growling stomach. “Must make right. What favorite dish?”

“Say what?” The question surprised Zelma.

“What favorite dish.”

“Are you saying you’re going to cook me dinner?”

Lili nodded.

Well, that would be something to see. There was no way Lili would have a clue as to how to make Zelma's favorite meal. It would be as alien to Lili as Peachwood's fondness for Lost Causes.

"All right," said Zelma, "it's fried candy bars with a co'cola Slushy."

## Chapter 29

# Spy chefs

“You see,” said Lili. “Make best ever.” She bounded out of her bedroom

“Wait!” cried Zelma, chasing after Lili. “I was just kidding.” She cringed at the thought of what Lili might imagine as fried candy bars.

Zelma finally caught up with Lili in the kitchen, where her host had gone through the basement door. She followed to find Lili stopped on the stairway about halfway down.

“See?” said Lili. “Wongs not chopped up.”

Zelma stopped, too, and looked down into the basement. Her eyes grew wide. Below her lay what looked not unlike an underground lair for an international spy ring.

A bank of television screens lined a back wall. The screens featured either a talking head or some country aflame. On the opposing wall were a half dozen clocks, each labeled Hong Kong, Berlin, London and other cities of the world. A digital stream of green numbers circled the room along a black collar about halfway up the walls.

At the center of the room sat a cluster of computer desks. A diminutive Asian man and woman in matching gray Harvard sweatsuits hunched into the computers, typing furiously, oblivious to the TVs, the clocks and the stream of numbers.

“Told you Wongs live.”

At the sound of Lili’s voice the woman looked up, scowling. Her scowl melted away at the sight of Zelma.

The woman elbowed her partner in the side. He grunted painfully but didn’t look up. “Edward,” she insisted in perfect English, again jabbing her partner.

“What?” moaned Edward, eyes still glued to a computer screen.

The woman grabbed Edward by the ear and yanked up his head to look at the stairs. At the sight of Zelma he smiled, too. "Welcome, welcome," Edward cried, jumping to his feet. He raced up to Zelma, a welcoming hand outstretched.

The Wongs escorted Zelma back upstairs as if she were a visiting dignitary from one of those faraway places represented by the basement clocks. In the kitchen they sat her down at the head of a table.

Zelma marveled at the kitchen. It was a vast plain of black, white and grey speckled marble countertop. In every corner stood a gleaming stainless steel or white appliance.

In front of the steel stove, the Wongs huddled around Lili. As she whispered, Edward looked up to wink at Zelma.

The Wongs broke huddle and scattered across the kitchen. Edward poured oil into a giant wok and set it atop a lit burner. Lili retrieved a bag of frozen Nestle crunch bars from the icebox and began crumpling them up into a ceramic bowl filled with flour. Then she carried her bowl over to Edward and began dropping the floured bits one by one into the heated wok. As the battered chocolate bits hit the sizzling oil they popped like automatic gunfire.

At the counter, Mrs. Wong emptied a liter bottle of co'cola into a tall blender filled with ice cubes. The blender roared to life. In no time co'cola and ice had been reduced to a beautiful brown slush.

Lili set fork, placemat and napkin in front of Zelma. Then she lay before her a plate piled high with molten bits of crispy chocolate. Zelma picked up the fork as Lili and the Wongs gathered around her, looking as anxious as if the staff of the Rue de Paris were serving the food critic of the Peachwood Spindle.

Zelma chipped off a bit from the chocolaty mound and tasted it. It was a sizzling crisp of perfection. As good as – dare she even think it? – as momma's fried candy bars. Who, by the way, hadn't made Zelma her favorite dish in, like, forever. She washed the chocolaty bit down with a sugary sluice that iced her throat. "Hmm," Zelma sighed. She chipped off another bit.

"Not too shabby, aye?" Edward patted Zelma on the back. "It was my favorite too when I was your age."

Mrs. Wong looked at her watch and then at her husband. "Well, you kids have fun," she said, heading back toward the basement steps.

Mr. Wong was right behind him. He stopped at the top of the stairs and turned to say, "We're so glad that Lili has at last found a friend."

Happily, Lili cleaned up. Zelma watched, picking her teeth with a butter knife. When the kitchen was again spotless, Lili turned to face Zelma. "Next your turn to make Lili's favorite dish."

"No problem," said Zelma, picturing herself microwaving a supermarket bag of frozen chow mein or chop suey.

"Vuh, vuh, vuh," clucked Lili as if once again reading Zelma's mind. "Favorite dish jelly fish salad."

"The stinging kind?"

Lili beamed.

## Chapter 30

# The apprentice

Mrs. Lee, who owned the Videorama, hobbled step by painful step through the maze of wooden barrels. Her creaking joints locked up when she saw Zelma behind the glass counter.

Zelma bowed and said “Lao Tai Po,” which was how Mr. Wong had taught her to address any elderly Chinese woman.

Mrs. Lee’s dry thin lips dipped into an upside down U.

Zelma knew what she was thinking. What did a scrawny white girl in raven dress know about Chinese medicine? Not much, this was true, but it wasn’t for a lack of trying.

Ever since her visit to Lili’s house Zelma had become Mr. Wong’s apprentice. Which meant learning, by and large, through observation. “Watch much; speak little,” Mr. Wong had counseled.

It was a line that could have come out of the red book of blue magic.

All the same, Zelma tried to understand. She looked hard and what she saw was this: To Mr. Wong’s way of figuring, biology teachers had it all wrong. People weren’t slopping sacks of blood and guts, a bed and breakfast for vagabond bacteria and viruses.

No, people were radio signals. And most of them were a wavering fuzz of static. No clearer than the signal from Georgia State University in Atlanta that Zelma received on her old clock radio.

A person’s signal was whorl of competing forces: water and fire, wood and earth. If all were blowing at equal strength than your signal chimed in the perfect pitch of a tuning fork.

Luckily for Mr. Wong that rarely was the case. Most people were less than pitch perfect most of the time. One force or another gained ground against the others. And when that happened your life signal would begin to wobble and fuzz, rasping off key like a warped nose whistle. Then all kinds of bad things began to happen. You could suffer everything from heartburn to a heart attack.

What threw people's signals off kilter? Now that was a tough one. It was like asking what came first, the chicken or the egg. At times it seemed that water just doused the fire of ambition, leaving a person to drift aimlessly down the river of life, unable to settle on a career or a mate. Other times a person's greed or envy fanned fire until it consumed the steady influence of wood. Then a person lost the backbone to resist the urge to cheat on a test or steal a neighbor's wife.

When Zelma's radio couldn't receive a clear signal her daddy used to fix it with pliers and a soldering iron. Not Mr. Wong. His tools were potions of dung beetles and the dung of horseshoe bats. He used licorice and apricots, dragonfly wings and pickled deer tongues. These things somehow worked to dam flooding water or cool a raging fire, restoring a person's sense of balance, strengthening her wavering signal.

Zelma narrowed her raven eyes, trying to tune in Mrs. Lee's wavering signal. What she heard, at least in her imagination, was a rising tide of resignation. Was it dousing Mrs. Lee's fire for life? Maybe it was from all those years of angrily chasing boys who tried to steal a game in her arcade through feeding fake tokens into her arcade machines.

Like Mr. Wong, Zelma stroked an earlobe and turned to study the shelves of jars rising up behind her. Her gaze fixed on one in particular. It was filled with what looked like petrified tongues. In fact, Zelma had learned, these were roots called Ren Shen. They made a tea that warmed you from head to toe. It sounded like just the medicine to warm a heart that had gone cold.

Zelma retrieved a stick of Ren Shen and, as she descended the ladder, she wiggled it like a worm on a hook. Mrs. Lee didn't take the bait. She stood a safe distance from Zelma, eyes darting about the store.

There was a familiar fluttering of a moth's wings. Zelma and Mrs. Lee both turned to see Mr. Wong emerge from the shop's gloom. He padded up to Mrs. Lee, studying her through his thick lenses. Soon he was stroking his earlobe and calling out ingredients.

At his command Zelma raced up and down the ladder. She dumped her handful of medicine into the mortar and began to grind. Mr. Wong shuffled up from behind and seized Zelma's elbow in a claw-like vice. He drove the pestle hard into the mortar. Pain crept down Zelma's fingers, through the pestle and into the potion. Wincing, she turned to glance up at Mr. Wong.

He smiled down at her with brown teeth.

At first Mrs. Lee hesitated in accepting her potion, neatly enfolded in brown paper. But when Mr. Wong nodded she took the package and waddled out.

Zelma rubbed her arm, which throbbed from bicep to fingertip. Yet she smiled. For the first time she'd ground up a potion that had won Mr. Wong's approval. Of course he hadn't said as much. He never did. But his brown-tooth smile spoke volumes.

With the shop empty again Zelma expected Mr. Wong to dissolve into the shadows. Zelma would pick up the broom and begin sweeping. Never mind that there wasn't a cobweb left in the shop. Mr. Wong still expected her to sweep.

She always did so gladly. Sweeping, somehow, chased away the trouble that liked to gather around Zelma's ankles these days, ever ready to trip her up.

Did Mr. Wong think so, too? He never said as much. Then again, Mr. Wong never stated the obvious.

Zelma grabbed her broom, left at the ready against the counter. But this time Mr. Wong didn't fade away. He stood peering at her through those coke bottle glasses, expectantly, as if awaiting some question.

What didn't Zelma want to ask: Why wouldn't Mr. Wong help Mrs. Zhang poison her cheating husband? What did her signal look like? And what was that ancient looking powder on the second to last shelf?

Yet it wasn't one of these questions that now popped out of Zelma's mouth. "Are you Lili's grandfather; is that why she calls you Gung-Gung?"

Mr. Wong arched an eyebrow. "Since when you care about Xiao ji zhen?"

Zelma blushed, suddenly ashamed. She saw herself again teasing Lili, mocking her speech. Sometimes it seemed like Mr. Wong knew Zelma better than she knew herself.

Did she care about Lili? Zelma recalled her house, with its artful furniture, designed to be looked at, but not sat on. Then there were her un-parents, secreted away in their spymaster basement. In such a place Lili seemed more lost soul than resident.

"You and Lili, both liu shou, eh? Not so different."

## Chapter 31

### Pole man

“So you are Lili's grandfather!” Zelma fired back.

“Not so lucky. Just Third Uncle.”

“But it was you who invited Lili to Peachwood?”

“Not invited. Had to come.”

“Say what?”

“Long story,” said Mr. Wong, as if he hoped that would silence Zelma's curiosity.

He should have known better.

Zelma set aside the broom, propped her elbows on the glass counter, and rested her chin on her upturn palms. She was all ears.

Mr. Wong sighed and said, “Lili's father bian dan.”

“Bian what?”

Mr. Wong struggled to translate. The best he could come up with was the cryptic “pole man.”

Zelma's brow wrinkled in bafflement.

“Pole man sell body.”

“Lili's father was a male prostitute?” said Zelma, eyes widening.

“Ai!” said Mr. Wong, throwing up his arms. Shaking his head, he muttered, “Waigoren.”

Waigoren was a word Zelma had heard before. It sometimes tailed her as she walked the back streets of Peachwood's little Chinatown. She interpreted it as Chinese for ignorant honky.

Still, Zelma was not put off. She knew that Mr. Wong would tell her how Lili came to Peachwood. What better way to entice Zelma to befriend his Xiao ji zhen?

With a deep sigh, Mr. Wong began to tell Lili's story.

Not unlike Zelma's own momma, Lili's parents were mountain folk. They'd grown up on the rocky hillsides of the Yangtze River in Central China. And like momma, Lili's family had left the countryside in search of a better life in the big city. That city was the Yangtze port of Wanzhou.

It turned out that Lili's father had a skill that was much wanted in the city. In the Yangtze River valley, he'd carried heavy sacks of grain and fertilizer up hill and down on the ends of a bamboo pole balanced across his shoulders. That's what Mr. Wong meant by pole man.

In Wanzhou, he now used the same pole to carry air conditioners and microwave ovens. Lili's father lugged them through the winding city streets to the modern new homes of government officials and entrepreneurs rising on the hills overlooking the ancient port.

For a country bumpkin new to the city, Lili's father didn't fare too poorly. He earned enough to rent a riverside hovel. It even had a tin roof. Unfortunately there was barely room for two. Nor was there enough rice and dried fish to feed three mouths two times a day.

Someone had to go. That someone, Lili's father decided, must be his only child and daughter. After all, had Lili not taught herself to read and write – and in Mandarin, no less, the language of his customers?

Surely such a daughter could learn English, go to university and become a doctor or lawyer. What honor for a family that had survived for generations on brute strength.

Of course Lili agreed to go to America. She had to. It was her duty. She was the youngest in a clan that blanketed the hills overlooking the Yangtze River. Her future was a family decision.

Still, on the day Lili was to leave for America, she was nowhere to be found. Relatives finally unearthed her burrowed in the mud brick hut where she had been born.

Zelma recalled the photo of the toothless old couple in burlap clothing. Were they Lili's parents?

“If you're Lili's uncle, why doesn't she live with you?”

“Oyo! Mr. Wong too old. Better live with son. Then can go to good school. Like parents want.”

“Good school, Peachwood High?”

“You know better?”

Zelma didn't care to answer that question, so she replied with another. “How come Lili wears the same tee shirt every day?”

“Ah,” said Mr. Wong. “Going away present from baba.”

“Baba?”

“Father. Saved for month to buy.”

Zelma thought of her red book, saved from the wreckage of her old life.

“See?” said Mr. Wong. “You and Lili not so different. Both live like frog in well.”

## Chapter 32

# World of Yin

Lili rubbed the pearly dust between her thumb and index finger as if it were powdered gold. “Put in Bunky's Coca-Cola,” said Lili, winking at Zelma. “Treat you nice from now on.”

“Let me see that.” Zelma sat on a stool alongside Lili behind the glass counter in the 88 Mart. Jars lined the countertop. Zelma dipped an index finger into the open jar with the pearly powder. She sniffed her finger. It smelled faintly of salty kelp. “What is it?”

“Crushed pearl. Strongest love potion.”

“Love potion?” Zelma wiped her finger on her blouse as if she'd dabbed it in arsenic. Big mistake. A white smear, looking not unlike one of Cupid's arrows, pointed to her heart.

Lili giggled.

Zelma pretended to ignore Lili and the embarrassing white smear. She plunged a finger into another open jar on the countertop. This one was filled with a sepia-colored powder that looked as ancient as Mr. Wong. Zelma had retrieved it herself off the second highest shelf. “What's this?”

“Most precious of all. Dragon bone.”

“Get out.”

Lili nodded solemnly. “Only found in secret caves guarded by monks.”

“What's it do?” said Zelma, sniffing her finger. This time her nostrils burned so bad it made her eyes water.

“Cure stupidity,” said Mr. Wong, who shuffled up behind Zelma. He screwed the lid back on the jar and then carried it up the ladder.

"You feel smarter, Xiao taiyang?"

"No," said Zelma, wiping the tears out of her eyes. Then she looked at Lili. "What did you call me?"

Blushing, Lili bowed her head.

"Lili make up Chinese name for you," said Mr. Wong. "Mean 'Little Sun,' as in center of universe."

"Gung-Gung," Lili whispered harshly. Head still bowed, she glanced hopefully up at Zelma.

"Xiao...tai...yang," said Zelma, savoring each of the three sounds of her new name. She nodded ever so slightly, as Mr. Wong would do.

Lili beamed, looking up.

"What does liu shou mean?" Zelma asked her.

"Mean 'left behind.' Why ask?"

"Oyo," crabbed Mr. Wong, stepping between the girls. "Enough foolishness." He reached under the counter and retrieved a brown package, handing it to Lili. "Please deliver to Mrs. Lee." Lili nodded and trotted toward the door.

As Lili departed an elderly Chinese woman entered the store. It was Mrs. Wei, a regular. Mrs. Wei always looked wrinkled with sadness. Ren Shen, bat wing, dried fish eyes. Nothing Mr. Wong prescribed seemed to ease Mrs. Wei's sadness.

Mr. Wong shuffled out to greet Mrs. Wei. His eyes bored into her now, as if he suspected she'd been hiding something from him during her many visits.

Zelma watched Mr. Wong from behind the counter, ready to fetch a pinch of chinaberry or a stick of Ren Shen at his command. As she waited Zelma studied Mrs. Wei, too, practicing her own powers of observation.

What she saw was an old woman who had the hangdog look of a golden retriever that had been long carrying a giant stone in its mouth. Question was, did that mean Mrs. Wei had a broken heart, a wayward son or just a hangnail. You never could tell.

"Tell me, Mrs. Wei. Your heart, in morning, float like butterfly?" Mr. Wong asked the question with all the seriousness of a doctor inquiring whether a patient had found a lump in her breast.

Glumly, Mrs. Wei shook her head. "Feel like stone. Struggle to sit up in bed."

"And your daughter, she is fine?"

Zelma imagined herself pursuing a similar line of questioning in biology lab. "And Mr. Frog, your pond mates, they know you're splayed here on my desk?" The question defied reason, at least as taught at Peachwood High, something the Mad Hatter might ask the dormouse.

Even squirrelier, sometimes Mr. Wong said nothing at all. The power of his silence seemed to draw people out. He did that now, studying Mrs. Wei rather than following up his question about her daughter.

Mrs. Wei sighed deeply and then began to talk. "Daughter not talk to me since year of the monkey."

Mr. Wong stroked his earlobe in silence.

"Daughter think I drive away father. Aiy, not true." Mrs. Wei paused, her eyes looked out the window, as if seeing again a moment from long ago.

"Mr. Wei raise hand to strike me," she said. "This time... this time I raise own hand, but only in self-defense." Mrs. Wei demonstrated, raising a hand to protect her face. "Mr. Wei hand bounce back, slapping his own face. He storm out of house. Never return."

"And daughter, she see this?" asked Mr. Wong.

Mrs. Wei nodded. "Only five. Think I hit father. Make him run away in shame."

"Anyone else see fight?"

Again Mrs. Wei nodded. "Mother. But long gone."

"Dead, yes; gone, no."

Zelma went deathly still.

Mr. Wong glanced back at Zelma. Had he noticed the rising intensity of her radio signal? Mr. Wong lowered his voice.

Zelma leaned across the counter, desperate to hear.

"Laozu always with us," said Mr. Wong, "watching and listening."

"Laozu," wondered Zelma, what did that mean, ancestor?

Mrs. Wei nodded slowly as if remembering something she'd long forgotten.

"Would mother tell daughter truth?"

A smile inched across Mrs. Wei's wrinkled lips. "She hate husband worse than me."

You'd have thought Mr. Wong would have said "aha!" at her revelation, but instead he frowned. "Tricky business."

“Hao, hao,” said Mrs. Wei, in a tone of agreement. Then she did something Zelma had never seen a customer do. She touched Mr. Wong, grasping his prune of a hand in both of her own.

Mr. Wong sighed. For a long moment he said nothing. Then he spoke.

Zelma sprawled on her belly across the countertop, ear cocked to try and catch every word of Mr. Wong's murmuring.

## Chapter 33

# Mrs. Bookworthy

Ever since she was knee high to a grasshopper, as daddy used to say, Zelma had loved the town library. She'd lazed away many a summer day slouched down in a beanbag chair and lost in the adventures of Pippi Longstockings, Mrs. Piggle Wiggle or Calliope Day.

Today, however, was another story. She'd come to do serious research.

It had been a while since Zelma had visited Howell Cobb Memorial Library, which sat on the Square. Truth was, she didn't have much call to come around these days. Peachwood High had a first class library, Zelma had to admit. It was there that she did any research for homework .

But the school library had one whopping hole in its collection. And that's what had brought Zelma back to Howell Cobb.

From the outside, the town library looked comfortably recognizable. Its once beautiful yellow brick façade remained darkened by soot, a reminder of Peachwood's heyday as a textile town. Inside, though, the library had become a stranger.

Where, for instance, was Mrs. Bookworthy? At one time she sat in the middle of the library, commanding center stage. Her desk was a towering fortress of atlases, almanacs, encyclopedias and boxes upon dusty boxes of microfiche. Needed to know the altitude of Machu Picchu or the oil production of Nigeria? Mrs. Bookworthy could find the answer for you in a red hot minute.

Now in her place stood a long bank of those gumdrop computers. A face stared glassy-eyed into every screen. It was the busiest Zelma had seen the library in years, even though the book stacks themselves were deserted.

Zelma inched into the library, her gaze searching for Mrs. Bookworthy. She tried to ignore the computers. Her memory was still opened to the Page of Hate.

Yet seated at one computer was something Zelma couldn't ignore. In it sat Freddie the Front Gate Man, or at least that's what Zelma had always called him. He was a friend of her father's who had manned the front gate of Faircloth Manor in a crisp blue guard uniform.

Freddie still wore the uniform but it was anything but crisp. It looked as if he had been using the stained and crumpled uniform as combination bedroll and tent.

But that's not what was really intriguing. Zelma couldn't recall ever seeing Freddie with a book, let alone in the library. Yet here he was now. Freddie sat hunched forward, fingers pounding the keyboard's arrow keys, glassy eyes locked on screen.

It wasn't an onscreen book that so engaged Freddie. Rather, it was a story of Freddie's own making, with him playing the title role. Through the keyboard, he apparently controlled a white knight in shining armor. The knight clutched a blond damsel while fending off a witch-headed dragon with a long sword.

Zelma heard snickering. It came from neither the white knight, his damsel nor the dragon. She glanced right to see a boy from Peachwood High. His gaze feasted on the Page of Hate. Zelma and Lili, though, were no longer the humiliation du jour. Today, the page featured one of the skateboarders Zelma had seen outside the Videorama. He laid sprawled face down in the street, a skateboard on top of him.

Lili was right. Sooner or later, digitally speaking, everyone at Peachwood High got tarred and feathered.

Zelma felt a snicker tugged at the corner of her lips. Ashamed, she mustered the strength to turn away from the Page of Hate. Zelma's gaze, cast as far as possible from the computers, landed on the object of her quest. Mrs. Bookworthy had retreated - or been removed - to a back corner of the library. There she sat, encircled in a high wall of dusty tomes, frowning and forgotten.

Zelma strode toward the librarian and Mrs. Bookworthy's frown began to soften.

"Why Miss Zelma, I haven't seen you in forever," Mrs. Bookworthy softly chided. "Not least since you left Pleasant Crump."

"Yessum," answered Zelma, her voice melting into her most syrupy drawl.

Mrs. Bookworthy's smile fell a notch as she studied Zelma. "Lordy child, is that some kind of school uniform over at Peachwood High?"

"Nome, just how I like to dress."

"I see."

Zelma could tell that Mrs. Bookworthy didn't see at all, given her returning frown. So she quickly changed the subject to one that would be more to the librarian's liking.

“Mrs. Bookworthy, I surely could use help with my history project.” Zelma tried to turn raven eyes into those of a needy puppy.

The librarian was not impressed. “Why don’t you use one of them computers? Everyone else does.”

“What I’m looking for ain’t on no computer.”

## Chapter 34

# The Book of Faircloth

Mrs. Bookworthy studied Zelma with a raised eyebrow. "What you're looking for wouldn't have anything to do with Peachwood history now, would it?"

Zelma nodded and the librarian smiled.

There was nothing Mrs. Bookworthy loved more than answering questions about town history. It meant perusing a text so sacred that she kept it under lock and key. Only one person was permitted to touch this tome and that was Mrs. Bookworthy.

The book was called "The Complete History of Peachwood," written by Mrs. Bookworthy's father, a longtime history teacher at Pleasant Crump. He'd died nearly 40 years ago in the early 1960s. Yet his book had never been updated.

Not when the last "Whites Only" sign had come down off of the drinking fountains in the Square; not when blacks and whites started going to school together; not when Chevy Suburbans began lumbering freely along the crest of Peachwood Heights. Not even when the mill had closed.

Rumor had it that the publisher wanted Mrs. Bookworthy to update her father's book, but she had refused. As far as she was concerned, nothing of interest had happened since her father died. In refusing to update the town's history, did Mrs. Bookworthy think she could stop time?

Zelma warmed toward the librarian. "What I need to know, Mrs. Bookworthy, is the history of the Faircloths."

"The Faircloths? Why nobody's asked about them in...well, I can't remember when." Mrs. Bookworthy eyed Zelma suspiciously for a moment and then nodded sadly. "Of course. You're living in the Manor now, aren't you?"

Zelma's face reddened. The news of her misfortune had now reached the remotest corners of Peachwood. "It doesn't have anything to do with that," snapped Zelma. Then she seized her temper by reins. "I'm doing a project for school, that's all."

She was working on a project, all right, but it had nothing to do with school.

Luckily, Mrs. Bookworthy didn't take offense at Zelma's outburst. She smiled and said, "Well, child, you're in luck. I have just the thing for you."

Mrs. Bookworthy rose unsteadily, as if it had been some time since she'd left her chair. She disappeared into a closet behind her corner desk.

A moment later she returned with a big black book. She lugged it to a small table in front of her desk. There she unlimbered the book onto the table and beckoned Zelma to sit.

Zelma sat down in front of the book. It was titled "The History of the Family Faircloth." Mrs. Bookworthy was right. This was just what Zelma needed.

Would she be able to read the book by herself? Zelma glanced up at Mrs. Bookworthy. The librarian nodded her assent, but remained standing over Zelma's shoulder.

Zelma lifted the book's heavy cover. Her face disappeared in a cloud of dust. Clearly, the Faircloths' history had gone unread for some time.

The book's pages were wide and its type small. Zelma had to lean in close to read it. Yet once she started reading she couldn't stop. The Faircloth's history was a yarn worthy of her daddy.

The Faircloths had arrived destitute from Derbyshire, England in the late 1700s. At first they'd tried to plant cotton. It was a dumb move, given North Georgia's rocky hills. Those hills did support giant chestnut and pine trees, so the Faircloths switched to lumbering. They floated their logs down a series of rivers that led to the bustling port of Savannah. And from there the Faircloth's logs headed north to build the burgeoning cities of New England.

It was backbreaking work that earned the family little at first. They did, however, end up owning much of North Georgia, especially after President Andrew Jackson chased off the Cherokee Indians.

The Faircloths made their real fortune when the Yankee rail barons began to extend their lines southward. Ever enterprising, the Faircloths built a rail depot on the Chattahoochee. Now boat traffic along the river could unload their wares onto trains heading to northern markets. Sure enough, the Yankees then bought Faircloth land to connect their rail lines to the new depot.

Then the Faircloth's sold the land around the depot to local businessmen, who built warehouses and small factories. Thus was born the town of Peachwood. You could say it was a Faircloth invention.

The Faircloth's story was a glorious one, but somehow it saddened Zelma. It reminded Zelma of her own family's history. Her ancestors too had worked hard. Yet all they had to show for it was a little house on Magnolia Street, passed on through the years from father to son. Now even that was gone.

"Do the Faircloths always come out on top?" Zelma lamented.

"Oh no," said Mrs. Bookworthy. She reached down and turned the page of the book and then nodded for Zelma to read on.

## Chapter 35

### Yankee lovers

On Confederate Avenue, where the library sat on the Square, there was only one war that counted: the War of Northern Aggression.

“So the original Faircloth Manor burned down in the war?” Zelma moaned aloud as she read. It seemed the Faircloths were not only land barons but war heroes, too. There was many a family in Peachwood that would have been proud to boast that they’d lost a home in the war.

“The original Faircloth Manor burned, all right,” said Mrs. Bookworthy, “but not how you’re thinking.”

“What do you mean?” Zelma assumed that Sherman had torched the manor as he delivered on his promise to “make Georgia howl.”

“It wasn’t the Yankees who destroyed the manor.”

Zelma turned around sharply to look at Mrs. Bookworthy, who savored Zelma’s look of confusion for a moment. Then she spoke. “It was our boys who done it.”

“Get out!”

Mrs. Bookworthy nodded solemnly.

“Where does it say that?” Zelma turned back to the book, furiously thumbing through its pages.

“Gracious, child,” said Mrs. Bookworthy, wrenching the book away from Zelma. “You’ll plum tear the old thing apart.” Mrs. Bookworthy carefully paged through the book, then stopped and beckoned Zelma to read.

If this didn't beat all. The Faircloths were never – as Mrs. Bookworthy would say – secesh. That is, those who favored leaving the Union. Their reasons for opposing secession were treasonous.

For one, the Faircloths paid everyone who cut timber for them, whether white, black or Cherokee. They'd sworn that, since cotton farming had nearly broken them, the family would never break other men.

Worse still, the Faircloths used their connections with Yankee businessmen to help runaway slaves escape to the North. Serving as part of the Underground Railroad was terribly dangerous, even in the North Georgia Piedmont. Sure, North Georgians despised the slave-owning planters in the coastal lowlands, who looked down on them as backwoods yokels. But that didn't mean North Georgians looked kindly on those who helped runaway slaves.

By the start of the war in 1861, the Faircloths had become pariahs. No one wanted to hear what the family had to say about the Yankees, even though nobody knew them better. That didn't shut the family up. They warned everyone that the North had the men, the industrial muscle and the will to ultimately crush any rebellion.

Since the family believed the North would ultimately win the war, it wanted to keep up good relations with its Yankee customers. That's why they invited Uncle Billy, as the Yanks called Sherman, to stay at the manor when his invading army reached Peachwood in the summer of 1864.

Ol' Stumpy didn't take kindly to the Faircloths' neighborly offer to Uncle Billy. He had his artillery – what little there was left of it by then – reduce Faircloth Manor to rubble.

"But wouldn't that have been the end of the Faircloths?" Zelma wondered aloud, "not to mention Sherman."

"Should have but wasn't," sighed Mrs. Bookworthy. "Seems Sherman got tipped off and escaped, taking the Faircloths with him – all save one."

Mrs. Bookworthy leaned over Zelma's shoulder and flipped the book to a page featuring a scratchy yellow photograph of a most striking girl. In a lacey dress, she rode sidesaddle atop a donkey. Her gaze challenged, "Just see if I don't ride this here donkey in my Sunday best."

"That's little Gracie," said Mrs. Bookworthy. "She was quite the character."

"I can see that," said Zelma. "How come she didn't escape?"

"Well, nobody knows for sure," said Mrs. Bookworthy. She leaned into Zelma's ear and whispered. "But the story goes the Faircloths plum forgot her in their rush to escape."

"No!" Zelma stared at the reference librarian with incredulity. Not only had the Faircloths given safe harbor to the enemy. They'd done so at the cost of a daughter. The real hero

here was poor little Gracie. How had the town ever forgiven the Faircloths for this atrocity?

The answer was written in Mrs. Bookworthy's expression. It was as hard as the granite face of nearby Stone Mountain, where forlorn Confederates had carved portraits of the Lost Cause's patron saints: Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis.

Was this why Miss Gracious's fund-raising, no matter how successful, was never enough for Mrs. Stillwater? Zelma found herself wondering what Lili would make of all this. She'd probably think Mrs. Stillwater and the whole dang town were nothing but a bunch of hypocrites. People were happy to work in the Faircloth's mill and take their charity – all the while despising them for something they'd done more than a century ago.

Heck, now that Zelma thought about it, the Faircloths didn't seem any different than Ol' Stumpy and his feckless uphill charge against a bigger, better armed foe. In harboring Sherman, not to mention ferrying slaves northward, the Faircloths had been fighting their own Lost Cause.

Zelma didn't know what to think anymore. She studied the picture of Gracie again as it might hold the answer. This time Zelma did see something new.

Gracie cradled a doll that wore an identical lacey dress. Its eyes seem to lock onto Zelma with a knowing look.

Zelma bolted out of her chair. "Joking Jesus."

"Lordy child, now what?" said a startled Mrs. Bookworthy.

Zelma seized the reference librarian's hand and shook it hard. "Thank you, thank you." Then she raced out of the library toward the manor. Had she found what she'd been looking for?

Only Miss Gracious herself could tell Zelma for sure.

## Chapter 36

# The girl on the donkey

Miss Gracious eyed Zelma victoriously, as if she were Brer Fox and had finally cornered Brer Rabbit. Zelma had to admit it sure looked like she'd been outfoxed, ensnared in a briar patch of her own making.

She sat at the dining room table wedged between the Brat-worst twins. Behind her stood momma, arms crossed, ready for trouble, and blocking any hope of escape.

The dinner dishes had been cleared from the table. What lay in front of Zelma now was a white box with a pink ribbon.

"Aren't you going to open it?" said Ambrose, a finger starting to uncurl the box's ribbon.

Zelma nudged away his probing finger. "Of course I am," she said, smiling at Miss Gracious. Miss Gracious smiled back as if the two of them shared a dangerous secret. Which, of course, they did.

Lord help Zelma if momma ever found out about the whopper she'd told about daddy at the club. To momma's way of thinking, her daughter still wasn't too old for a good whupping. No doubt this pretty box, if properly flattened, would make a fine paddle.

Why else had Miss Gracious ambushed Zelma with this latest gift after dinner in front of momma? She figured Zelma would have no choice but to accept it. And accepting this gift would be tantamount to acknowledging Zelma's debt to Miss Gracious for not ratting her out.

Clever, dang clever. Miss Gracious obviously thought so, given her triumphant smile.

Truth was, Miss Gracious needn't have gone through all the bother of an ambush. This time Zelma was more than happy to accept a gift, although not for the reason Miss Gracious probably thought.

Zelma carefully untied the ribbon and lifted up the lid. Inside the box lay a black and grey checkered cardigan.

“All the stylish girls, I’m told, are wearing these cardigans at Peachwood High,” said Miss Gracious.

Normally, Zelma would no more don this cardigan than Alyssa would candy cane stockings.

Yet Zelma tried to flush her pale cheeks pink with excitement. She slipped the sweater on over her black blouse.

Miss Gracious beamed.

“What do you think?” Zelma turned around to show off the sweater to her mother.

Momma wasn’t as easily fooled as Miss Gracious. She frowned, obviously wondering about Zelma’s sudden change in taste in clothes.

“Well, I for one, think it looks lovely on you,” said Miss Gracious.

Zelma accepted the compliment with a graceful nod that would have made Lili proud. Then she said, “Miss Gracious, may I ask you a question?”

“Of course, dear, anything.”

“Is it true your family lost everything in the war?”

Miss Gracious’ thin eyebrows arched in surprise. “Why who told you that?”

Out of the corner of her eye Zelma saw momma’s fists clench, girding for battle.

“My teacher. We’re studying your family in class.”

“Really,” said Miss Gracious, sounding even more surprised.

As well she should be. Zelma had never heard the Faircloths mentioned in discussions about the war – not in Milltown, not at Peachwood High. Thanks to Mrs. Bookworthy, Zelma now knew why.

“Well,” said Miss Gracious, nervously fingering her pearls, “what are they saying about us?”

“That the family escaped with only the clothes on their back.”

“That’s true,” said Miss Gracious, sitting up proudly. “As you can see we came back bigger than ever.” She thrust a index finger jubilantly toward the high ceiling.

Did Miss Gracious see that her ceiling bowed and flaked paint? Zelma didn’t ask. Instead, she nodded as if every word Miss Gracious said were true.

So did momma.

Miss Gracious smiled benevolently down at Zelma and her mother. You'd have thought the Duprees were the first people to understand the reluctant matriarch of Faircloth Manor.

Which was what Zelma wanted Miss Gracious to think. It looked safe now to ask about what she really wanted to know. "Who was Gracie?"

Down fell the hand Miss Gracious had raised so high and mighty.

"Gracie?" piped up Ambrose, "who's she?"

"Yeah," Ashley chimed in.

Miss Gracious eyed her twins for a moment and then spoke. "Gracie was your great, great aunt." A playful smile crossed Miss Gracious' lips. "Your Gramie used to tease me that I was Gracie's spitting image."

"What was Gracie like?" nudged Zelma.

"Zelma, please," scolded momma. She considered it disrespectful to inquire about a person's family without invitation to do so.

"It's all right," said Miss Gracious, eyes twinkling. "Zelma and Gracie could have been kin."

"How's that?" said Zelma.

"Gracie loved to do whatever she wasn't supposed to."

From behind Zelma heard her mother snort.

"Like what?" pressed Ambrose.

"Well, according to your Gamie, like keeping a pet donkey."

"Cool," the twins cooed in unison.

"And she like to go hunting with her brothers, unusual enough in her time, but she liked to do it in her Sunday church dress."

Even momma chuckled at the image of a little girl riding shotgun in her Sunday best atop a donkey. But it wasn't a shotgun Zelma remembered cradled in Gracie's arms.

"What else?" Zelma coaxed.

"Well, let me see now. Ah, of course. How could I've forgotten?"

"Forgotten what, momma?" said Ashley.

“Gracie had this doll, carved by her own grandpa, and she carried it with her everywhere. It was her most prized possession.”

“Get out,” said Zelma.

“God’s honest truth,” said Miss Gracious. “The doll is around here somewhere, although I haven’t seen it in ages.” She cast a suspicious eye at the twins.

“We didn’t take it, momma. Honest,” protested Ashley.

Zelma knew they were telling the truth.

## Chapter 37

# A ghostly holiday

To the Chinese, the 15th of every month was a holiday. Not for those standing above ground, mind you, but for those six feet under. It was the day when unhappy ancestors were allowed to return from the World of Yin and poke around among the living.

The World of Yin, as best Zelma could figure, was a depot of sorts, a place where Chinese souls hung out after death. Here they waited to catch a bus to either heaven or hell. It could be a long wait.

No wonder these poor souls looked forward to the day they escaped this limbo. What better time to conjure up the spell she'd overheard Mr. Wong's whisper to Mrs. Wei?

Except Zelma didn't dare try the spell with either momma or Miss Gracious in the manor. Yet dang if she could get them both out of the house at the same time, let alone on a specific day. After two months of trying, she'd finally managed to succeed tonight, Feb. 15th.

Miss Gracious had been easy. She'd decamped on her own. It had snowed for the first time in years and Miss Gracious had fled the cold to her family's pecan plantation in Albany.

Momma had been another story. It had taken some effort to persuade her to take a night off to play cards with some old friends in Milltown.

Alone now with the twins, Zelma realized how badly her mother needed a night off. She slumped against a wall in the foyer. Hanging limply in each hand were a pair of bunny pajamas. Overhead there was the patter of little bare feet. The hallways echoed with the chortling of twin boys run amok.

It had taken half the evening to bathe Ambrose and Ashley. At this rate Zelma would never bed the twins before momma's return. The time had come to stop pussyfooting around.

Flinging the PJs over her shoulder, Zelma shoved off for the twins' bathroom. In the medicine cabinet she found just the right potion for the task at hand.

Back down the stairs Zelma crept to a big sofa in the living room. There she crouched in waiting. Soon she heard the approaching slap of naked feet on bare wood.

Like a tiger, Zelma pounced on Ambrose. She sat on his chest, pinning an arm under each of her knees. Into his bawling mouth Zelma squirted an eyedropper full of Benadryl.

Ambrose sputtered in protest, glazing Zelma's hair in sticky red medicine. Still, most of the sleep-inducing Benadryl appeared to have gone down his gullet.

Zelma rolled off Ambrose. He popped back up on his little feet and scampered away. Moments later she trapped, dosed and released an equally flustered Ashley.

She pressed an ear against the floorboards and patiently listened. Sure enough, Zelma heard a pair of scampering feet slow to a trot. Then the floorboards shuddered.

Zelma set off in search of her fallen prey. She found Ambrose curled up like a cat behind a chair in the dining room, sound asleep. Zelma slung him over her shoulder and touted him up to bed. Soon she had bedded Ashley, too.

The manor creaked a long sigh of relief, a thank you no doubt, for Zelma silencing the four little feet pounding its rickety old floorboards.

As the creaking faded there was only one sound in the house: The thunk, thunk, thunk of the grandfather clock in the foyer. It served as the manor's heartbeat.

The old clock chimed eight times. Zelma still had plenty of time to cast her spell. Given mamma's love of cards, she probably wouldn't be home before midnight.

Zelma slipped into the dark inner corridors of the manor, feeling her way along the walls. No need for a light anymore. She'd come to know these forgotten passageways as she did the inside of her own skirt pockets. The thunk of the grandfather clock grew faint as Zelma crept deep into the manor.

At last Zelma's fingers touched a familiar curtain of a door. Zelma stopped but her heart raced on. For a moment, she feared that her feet might chase off after her racing heart.

Steady girl, she told herself. This was her best, if not only, chance to attempt Mr. Wong's spell. Her raven eyes narrowed in determination. The panic in her heart fluttered off.

From her pocket Zelma retrieved a candle and a long stick match. She struck the match against the wall and lit the candle. Flickering candlelight illuminated a roomful of mounted heads.

Holding the candle overhead, Zelma approached the high mantle above the fireplace. There was just enough light to make out the doll preserved in glass atop the mantle.

Miss Gracious was right. The doll was her spitting image. It had the same stiff blonde hair, high nose and long neck.

Yet there was something strikingly different, too. Where Miss Gracious gazed down on you with a feigned tolerance, this doll looked you straight in the eye. "Just see if I don't," it seemed to challenge.

The doll's challenging gaze drew Zelma's hand like a moth to flame. Clamping the lit candle between her teeth, she lifted the doll's glass case down from the mantle and placed it on the floor. Carefully she raised the glass cover.

Holding her breath, Zelma picked up the doll. She half-expected it to crumble in her hands, like Egyptian parchment exposed to air. It didn't. In fact, the doll felt as solid as oak, or in this case, probably chestnut. This was the grandest of American trees, the Redwood of the East, until wiped out by blight at the turn of the 20th century.

No wonder the doll had survived all these years.

The doll hadn't softened with age, either. Zelma stroked its dress and the hem pricked the back of her hand like a thorny rose. This was not a doll made for cuddling. All the same Zelma had to try.

She thrust the burning candle between her teeth and spirited the doll off to her curtained alcove in the attic. On the floor lay the red book of blue magic. Atop it sat a readied mortar, brimming with dried seahorse, red berries and the shavings of a root hairier than her father's chest.

For weeks Zelma had been smuggling ingredients out of the 88 Mart, one red berry at a time. Eluding those coke bottle eyes of Mr. Wong hadn't been easy. He clearly didn't want Zelma messing with the World of Yin. Mr. Wong never again mentioned the spell he'd given Mrs. Wei. Thank goodness every word of it had been etched in Zelma's memory.

Zelma blew out the candle and sat down cross-legged in front of the red book on the floor by her desk. She nestled the doll in her lap. It looked on as Zelma ground up the ingredients in the bowl.

Did the doll understand what Zelma was up to? Its challenging gaze egged Zelma on. Zelma drove the pestle hard against the marble sides of the mortar. Sweat beaded on her forehead. Slowly the ingredients became a red powder as fine as fairy dust.

Exhausted, Zelma leaned against the wall to rest for a moment. Again she heard Mr. Wong's words to Mrs. Wei: "Find something dear to ancestor. Love as own."

Zelma picked up the doll and cradled it against her cheek. Its thorny dress bit into her skin, drawing blood. "There, there," Zelma cooed despite her stinging cheek. "Everything is going to be all right."

Zelma herself was less than sure.

All the same, she continued to coo and drew another match from her pocket. She flicked it with the nail of her thumb, just like daddy used to do. The match burst into flame and Zelma tossed it into the mortar. The powder ignited, emitting a snaking column of red smoke.

Zelma leaned over the bowl and breathed deeply. Her nostrils filled with a smell not unlike sorghum, heavy and seductively sweet. It soaked her lungs as if she'd guzzled a bottle of syrup. Zelma's eyelids drooped and she felt herself slipping off the shelf of consciousness.

## Chapter 38

### Sissy's mine

"Jee-crawling-hova!"

The ballyhoo of a cry startled Zelma awake. She opened her eyes to find herself toppled sideways, curled up in a ball, the doll clutched to her cheek. Zelma's nose stung from the lingering sulfurous smell of a gunshot.

Suddenly the doll's prickly dress scraped Zelma's cheek as something tugged on its legs. The tug felt not unlike a bass seizing the minnow baited on the end of a line. Instinctively, Zelma reared back, as if setting a hook. She looked down, half-expecting to see Bubba Largemouth.

Instead, what Zelma saw were two vaporous little hands holding the doll's ankles. A pair of eyes orange as Georgia clay blazed up at her. "Ye God, Sissy's mine!"

"Joking Jesus," Zelma stammered.

"I ain't a joking atall," fumed a sepia girl. She looked no more substantial than a plume of cigar smoke. This apparition had to be Gracie, or what was left of her. The ghost might not look like much, but she was an angry force to be reckoned with. Gracie's tugging on the doll made Zelma's arms tremble.

Dare Zelma let go? The doll might be Zelma's only lever of control over the ghost. Yet Gracie looked madder than a yellow jacket flushed out of its earthen nest. And Zelma wanted to befriend Gracie, not anger her.

Zelma's grip relaxed, and the doll slipped out of her sweaty hands.

Gracie tumbled backwards head over heels. She landed upside down against a corner, doll clutched to her chest, feet draped overhead like some yogi doing the plow. Gracie thrust the doll out in front of her. Wagging a finger at the doll, she scolded.

And Zelma thought momma had a thick drawl. Gracie's words dripped out like molasses and all stuck together. Her speech was a nearly indecipherable mush of words.

Finally, Zelma figured out what Gracie was saying and it struck her as upside down as the ghost.

“Bad, bad Sissy. Don’t ever leave momma again!”

Wasn’t it Gracie who’d left the doll in getting blown up – not the other way around?

Gracie rolled over until she sat upright. Cradling Sissy in her arms, she cooed. Gracie's body floated up like a feather on a faint draft. Her eyes lost their fiery glow.

Exhausted, Zelma slumped against the wall for support. What she beheld tested even her own prodigious ability to believe in the unbelievable.

A sepia transparency of a girl hovered in the middle of the alcove. Her hair was a bramble no comb had touched in 140 years. The ghost’s lace dress had become a canvass depicting her tragedy. It was singed with gunpowder, streaked orange with Georgia clay and dusted with pulverized masonry. Gracie could have hung as a Jackson Pollock in Atlanta’s High Museum of Modern Art.

Gracie looked up from the doll cradled in her arm as if awakening from a deep sleep. She held out a transparent hand, turning it side to side. Was it really hers, Gracie seemed to be thinking. “Ain’t I supposed to be kilt?”

“Well,” croaked Zelma, struggling to get her parched throat to speak, “yeah.”

“Then ‘laws alive, what am I doing here?”

Good question, but how to explain Chinese magic to a 19th century girl? Zelma barely understood it herself.

“Lookee here,” said Gracie. “One minute I’m on the outside looking in. A red hot minute later, I’m on the inside, looking out.”

Ah, now Zelma understood what Gracie was getting at. She was describing Mr. Wong's World of Yin, or unlife of the dead. As Zelma understood it, the dead lived as if behind a one-way mirror. They could hear and watch you, but were unable to talk back or touch. Imagine sassing a mother who couldn’t hear a word you said. It sounded like a living hell.

Now Gracie had been sucked through the mirror separating the living from the dead. And it was Zelma who’d pulled her back through. Beaming proudly, Zelma watched as Gracie enfolded herself in the alcove’s curtain, reveling in the soft velvet.

“Well, I’ll be ding-busted,” purred Gracie, “if’n I ain’t back. Am I some kind of haint?”

“You mean ghost?”

Gracie nodded.

“Yep,” answered Zelma, mustering her courage. “You’ve come back as a ghost – and you have me to thank for it!”

“Do I now,” said Gracie. Her eyes flashed orange. She wafted out of the curtain and snaked across the room. Gracie stopped within inches of Zelma's face, looking her in the eye.

Zelma tried not to flinch.

“Boo!”

Zelma lurched backward, slamming the back of her head against the wall. She swallowed a yelp of pain, but she couldn't stop her eyes from watering.

“Now don't go all white lipper on me,” said Gracie, grinning at Zelma's tearing eyes. The ghost drifted back a step or two, as if to get a better look at Zelma. “Say, I know you.”

“You do?”

The ghost nodded. “Ain'tcha the one who spiked my great grand nephew's chocolate milk with ketchup?”

Zelma gulped. How much had Gracie seen from behind the World of Yin's one-way mirror? A slideshow of embarrassing moments flashed through Zelma's memory. Her tumble down the attic stairs when a slipper snagged on a raised nail head; the time she'd caught her hair in the cupola's trap door and dangled painfully, afraid to cry out for help and reveal her secret hideaway.

Gracie smirked as if reading Zelma's thoughts.

Could Gracie do that? She didn't recall Mr. Wong saying anything about ghosts being mind readers. Then again, Zelma didn't always understand everything he said. Mr. Wong could be as cryptic as the red book.

Zelma began to sweat through her candy cane stockings. How would she ever control a ghost who seemed to know not only her every faux pas, but her thoughts as well?

## Chapter 39

### Life behind the mirror

“Vuh, vuh, vuh,” Lili clucked disapprovingly.

“Huh?” said Zelma, as if startled awake from a dream.

Lili pointed down at the glass countertop of the 88 Mart.

Red juice dripped from Zelma's hand and puddled atop the counter. Apparently she had been absent-mindedly squeezing to mush a handful of chinaberries. Zelma wiped up the puddle with the sleeve of her blouse.

Lili's thick glasses bored into Zelma. “Wind blow out brains today?”

“Oh I'm just worried about that biology test. You know how I stink at science.”

Lili looked unconvinced. She was in Zelma's class. “What test?”

“Well, will you look at the time,” said Zelma, pointing up at the three-eyed Buddha atop the drawers as if it were a clock. “Gotta run.”

Zelma dashed out the door of the 88 Mart and ran all the way home.

Momma was dusting in the foyer when Zelma came barreling through the front door. “Got to study,” she said, holding up a convincing stack of textbooks.

With an approving nod momma signaled Zelma could pass unquestioned.

Up the foyer stairs Zelma bounded two steps at a time. Every day for the past week she'd manage to elude all chores, pleading that she had to either study for a test or write a paper. To momma Zelma's schoolwork was sacrosanct.

Zelma was hard at work, all right, although it had nothing to do with reading, writing and arithmetic. She was trying to figure out how to control Gracie. In the week since Zelma had summoned back the ghost she'd learned a thing or two.

Gracie, for instance, loved to startle. At the most unexpected moments the ghost would snake out of the floorboards or the folds of Zelma's skirt. The best way, then, to summon Gracie was to pretend you weren't expecting her at all. So Zelma always acted as if she were absorbed in homework or dusting. Truth was, all she could think about was the ghost.

Yet what Zelma didn't know about Gracie was a lot. She didn't dare ask Mr. Wong. In effect, she'd stolen his spell. Zelma had never seen him angry, but if anything would tick off Mr. Wong, surely it would be the theft of a spell. Especially one he clearly didn't want Zelma to have. The image of a scowling Mr. Wong raised the hairs on the back of Zelma's neck.

Zelma supposed she could ask Lili, but had been unable to bring herself to do so. She feared there were no secrets between Lili and her Third Uncle. Worse, Lili might try to get Zelma to confess her perfidy to Mr. Wong. That seemed like something a girl with a penetrating gaze might do.

That left Zelma only one last source, and it wasn't what you'd call reliable.

Zelma let her schoolbooks thud to the floor. Then she snaked on her belly to retrieve the red book of blue magic. She lugged the book to her bed and nestled it between her crossed legs.

The book flipped open. A line on the page grabbed Zelma's eye. It read, "Beware of smells that pinch the nose."

As she read Zelma's nostrils curled up with the smell of singed lace.

"Flapdoodle."

"Say what?" Zelma glanced over her shoulder to see Gracie swirling into view.

"That dog don't hunt," the ghost said, pointing at the red book. "You ever cipher a thing from it?"

"Sure I have," said Zelma, squaring her shoulders proudly.

"Name one."

"I once vaporized a boy."

"With that fricasseed bat?"

"That's right."

"In a pig's eye."

"Well I did," insisted Zelma, hoping the ghost had never been able to venture beyond the manor.

The sepia light that was Gracie drifted over Zelma's shoulder, brushing her cheek. Gracie's touch chilled Zelma to the bone, like the wind on an icy day.

As always, Gracie clutched Sissy to her breast. The two were inseparable. Which made Zelma wonder. Was the doll the secret to controlling Gracie? Zelma sure would love to get her hands back on Sissy, but how, was the question.

Floating in mid-air, Gracie stretched out sideways as if lazing on a cushion of grass. She propped her head up on a palm and rested Sissy against her belly. Dust wafted through Gracie's sepia light.

Amazed, Zelma asked, "So what's it like?"

"What's like?"

"Being dead and all."

Gracie reached into her dress and retrieved a weathered corn pipe. She tapped it on her leg as if shaking out old ash. "Ain't so bad. Beats living in some ways."

"Get out."

Gracie's eyes glowed orange, as if fueled by Zelma's astonishment. "When I was a livin', men folk had all the fun," Gracie said with a frown. "They got to go riding and hunting in the morning. Afternoons were spent down at the courthouse, hanging around, whittling and jawing about war.

"We woman folk, especially ladies like yours truly, had to stay home all day. We'd sit in the parlor, trying to look pretty, playing the piano or knitting. We were to be seen but not heard. All we could say was yessum or nome or quote scripture. I'm rotten glad to be quit of all that."

"Sounds terrible," Zelma, agreed. She wouldn't have lasted 15 minutes in such a world.

"It was even worse for common folk such as yourself."

"I beg your pardon," said Zelma, bristling. Gracie might as well have called her ordinary, boring.

"You know," said Gracie, "regular working folk."

Well, there was no shame in being that, thought Zelma, and she lowered her quills.

"All the same, I reckon your kind have it pretty easy nowadays."

"We do not!" Zelma thought of all the times she struggled to get the twins bedded or dusted the inner manor.

Gracie took the stem of the pipe out of her mouth and pointed it at Zelma. "You ever beat a rug with a stick?"

"Well, no..."

"Churn milk into butter until your arms felt like pudding?"

"No, but..."

"Walk miles with a shovel to fetch a hot coal from a neighbor?"

Zelma whispered "no."

Smiling triumphantly, Gracie studied her worn corn pipe. "Yep, these here times are better all round, ain't that right, Sissy?" The doll, nudged by Gracie's knee, nodded in agreement.

"In my day," Gracie said, frowning, "a lady warn't suppose to smoke."

"No kidding," said Zelma, thinking of all the girls at Peachwood High who smoked behind the school.

"Yesiree, tobaccah were the devil's weed," said Gracie, her eyes glowing orange. "At least that's what mamma said. "If'n I wanted to smoke I had to hideout in the cellar.

"Now lookee," boasted Gracie, holding up her pipe. "I can smoke any ol' time I got a han-kering to.

"Of course," said Gracie, frowning again, "I do have to make believe there's tobaccah in the bowl. And it was smoking, I reckoned, that got me kilt."

## Chapter 41

# Betrayed

As Gracie took a deep drag on her pipe she faded away, as if consumed by her own deep thoughts. Slowly the ghost exhaled and her image re-appeared. “The best I can figure, it happened something like this:

“I was up in the cupola, enjoying a wonderful September day, when I seen of column a Yankee boys, their canteens a clinking, their upraised musket barrels gleaming in the sun. They was a marching down the road toward the manor. Sherman himself was a leadin’em, sitting high on a chestnut mare as if he’d already drove Ol’ Dixie down.”

As Gracie talked, Zelma listened eyes wide, legs balled against her chest, spellbound. She could see the town’s history unfolding before her eyes.

“Well, as funny as it sounds, all I could think of was this’n here pipe. If’n we were captured, or had to skedaddle, I knew I’d never find me another as good. So I raced to the cellar. Everyone – ma, pa – were racing around, too, although they didn’t look to be a skedaddling. There was a huge feast set out on the table. But I paid it no mind. All I could think about was my pipe.

“Problem was, I couldn’t find it nowheres. I turned that cellar upside down and inside out. At long last, I found my pipe in a closet behind a barrel of pa’s best whisky. That was queer, mighty queer.

“Sure, every once in a while, I’d sneak a swig,” confided Gracie, winking at Zelma. “But I’d rarely had me the chance. Daddy only unlocked the closet on special occasions, like when the circuit judge came a calling and that hadn’t been in quite some time.”

Gracie scowled. “How’d my pipe get into the closet, anyhow? Had pa, or worse, one of my good for nothing brothers, been using it? The thought of that made me pig-biting mad. I rushed into the closet and the door swept shut behind me. Dawg-gum it if’n it weren’t locked in.

“Well things had sure come to a pretty pass. If’n I pounded on the door long enough ma or pa would come a runnin’, but how would I explain what I was a doing in the whiskey closet? I reckoned it would be a sight better if’n I jimmied open the door by my lonesome.

“So that’s what I done. Although it took me a sight longer than I figured. I had to use the rusted metal keg tap and the jamb was dang thick. When I finally got free, pipe tucked snugly in my undergarments, I waltzed upstairs as if’n nothing had happened.

“‘Cept’n warn’t nobody around. Not my family; not any dang Yankees. The feast sat on the dining room table, untouched, if’n you didn’t count the flies. There was a deathly hush to the house. I ran upstairs to my room and poked my head out the window. There warn’t nobody around the manor, neither. “Ma!” I cried out.

“She didn’t answer, but I heard a queer sound, like a high pitched whine. Then I saw it. Clear as day. A cannonball hurtling straight for the head of yours truly.

“I have to give them Yankee boys credit. It was a helluva shot. But I warn’t done for yet. I ducked and that cannonball whistled overhead. All it did was muss my hair a might.

“But wouldn’t you know it? The ding-blasted thing hit a supporting beam. The ceiling come crashing down on me.”

Zelma winced.

“Aw, didn’t hurt none, leastways not that I can remember.” Gracie puffed out her chest. “Besides, ain’t no shame in getting kilt by Yankees. I’m a war hero!

“Funny thing is,” said Gracie, her chest deflating, “I don’t feel like one. I ain’t never heard a body bullyragging about how I got kilt by a Yankee cannonball. You’d a thunk I passed on quietly in my sleep –or never drew a breath atall.

“What do folk say about me in town?” Gracie smiled hopefully.

Gracie's ignorance was surprising. Zelma assumed the ghost spent day and night eaves-dropping in on every conversation. What else was there to do behind the mirror of life?

“That wasn’t a Yankee cannonball,” said Zelma.

“What’s that you say?” Gracie's eye’s lit up.

“Those Yankees?” They were you’re dinner guests.”

“That’s a damnable lie!” said Gracie. She jumped to her feet and Sissy went flying off her stomach. But the ghost paid the doll no mind. She pointed her pipe at Zelma like the barrel of a loaded musket.

“I’m afraid it’s true.”

“Well, lick my boots with shame,” Gracie raged like a sepia thunderstorm. “So Pa was in cahoots with them bluebellies. I was afeared as much. Jee-crawling-hova!”

As Gracie stormed back and forth, cussing and hollering, Zelma turned and crawled toward a far corner. There, Sissy stood on her head, looking none too happy about it, either. Breathlessly, Zelma scooped up the doll. She needn't have worried. Gracie ignored her.

The ghost drifted to one of the attic windows and looked out. Her cheeks were drenched and spongy, as if pummeled by the driving rain of a passing storm. The windowpanes, silhouetted in the fading sunlight, cast dark bars across Gracie's sorrowful face.

## Chapter 42

# Hong Kong Panties

Nice panties.

Zelma stood in Teen Outfitter, fingering the sheer fabric of a pair of girl's underwear. It was soft enough to cuddle up in. And so deliciously bad: black, lacy and see-through. A girl in these would feel secretly evil to the bone. If the Faircloths had made underwear like this their mill might still be open.

Who dared to make this pair? Zelma turned the underwear inside out. There she found a tag that read: "Odom Industries, made in Hong Kong."

Odom, as in Bunky?

"Hey!"

Zelma looked up from the panties in her hands. A woman with a Teen Outfitter store nametag waddled toward Zelma as quickly as her chubby legs would carry her. Zelma's face turned red with embarrassment, thinking the clerk was coming to scold her for toying with such shameful underwear.

It soon became clear that Zelma was not the subject of the clerk's wrath.

The circular rack in front of Zelma began to tremble. Out of the dangling panties emerged two little boys, cheeks streaked with tears of laughter. Each wore a silk panty as a hat. Squealing, they scampered off through the store.

The Teen Outfitter clerk gave chase.

Uh oh, the twins. Zelma had forgotten all about them, lost in silky thoughts of naughty underwear. She tore after the Teen Outfitter clerk, easily passing her and catching up with the twins.

Zelma lassoed a twin around the neck under each of her arms. "Whoa Nelly," she cried out. The twins didn't stop, but they did slow enough for Zelma to steer them toward the door.

In the doorway Zelma paused. She ripped the silky underwear off the twins' heads and flung them back into the store. The panties landed draped over the clerk's face. Blinded, she stumbled into a rack.

Zelma escaped, twins in tow, into the crowded mall. With tender care, she guided the boys head first into a wall. They bounced back and collapsed to the floor, but not in tears. The twins wriggled on the floor in laughter.

Why did she have to be such an obedient daughter, Zelma muttered to herself, or at least one so easily beguiled? Oh how Momma had begged Zelma to take the twins out of the manor on this rainy Saturday afternoon. How else would she ever get the manor cleaned before Miss Gracious' return from Albany that evening?

Momma had sweetened her request with a wad of cash, stuffed into a pocket of Zelma's skirt. Then she'd called up Charles the chauffeur. He and his limo were a rare treat these days.

Charles had shuttled Zelma and the twins off to Battlefield Mall, which sat in a DMZ of exurban sprawl between Atlanta and Peachwood.

Gracie had wanted to go to the mall, too. She'd grown increasingly bored cooped up in the manor. At first she just complained and stared grumpily out the attic window. But lately she'd grown bolder.

Last night Zelma had caught Gracie in the attic stairwell, ear pressed against the door. She had been eavesdropping as momma sweet-talked Zelma into trundling the twins off to the mall.

It was an unnerving discovery. What if momma had seen Gracie? Could she see the ghost? There was still so much Zelma had yet to understand about Gracie.

Zelma had shooed Gracie back up the stairs into the attic. There the ghost had batted her eyelashes, trying to look angelic. "I sure could use me a new dress," Gracie cooed.

No kidding, thought Zelma. The ghost looked like a battle-worn rebel flag in her singed dress.

All the same Zelma wasn't ready to unleash Gracie on the mall. The twins were handful enough. Zelma shook her head no.

"I wouldn't be a lick of trouble," pleaded Gracie, batting those long lashes even harder.

"Absolutely not."

Gracie's angelic look vanished in a flash of orange. "I'm a going – and that's that," she snarled.

Zelma scoffed. There was one thing she had learned. When it came to leaving the manor Gracie was all smoke and no fire. Not once had the ghost popped up at school or at the supermarket.

Gracie was like a virus. She needed a living host to travel outside the manor. Zelma, for now, had declined to serve as such a hostess.

Gracie had advanced, fists clinched toward Zelma. But this time Zelma hadn't flinch. She'd whipped Sissy out of her pocket. Gracie had cowered as if Dracula before a cross. The doll had indeed proven a wand of control over the ghost.

"You'll stay right here until I return from the mall," Zelma had commanded. She'd walked over to her desk, unlocked it, and then motioned for Gracie to climb inside.

Gracie had flung her arms stiffly out in front of her and marched wooden-legged like some zombie. "Yes, master." She'd lied down on the top of the desk as if returning to her crypt.

And people thought Zelma was a drama queen. Gracie must have been watching those old Boris Karloff movies on the SciFi channel with the twins through her one-way mirror.

Zelma had locked her desk with Gracie stowed inside, and that was the last she'd seen of the ghost. Given what a handful the twins had been today, Zelma was thankful that she hadn't brought Gracie along.

Now, what to do with the twins? There was still an hour or so to kill before they could return home. Zelma scanned the stores in the mall, desperately looking for a safe place to stash the troublesome duo. Half way down the corridor she spied the perfect place.

It was a town treasure that she'd thought had been lost forever.

## Chapter 43

### Ice cream follies

A year ago the beloved Marley's ice cream parlor had shuttered its doors on the Square. Nothing could take its place and nothing had. Marley's storefront had remained empty, like a blackened tooth in an otherwise brightening smile of new shops besieging Ol' Stumpy.

Now here was Marley's, resurrected in the mall. Zelma should have been mad as all get out, as Gracie would say. How dare Marley abandon the square for Battlefield Mall. He might as well have moved to New York. But Zelma swallowed her anger. She knew there was no better opiate for rambunctious little boys than ice cream.

"Who wants ice cream?" Zelma asked.

The twins sprang up from the floor. "I do, I do," they clamored and obediently followed Zelma into Marley's.

Zelma couldn't believe her raven eyes. There was Marley, all right, behind the counter. But where were his trademark ratty jeans and ice cream smeared tee shirt? Instead, he donned white shoes and pants. And he wore the most ridiculous matching red and white-striped candy cane polo shirt and cap. Zelma didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

In all those years on the Square, Marley's had no better customers than Zelma's family. That was especially true of Zeek and Daniel. Once as teenagers, they'd each ordered two Banana Splits and finished them right then and there.

Marley should have leaped over the counter to greet the member of such a family of loyal customers. Instead, he looked over Zelma's head, as if scanning his store for another customer. But the place was empty except for Zelma and the twins.

Maybe it was her raven get-up. Marley simply didn't recognize Zelma. "It's me!" she said, as if greeting a long lost friend.

Marley stared at Zelma for a moment and then spat, "Whatta y'all have?" You'd have thought he didn't want her in his store.

Zelma had half a mind to order the puniest of scoops of ice cream – or turn around and walk out. Then again, that might just confirm what Zelma suspected Marley was thinking: She and her kind were so down on their luck that they couldn't even afford a simple luxury such as ice cream.

Well, Zelma would show Marley a thing or two. "We'll take three large root beer floats."

Marley harrumphed and didn't move. At \$4, a float now cost nearly twice as much as it had on the Square.

Zelma retrieved from her pocket the wad of bills momma had given her. It was thicker than an ice cream sandwich. She thumbed the wad in Marley's face.

He jumped into action. "Whip cream, nuts or cherries?" he called out as he made the floats.

"The works," Zelma answered as if money were no object.

Towering floats in hand, Zelma and the twins shuffled off to a back corner. Here she hoped to keep the twins happily slurping – and out of trouble – until it was time to meet Charles.

Lili's Lady Sorrowfree did not smile benevolent upon Zelma today. The floats didn't interest Ambrose and Ashley in the least. What they fancied were the floats' long green straws. The twins turned them into miniature muskets. They pelted one another with Minie balls of spittle-soaked napkin.

Soon Zelma's long black hair was speckled with white bits of wet napkin.

Charming, absolutely charming.

Stay cool, Zelma told herself. Charles would be here soon. She tried to forget the twins by thinking about Gracie.

What should she do about the rambunctious ghost? She had half a mind to chalk Gracie up as a dry run. Dispatch her back to the World of Yin. Then she could find a Faircloth ancestor more obedient and malleable.

There was only one problem. Zelma didn't know how to send Gracie back. She'd bolted out of the 88 Mart, her head full with the promise of great magic, without hearing Mr. Wong explain how to send ancestors back home. And of course she wouldn't dare ask now.

Lost in thought, Zelma had let her gaze drift from the two scoops of double trouble seated in front of her. She paid dearly for her lapse in vigilance.

A foamy stream of root beer struck her square in the eye. Zelma's raven eyeliner melted in black streaks down her pale cheek. Through an eye stinging with root beer she watched Ambrose wave his green straw triumphantly.

Zelma slowly rose out of her seat, shaking with indignation. A second liquid bullet struck Zelma, this time in the chest, marking a foamy white bull's eye on her heart.

Ashley roared with laughter.

She seethed and pointed a damning index finger at him. "May your tongue turn purple," Zelma sputtered, "and fall out."

"Me, too, me, too," whined Ambrose, "curse me, too."

Zelma did as commanded, shifting her damning finger to Ambrose. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to will her curse to come true. Behind her back Zelma crossed the fingers of her other hand for good luck. Hopefully, she listened for the disgusting slap of little tongues onto the linoleum floor.

The twins kept giggling, tongues obviously still in tact, but Zelma did hear something unusual. It sounded not unlike the bubbling of a hot cauldron. Zelma opened her good eye and couldn't believe what she saw.

Ambrose's float bubbled and fumed. Up rose a geyser of root beer out of the mug. A scoop of melting ice cream bobbed atop the geyser's crown.

Higher and higher the scoop bounced atop the geyser. On the fifth bounce the geyser assumed the shape of a hand, which caught the ice cream. It held the scoop as readying to throw a fastball. Which the hand did, pitching the ice cream into Ambrose's face.

The geyser plopped back into the soda mug with a showy splash.

Face slathered in melting ice cream, Ambrose sputtered. He was apparently too stunned to either shout or cry.

Zelma too trembled in disbelief. Had she truly transformed the root beer float into an instrument of her wrath? It was as if someone had bewitched Zelma, imbuing her toothless spells into the most biting of black magic.

Ashley raised his straw in his brother's defense. It was loaded with a big slurp of milky root beer.

Zelma stared into the muzzle of the plastic barrel pointed at her face. She aimed her trembling bony finger at Ashley. "Just you try it," she hissed.

Slowly Ashley lowered his straw, spilling root beer onto the leg of his new khaki pants. The straw slipped out of his fingers and he grabbed his brother. The two of them whimpered for mercy.

There was another sound. The twins didn't appear to hear it. They would have stopped bawling immediately if they had. A cackling floated through Marley's, sounding both distant, as if from another dimension, yet just over Zelma's shoulder.

Was it the spirit of Gamby, suddenly awakened to Zelma's cries for help? Not likely. As far as Zelma could tell there were no recipes for terrorizing little boys in the red book of blue magic.

Who, then, cackled for Zelma? She had a pretty good idea.

## Chapter 44

# What the devil

On the way home Zelma rode upfront with Charles. Ambrose and Ashley had locked her out of the back seat. When the limo pulled up to the manor's front door the twins bolted out. They rushed passed momma, who stood in the doorway.

Momma's welcoming smile curdled. "What the devil?" she said, turning to watch the twins run upstairs toward their room.

Zelma trudged up to her mother. You'd have thought she were the same girl who'd left that morning for the mall, a witch wannabe whose magic had no more spark than a dead battery.

It was all a ruse, of course. Inside Zelma felt so electric her hair would have stood on end if not glazed with root beer.

Momma's nose wrinkled at her daughter. Zelma's blouse reeked of stale soda and spoiled milk. She embodied the spirit of birthday parties gone sour.

"What in the Sam Hill happened to you?" said momma.

"Don't ask," said Zelma, feigning exhausted exasperation.

Momma looked pretty pooped herself. A halo of loose hair crowned her head; dust and furniture polish streaked her white apron.

But Mrs. Dupree was smiling. For once, Zelma had performed as requested. She'd given momma time to clean the house in preparation for Miss Gracious' return. And for that, momma stepped aside, letting Zelma pass without interrogation.

Thankful, Zelma continued her act, plodding across the foyer and up the stairs. But once out of momma's eyesight she raced up to the attic. There, she quickly unlocked and then scrutinized her desk.

Everything looked in order. Her coffee can of a cauldron and Sterno burner stood undisturbed. So did the jars crowded in along the desktop. There was only one thing missing: the ghost of a girl lying arms crossed as if mummified.

“Lose something?”

Zelma spun around at the sound of the voice. Her arm knock over a jar of spiders she had been collecting for a spell against Alyssa.

“Now isn’t that jim-dandy?” said Gracie, pointing her corncob pipe at the spiders scurrying across Zelma’s desktop. “Now how’s a body supposed to sleep in there?”

“So it was you at Marley’s!”

Gracie curtsied as if the most lady-like of little girls.

“But...but how’d you get out?”

“Jee-crawling-hova, you didn’t really think some rickety ol’ desk was gonna hold me.” Gracie crossed her arms, looking insulted, or at least pretending to be so. Zelma couldn’t tell which.

“But Sissy...”

“That ol’ thing?” Gracie chuckled.

Zelma realized she’d been had. The doll had no more hold over Gracie than Zelma had over the spiders scurrying across her desk.

“I told you to stay home,” Zelma fumed.

“And I done told you I wanted to have me the look-arounds,” Gracie retorted. “Good thing I did, too.” The ghost nodded at Zelma’s sticky hair.

Zelma couldn’t keep up the pretense of anger. Curiosity was eating her alive. “How’d you do get out?”

“Easy, I hitched me a ride,” said Gracie, nodding toward Zelma’s pocket.

“And all the rest?”

“You mean this’n?” Gracie re-enacted her humiliation of the twins. Once again she transformed herself into a geyser of root beer, a fist and then a hurtling scoop of ice cream. She even mimicked the whimpering boys.

It was a performance that knocked Zelma to her knees with convulsive laughter.

Gracie dropped to her knees beside Zelma, and together they laughed so hard it rattled the loose boards concealing the red book of blue magic.

“What’s going on up there!”

Zelma froze as momma’s footsteps thudded up the attic staircase. “Quick,” Zelma whispered, offering a pocket to Gracie, “in here.”

“I ain’t afeard of your momma,” scoffed Gracie.

“Well, you ought to be,” said Zelma. As the daughter of a backwoods shaman, Momma surely wasn’t going to be frightened by a sepia wisp of a ghost – even it could hurl ice cream with the fury of Atlanta Braves fastballer John Smoltz.

Gracie grumbled, but finally did as she was told, swirling into the pocket of Zelma's skirt.

Zelma threw on a ratty old tee shirt and grabbed a tome of a math book off the floor. She buried her face in the book as she heard momma approach.

“Did you hear me?” Mrs. Dupree swept back Zelma's heavy curtain with one arm. There she found her daughter kneeling, face in a book, as if in prayer to a higher math.

“What?” grumped Zelma, not looking up from the book. She feigned annoyance at momma’s interruption.

Momma was not put off. Bluntly she asked, “ Did you throw ice cream in Ambrose’s face?”

“Momma, please,” said Zelma, trying to sound offended. It was a struggle, given that she couldn’t shake the image of Ambrose’s ice cream splattered face. She bit her lower lip, trying to chew off a growing smile.

“Don’t ‘please me.’ Something happened.”

“It was nothing.”

“Nothing? Then why won’t Ambrose come out of the closet.”

“Look,” said Zelma, staring at an unfathomable equation of Greek letters. “The twins were horsing around. Ambrose got an eyeful of ice cream. Same old, same old. End of story.”

Zelma glanced up at momma. Her mother looked anything but convinced.

Momma’s gaze swept Zelma's lair like a tractor beam, searching for any hint of trouble. Jars of lichen and bark lined Zelma's desk; her candy cane stockings dangled from clothespins. Nothing out of the ordinary.

With a harrumph, momma brought her gaze to bear on Zelma. Momma’s nose wrinkled and a look of “gotcha” lit up her face. “Have you been smoking?”

“Say what?” Zelma looked up sharply, caught off guard. Her lips had never touched so much as a bubblegum cigar.

“Stand up,” commanded momma. She reached down and yanked her daughter upright. The math book tumbled to the floor.

As she was jerked to her feet Zelma glimpsed a wisp of sepia smoke curling out of a pocket. She tried in vain to stuff the smoke back inside.

Momma pulled Zelma's hand out of the pocket and then thrust in her own. She pulled the pocket inside out, but momma found nothing, not even a speck of dust.

Zelma wasn't relieved. Her empty pocket meant nothing but trouble. Gracie was on the loose again. And this time Zelma knew all too well the ghost's mischievous powers.

## Chapter 44

# The Cheshire ghost

A smile not unlike the Cheshire Cat's emerged out of the gloom over momma's shoulder.

Did momma see Gracie, too? Apparently not. She continued to glare at Zelma.

Could Gracie control who could see her and when, flicking herself on and off like a flashlight? It sure seemed that way.

All the same, Zelma wasn't taking any chances. She dropped her head, glowering at her slippers, trying to divert momma's attention. She also tried to put her mother on the defensive. "I can't believe you'd think I'd smoke."

"I don't know what to believe anymore," sighed momma. "You're getting squirrelier by the day."

Zelma glanced up to see if Gracie was still hovering over momma's shoulder. She was there, all right, teeth bucked out and nose wiggling like a squirrel. A laugh escaped as a snort through Zelma's nose.

"Sweet weeping Jesus," fumed momma, "this ain't a laughing matter."

"Sorry," murmured Zelma, staring as hard as she could at her slippers. Anything to ignore Gracie's antics.

"You bet your sweet bippy you're sorry," said momma. "And when Ambrose comes out of his closet you're going to apologize to him."

"What?" said Zelma, looking up sharply.

"That's right."

"But I didn't do anything!"

“So you say, but you’ll apologize all the same.”

Zelma tried to glare defiantly at her mother, but she couldn’t do it. Not with Gracie blowing silent raspberries at momma.

“Oh all right,” Zelma caved. She’d eat Brussels sprouts if need be, anything to get momma out of her sanctuary.

At last mollified, Momma turned to leave, but not without firing an ominous parting shot. “There’s something funny going on here, and I aim to find out what it is.”

As momma’s footsteps faded down the attic stairs Gracie emerged in full. She slapped a thigh and hee-hawed.

“You sure like spooking people,” said Zelma.

“I reckon I am partial to it.” Gracie took out her pipe and blew imaginary smoke rings. “Who we gonna git next...your momma?”

“No!”

“Well, shoot, why not?”

Zelma racked her brain for a reason that would put off Gracie. “Momma wouldn’t be any fun. She’s not scared of anything. Her own momma was a witch.”

Gracie's eye grew big. “Ye God!”

Zelma nodded gravely.

Grinding the pipe between her teeth, Gracie drifted over to the fallen math book. The ghost flipped it open and tried to read the algebraic formulas “This’n where you get your spells?”

“No, that’s my math book.”

“Math? Reads like the Egyptian Book of the Dead.”

“Those are formulas.”

“So it is a book of spells!”

“No, like I said, it’s my math book. You know, for school.”

“School?” Gracie scoffed. “You don’t go to no school.”

“Where do you think I go all day?”

That silenced Gracie. Her brow wrinkled. “I reckon I don’t know at all.”

For the first time the ghost gazed at Zelma with a look that bordered on respect. "I ain't never knowed a girl with schooling."

"Oh come on," said Zelma, thinking Gracie must be fooling. "Surely you went to school."

"Shoot, no. Girls warn't allowed."

"But you can read..."

"...And cipher, too. Momma learn't all us girls. So we could read the Bible and write poesy to the Lord." Gracie said all this with a lengthening pout.

Then she looked up at Zelma, a hopeful smile on her face. "I always wanted to get me some formal schooling."

"Oh no," said Zelma. "You're not coming to school with me."

Gracie's beguiling smile vanished. She just about ground the pipe's mouthpiece to a nub.

## Chapter 45

### An omen

Gracie grasped the cupola's flagpole at half-mast with both hands. Then she let her wisp of a body unfurl in the high breeze. It flapped like a rebel banner in the heat of battle. She taunted, "What's a witch without a body to bewitch?"

Gracie had a point, Zelma agreed. She straddled the bannister beneath the flagpole. Lord knows Zelma wouldn't have minded, say, spooking Alyssa. But that would mean unleashing Gracie in school or in town. The thought of that gave Zelma the hiccups.

"How about them twins?" Gracie offered hopefully.

"I said no," huffed Zelma. "Momma is suspicious enough already."

Gracie snapped in the wind.

Let Gracie stew. It turned out that Zelma didn't need that old doll, after all. The ghost obeyed Zelma better than Zelma did her own momma. Gracie craved Zelma's attention. Why, she wasn't sure. Was it because of all those decades spent eavesdropping on an ever-changing world she could never touch, so close yet so far away?

Beneath the girls gravel crunched. Gracie glanced down and then exclaimed, "Jee-crawlin-hova."

"What?" Zelma looked down, too. All she saw was the rusting copper Mercedes pulling up in front of the manor.

"Don't you see?" said Gracie, excitedly.

"See what?"

"Miss Gracious, she's the one we should put the hoot on."

"I don't know." Spooking the twins was one thing. But Miss Gracious?

“Since when you so sweet on her?”

Zelma bristled. “I’m not, but momma won’t take kindly to us haunting Miss Gracious.”

“Ooh, I’m afeared.”

“Besides, it’s not right.” After all, Zelma did sleep in Miss Gracious’ attic and eat her food.

Out each of her pockets Gracie retrieved a bracelet that Miss Gracious had given Zelma. The ghost rattled the bracelets in Zelma’s face like chains.

“Stop that,” Zelma sputtered. She struggled to fight back the anger rising from deep inside of her.

Gracie glowed bright, as if suckling off the heat of Zelma’s anger. “What’s Miss Gracious ever done for you and your’n,” she said, rattling the bracelets, “other than run off your pa.”

Zelma burned with anger. “I said NO.”

“Mercy, Zelma, is that you?”

Zelma glanced down to see Miss Gracious standing in the driveway, a hand cupped above her eyes, peering up at the cupola.

Dawg-gum-it, Zelma’s secret hideout was secret no more.

## Chapter 46

# Tangled up

Zelma's slippered feet snapped twigs and crushed mushrooms as they tromped along a narrow trail that ran along the banks of the Chattahoochee River. Soon she came to a small clearing where a tree had fallen. A well-worn seat straddled the middle of its trunk. Here Zelma sat, elbows on thighs, head in upturned palms. She gazed out at the murky water.

Zelma's heart throbbed as if rapped with a switch. Her head rang with Gracie's parting words: "What's Miss Gracious ever done for you, except run off your pa." The ghost knew Zelma's darkest thoughts better than she did herself. Zelma seethed with anger, and she imagined the ghost somewhere swelling up like a tick.

That couldn't be good. Which is why Zelma had come to daddy's secret fishing hole. If there was a place she could cool off and soothe her aching heart it was here. She tried to recall all those wonderful times when she and daddy wiled away countless summer hours, happily losing lures and snagging fishing line on every branch and stump in sight.

It was here, in fact, that daddy had come closest to catching old Bubba himself. He'd hooked him with a top of the line Rapala, a lure whittled out of balsa to look and swim like a live minnow. Remembering that Rapala made Zelma smile. Daddy and his buddies wouldn't be caught dead buying a \$3 cup of coffee, but they would spend twice that on one of these Finnish lures - even when they knew they'd probably lose it after one fishing trip.

Tell you what. Old Bubba had good taste. He'd chomped down on daddy's fancy new Rapala like it were Russian caviar. Then he'd run for the deep water with his prized catch. It took Budda no more than a red-hot minute to snap daddy's line, which sprang back to entangle itself among some low hanging branches.

Daddy had wadded in up to his chin trying to retrieve his precious Rapala. He never did find it. Zelma cried in frustration for him now.

Her sobs had a most curious effect. They acted like a siren's song, calling back lures long lost. There in the muddy froth of the river bobbed a badly gnawed Rapala. Was it daddy's?

Zelma lunged toward the Rapala. She took no more than a step when her feet became entangled in a web of lost fishing line. Down Zelma tumbled face first into the river's edge. The splash launch the Rapala back out into the river.

Zelma's cursing bubbled the water. Joking Jesus, son of bitch. She was dang angry, all right, but not about that stupid Rapala. Zelma had lost everything - her best friend, her school, her home and her father. All thanks to Miss Gracious' closing of the mill.

And the only one who understood this simple truth was a sepia wisp of a little girl dead more than 140 years. Gracie was right. Zelma deserved to be angry, had earned the right to exact revenge. Not just on the Faircloths, either. Why, Zelma would spook the living beejeezus out of Alyssa and all of Peachwood High, if she could. Zelma would be a fool not to. A plan quickly formed in her fervid imagination.

There was only one problem. Zelma couldn't do anything without the ghost. For Gracie, making trouble came as naturally as singing did to a mockingbird. Yet Gracie had vanished without a trace since their spat atop the cupola a week ago.

Zelma rose up on her knees and cried out. "Gracie, GRACIE."

A flock of starlings fluttered from the branches overhead.

"Come back," Zelma wailed. "Please, Gracie, come back. I promise. We'll give Miss Gracious a spooking that she'll never forget."

## Chapter 47

# Spiders and bullfrogs, oh my

“Lose something?”

“Ah...no,” Zelma answered.

Momma stood, hands on hips, peering down at her daughter. Zelma crouched on all fours, head poked under the legs of the cast iron stove in the kitchen.

“Could’ve fooled me.”

Zelma didn’t blame momma for being skeptical. In the past week, she had been acting as if, in momma’s words, she had brain fry. Zelma had probed every shadow and cobwebbed corner of the manor.

Yet she’d found not a wisp of sepia smoke. Gracie had vanished as completely as cinders in the wind.

Zelma crawled halfway under the iron stove. “Gracie, it’s me, Zelma. I’ll do it, okay?”

“You’ll do what?” barked momma.

Startled, Zelma banged her head on the underbelly of the stove. While it smarted like all get out, the bump also knocked some sense into Zelma. She saw now how to find the missing ghost.

Zelma crept out from under the stove, crawled between momma’s legs and then jumped to her feet. Out of the manor she dashed and into the front woods.

In her obsessive search for Gracie, Zelma had forgotten all about the ghost’s doll. She’d stashed Sissy in the hollow of an old stump. Why, she wasn’t sure at the time, since the doll seemed useless. Now Zelma realized she could use Sissy to summon Gracie back, just like she’d done the first time.

Excitedly, Zelma reached into the hollow of the stump. But her hand found the stump empty. The doll had vanished, too. No Sissy, no Gracie, what did it all mean? Zelma sat atop the rotting remains of the tree, stumped.

Over the next week the mystery only deepened. Gracie may have vanished, but her impish spirit seemed to have infested the very timbers of Faircloth Manor.

Take Zelma's spiders. Like a roving troupe of gypsies, they'd wandered into to Miss Gracious' underwear drawer.

Zelma first learned of her spiders' new home early Saturday morning. At 8 she awoke to a shrieking that rattled the slats of her slave bed. It was Miss Gracious, whose room sat two floors beneath the attic belfry.

Then there was the guest appearance of a bullfrog the size of a softball. Zelma had heard of such creatures from her daddy, but she'd never seen one up close. The twins hadn't either, until they found this one lollygagging in their toilet bowl. The boys laughed until they about peed in their pants.

Momma wasn't as amused. All that day she glared accusingly at Zelma. If only she were the culprit. Truth was, Zelma wouldn't know a bullfrog from a horny toad, let alone where to find one. Unlike Gamby, she was no nature girl.

Daddy, on the other hand, knew every crook and eddy of the Chattahoochee as it flowed through Peachwood. And he wasn't afraid of spiders, either.

All of which set Zelma to thinking – and not about Gracie. In fact, for the first time in a week, she forgot all about the ghost.

In working with Mr. Wong, Zelma had learned that the sudden appearance of spiders and bullfrogs weren't random acts of absurdity. They were omens.

She tried now to read the spiders and the bullfrog as Mr. Wong might read the sunken leaves at the bottom of a customer's cup of tea. And what she saw was this: her daddy's imminent return.

Daddy hadn't been camping out under Old Nellie Big Bottom or in the ravine. He'd been right here in the manor the whole time, keeping an eye on his only daughter. It was his gaze - not Gracie's - that Zelma had felt in the back reaches of the manor.

He'd somehow figured out how to dispatch Gracie back to the World of Yin. Then daddy had set loose the spiders and the bullfrog. It was all part of his plan to drive out Miss Gracious and seize her throne for the House of Dupree.

He, too, had figured out what a gold mine the manor could be. Momma had always said Zelma and daddy thought alike, as if two halves of the same brain.

The seeming absurdity of the past week all made sense now. It was up to Zelma to stay cool, not give her daddy away. She'd bite her tongue until it bled, if need be. All the while she'd keep an eye out for when daddy made his final move.

As it turned out Zelma didn't have long to wait.

## Chapter 48

### Sissy's dance

It was a Sunday afternoon and Zelma ambled along the second floor portrait gallery, feather duster in hand. So far she hadn't done much dusting. Zelma was too busy day-dreaming about General Eustice. Standing in front of his portrait, she admired his fine red sash. Was it too somewhere deep in the manor, draped across a settee, lost but not forgotten – just like the General's war?

If she could only find that sash. Imagine conjuring up the general. Eyes closed, Zelma pictured him on bended knee, tears in his eyes, thanking her for calling him back from the dead. How could he ever repay her?

How indeed.

Zelma's legs wobbled, but it wasn't from images of waltzing with General Eustice. The wooden floorboards beneath her feet had suddenly begun to rumble.

"Momma, momma."

Zelma opened her eyes to see the twins. They thundered down the hallway, oblivious to her. Ambrose held Sissy by an ankle, wagging her overhead.

Gliding silently on slippered feet, Zelma tailed the twins. They led her to what she called the throne room. It sat at the intersection of the portrait gallery and a hallway that led to the abandoned heart of the manor.

In this room, Miss Gracious received supplicants seeking to enlist her fundraising prowess. Zelma had never seen anyone enter the room – not even momma – without Miss Gracious' permission.

That is, until now.

The twins barged through the closed door. It banged open, rebounded from against the wall and then hung ajar. Zelma pressed an ear against the crack and listened.

“My goodness,” said Miss Gracious.

For a moment Zelma heard what sounded like two puppies panting in sync.

Then there was a gasp.

“Why I declare,” exclaimed Miss Gracious. “Ambrose, where did you find this?”

“It was sitting on the end of my bed.”

“Now Ambrose...”

“It’s true, momma,” said Ashley, jumping to his brother’s defense. “I swear it.”

Miss Gracious sighed, not sounding the least bit convinced.

Normally, Zelma wouldn’t have believed the twins, either. But this time she knew they had to be telling the truth. It was the only answer to Sissy’s mysterious disappearance. Daddy must have fetched her from the stump as part of his campaign to scare away the Faircloths.

“Ambrose, if you don’t mind,” said Miss Gracious.

Zelma heard Sissy’s prickly dress rustle as it was passed from Ambrose to Miss Gracious.

“What is it, momma?” said Ashley.

“It’s Sissy, the doll of your great aunt Gracie. Remember, I told you about her? Good Lord, I haven’t seen this doll in ages. Now, boys, really, where did you find her?”

“We didn’t, momma, Sissy found us,” said Ambrose.

Miss Gracious harrumphed in exasperation.

“I know where Sissy came from,” Ashley asserted with authority.

“Yes?” said Miss Gracious, sounding hopeful her son would at last tell the truth.

“It was Zelma,” said Ashley. “She conjured up Sissy to spook us.”

“Really, now, Ashley, not that again.”

“Momma,” Ambrose insisted, “Zelma is a witch. She made my ice cream throw itself into my face.”

Zelma could hear the doll rattling as Miss Gracious shook it at the twins. “Enough of this nonsense...”

“What about the spiders,” cut in Ashley.

“And the bullfrog,” added Ambrose. “You don’t think he hopped all the way up from the creek by himself?”

Zelma liked the sound of this. Even she was beginning to believe in her reputed powers. What if she were to jump through the door and shout, “boo?”

She imagined the Faircloths fleeing the manor, never to return. That would make daddy mighty proud, if she delivered the final blow, the coup de grace. Maybe that’s what he intended for her to do all along.

The study fell strangely silent and Zelma took it as the cue for her grand entry. She nudged open the door and stepped boldly into the frame. Hands on hips, she smiled as wickedly as she could.

No one paid her any mind.

All eyes were on Sissy, which Miss Gracious held out by the ankles as if a burning branch. The doll’s head spun.

Sissy’s arms flew up and seized her gyrating head, wrenching it to a stop. “Laws alive, don’t you slap hate it when that happens?”

Zelma recognized Sissy’s voice and it wasn’t that of her daddy.

Amazement filled the room like a cloud of ether, benumbing even Zelma.

With a sickening creak, Sissy’s head rotated slowly to look around the room. Her gaze finally came to rest on Miss Gracious. She extended a paint-chipped hand toward the matriarch of Peachwood and said, as friendly as can be, “Howdy do.”

Miss Gracious didn’t take kindly to Sissy’s greeting. She flung the doll, but it didn’t hit the ground. Instead, Sissy boomeranged, stopping in front of Miss Gracious and frowned. “Now that warn’t no way to treat a body, especially one who’s kin.”

True enough, but Sissy’s scolding didn’t improve Miss Gracious’ manners. She stampeded toward the door, with the twins right behind her.

Zelma might as well have been a ghost herself. The Faircloths tried to run right through her, knocking Zelma to the floor. They left a trail of dusty footprints down the middle of Zelma’s blouse.

Lying face up in the doorway, Zelma heard a mighty “Yee haw!” She raised herself up on an elbow to see Sissy strutting in mid-air. The doll flapped its arms like a pair of chicken wings.

Catching sight of the supine girl in the doorway, the doll stopped. She looked Zelma in the eye and crowed, “How’s that for putting the hoot on?”

## Chapter 49

# Cruising for a bruising

Woe to anyone who crossed Zelma this Monday morning. She swaggered down the school hallway, head held high. Her gaze was not unlike the Grouchy Lady Bug, taunting, “You wanna fight?”

Ahead Zelma espied Joe Comisky, star linebacker on the Peachwood Raiders. Zelma veered into his path, clipping his six-foot-plus frame.

“What the...?” Joe rubbed his right biceps, thick as a porterhouse steak. He glared down, incredulous. No one had ever dared bump into him, not even his coach.

Careful Joe, taunted Zelma's twisted smile. She had a pocketful of trouble, already smoking for a fight, hot against her thigh.

Sadly, Joe turned away with a grunt when he recognized Zelma and lumbered on down the hallway.

And so it went all day. No matter how hard Zelma sneered, bumped or glared, she couldn't start a fight. People just walked away, as if she weren't worth the effort. By final period, Zelma's neck ached from holding her head so high all day.

There was one person who didn't ignore Zelma. In fact, Zelma couldn't shake her, despite all her evasive maneuvers. Zelma plunged into the most crowded hallways between classes, weaving among the students. She skipped lunch; she slumped down low in her seat at the back of class in American history. When the bell rang signaling the end of the school day, Zelma slipped out a back door rather than heading for the bus.

Now Zelma warily eyed the rear of the school. At last, Lili was nowhere in sight.

Zelma had been dodging her new friend for weeks. In part, it was Gracie's fault. Zelma had only to mention Lili's name and the ghost would throw a hissy fit. It was as if Zelma had become Gracie's new doll.

Truth was, though, Zelma had been a willing accomplice in avoiding Lili. She feared those magnified eyes. They could penetrate any subterfuge. And Zelma didn't want anyone thwarting her plan.

Ahead trouble beckoned. Zelma spied a glistening forest of platinum spikes. They poked up out of a cluster of people milling around some dilapidated picnic tables behind the school. The tables were a popular after-school hang out, even on a chilly February day.

Zelma strode toward the picnic tables but she didn't get far. A figure darted out from behind the school and blocked her path. "Joking Jesus," cursed Zelma, nearly colliding with the figure.

"Walking home?"

Zelma didn't answer and tried to sidestep Lili, but Lili sidled to block her way again.

Lili's nose twitched. "What smell?" Her glasses zeroed in on Zelma's pocket. "Dress smoking!"

She was the first one to notice all day.

"Love to catch up, but gotta go," said Zelma. This time she elbowed Lili aside.

Head down, Zelma plowed into the crowd milling around the picnic tables. She found herself amid a forest of towering thick-trunked boys. Zelma glanced over her shoulder and smiled. Lili had disappeared in the crowd.

Pre-occupied with losing her shadow, Zelma had failed to watch where she was going. She plowed smack into one of those towering boys. His arms flew up, as if in surrender. He stumbled face first into some buddies. They received him with open arms - and a big guffaw.

Shod in big yellow boots, the boy quickly regained his footing. He swung around with clenched fists raised. But when he saw Zelma his empurpled face turned red, anger becoming embarrassment.

At last fortune had smiled upon Zelma. She wondered if her daddy were skulking about in a nearby row of hedges, watching. Zelma hoped so. She'd do him proud now.

Zelma let her long hair drape across half of her face, peering at Bunky as if from behind a black veil. She narrowed her exposed raven eye. "Hey-yah Buh-unk-ee," Zelma said, drawing out his name like a piece of taffy.

Poor Bunky. His tongue struggled to form words. Something meanly witty, no doubt, but all that came out was a guttural "er."

This time it would be Bunky who served as Zelma's comic prop.

## Chapter 50

# Haint that something

“Do you like movies?” Zelma asked sweetly.

“Er...I guess.”

“Attack of the Killer Tomatoes is playing at the Majestic tonight. It’s a classic.”

“So?”

“Sooo,” said Zelma, reaching out to stroke Bunky's arm. “How about taking me?”

The line was, as Zelma had hoped, a show-stopper.

Bunky's friends were struck dumb. Their hushed amazement began to draw attention. Leering faces encircled Bunky and Zelma.

“Ah...” was all Bunky could get out. Luckily, someone else emerged to speak for him.

The kids encircling Zelma and Bunky parted. Into the ring stepped Alyssa. Her eyes shone like sapphires in the cold sun. Alyssa's blonde hair glowed like a halo. She wore a blouse as feathery white as an angel's wings.

She was an angel, all right, the angel of death. Scowling, Alyssa spoke in a voice that sounded as jagged as broken glass. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Zelma smiled. Did she know Alyssa or what? Her emotional radar had detected the disturbance in Bunky's affections and she'd come running, eyes sharpened for the kill. John Wayne couldn't have asked for a better showdown.

“Asking your boyfriend out on a date?” offered Zelma with a shrug.

“Meow!” hooted some boy.

Alyssa's face reddened as if it had been slapped. "You little witch," she hissed. Alyssa advanced toward Zelma but stopped beside a rickety picnic table.

The hairs on the back of Zelma's neck stood on end as anticipation ran electric through the encircling crowd. All eyes were on Alyssa and Zelma. It was as if they were a pair of gypsy girls ready to claw each other bloody – all for the attention of the clan's dashing young chieftain. This trumped the Page of Hate. Here was hatred live and unrehearsed.

Only the young chieftain wasn't paying attention. His eyes probed the tightening throng for a way out, but he too was entrapped in Zelma's melodrama.

Now ain't that a shame.

As for Alyssa, she looked eager for a showdown. Her piercing blue eyes jabbed at Zelma's heart, but Zelma deflected Alyssa's thrust with a smirk.

Alyssa's gaze narrowed, as if to get a better bead on Zelma. What happened, she seemed to be wondering, to the girl who rode alone in the back of the bus, slumped behind a veil of long black hair?

The encircling crowd suffered no doubt. It egged on to battle the two girls who warily eyed one another. No one stepped forward to stand beside either girl. Was it any surprise, then, Zelma felt more joined with Alyssa than opposed?

Out of the corner of her eye Zelma glimpsed a hand bobbing above the crowd. It opened and shut like a blinking light at a railroad crossing, signaling an oncoming trainload of trouble.

Zelma ignored the warning. Instead, she concentrated on anticipating Alyssa's next move. She'd already called Zelma a witch and tried to stare her down. Neither had made Zelma flinch. What could be left in Alyssa's arsenal, another kick from her steel-toed loafers?

A sepia plume snaked out of Zelma's pocket. As it slithered up her spine the plume left a trail of goose bumps. Zelma's hair rustled and a voice whispered, "Lookee yonder."

Zelma did as commanded. She watched Alyssa slip her fingers around the handle of a plastic spoon. It jutted out of a glob of crusting chocolate pudding, which sat in a Styrofoam bowl. The bowl sat on the edge of the picnic table beside Alyssa.

"Yee haw," chortled Gracie.

Zelma nodded in agreement, eyes locked on the spoon handle. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

Gracie hissed like a cat preparing to fight.

Grinning wickedly, Alyssa flicked the spoon out of the bowl. A brown glob hurled toward Zelma's face.

The kids standing behind Zelma gasped and then ducked.

Not Zelma. She didn't even flinch. Calmly, Zelma raised a hand, palm out.

The glob froze in mid-air, inches from Zelma's palm. She stepped out from in front of the glob and examined it. Clucking, Zelma shook her head. Then she flourished a hand over the glob. It morphed into the shape of an index finger. The finger turned to point at Alyssa and wagged as if to say, "tsk, tsk, tsk."

Again Zelma waved her hand. This time the finger transformed into an arrow. Zelma took hold of an imaginary bow and drew back the string. The chocolate arrow reared backward as Zelma took aim at Alyssa's heart. You could almost hear the zing of a bow as Zelma let go of the imaginary string.

Alyssa screamed, covering her face with both hands.

The arrow struck Alyssa's heart with a sickening splat.

For a moment, Alyssa's legs bowed as if she were about to collapse. But she didn't, even though her legs wobbled terribly.

Slowly, Alyssa realized she was not, in fact, dead. She lowered her hands and looked down at her feathery white sweater.

It was un-pierced, but not unscathed. Writ large across the sweater in dripping chocolate were the words, "You Haint Seen Nothing Yet!"

## Chapter 51

# Hoorah, hoorah

Zelma slumped down low, ankles crossed atop of the seat in front of her. An open bag of BBQ potato chips spilled across Zelma's chest. Loudly she munched.

Eating on the school bus was strictly forbidden. But no one complained, not even the bus driver. Nor did anyone snicker at Zelma's lemon-lime striped stockings or the BBQ powder that dusted her lips.

No one, in fact, paid her any mind. If need be, kids scrunched three to a seat upfront; anything to keep clear of the girl who'd commandeered the long seat that ran along the back of the bus. This was no longer the turf of Bunky and his posse.

These days Zelma floated inside a bubble that kept the world at bay. And well it should. Trouble followed her like an ill wind.

When Zelma passed soda cans toppled off tables into people's laps. Girls' skirts blew up. As if from heaven above, giant water bugs plopped into bowls of ice cream or soup. It had gotten so bad that, when Zelma raised her hand in class, everyone – including the teacher – cringed. Who knew what such a seemingly innocent gesture might inflict?

Even Lili, once so desperate for Zelma's attention, now kept at a safe distance.

That left Gracie as Zelma's only friend. The ghost peered out of her pocket, gnawing on the hem, ever hungry for mischief.

As the bus crested Peachwood Heights, Zelma's head lolled to the right. Out the window passed the kudzu lump that had become Old Nellie.

Zelma jumped to her feet. "Stop the bus," she garbled through a mouthful of potato chips.

The bus jerked to a stop, its aging gears groaning in protest. As Zelma pattered down the aisle sighs of relief purred through the bus. It rumbled away as soon as she stepped off.

Zelma grabbed hold of Nellie's kudzu and pulled herself atop the sculpture. Her feet dug through the vines until they found solid footing beneath the vines.

She looked out across Peachwood. A drenching March rain the night before had cleansed the air of the yellowing smog of SUVs and pick up trucks. Zelma could see clear down to Ol' Stumpy. Dawg-gum if he weren't smiling back at her.

Gracie wafted out of Zelma's pocket, took a gander at Ol' Stumpy, and then began a high-stepping jig. She hooked an arm through Zelma's, spinning her around in circles. "Hoorah, hoorah," Gracie bellowed, "for Southern rights hoorah."

Zelma knew the song. Every kindergartener learned it Milltown. "Hoorah for the bonnie blue flag," Zelma joined in, "that bears the single star."

She and Gracie had struck a blow for Ol' Stumpy and Egg Betty, for co'cola slushies and fried candy bars. They'd scared off the Faircloths and made Alyssa blubber like a baby. Not even Bunky dared to mess with Zelma now. No wonder she felt like crying "hoorah."

Zelma descended Old Nellie and swaggered down the face of Peachwood Heights. She stomped across emerald lawns and flower beds. Overhead, Gracie flitted from pear tree to dogwood, startling birds and squirrels.

Sherman himself would have been proud of the angry swath Zelma and Gracie cut through the hushed beauty of the Heights' new subdivisions.

Their march halted on the porch of Faircloth Manor. Gracie slipped into the thick of Zelma's long hair. This time the manor's double doors didn't open in welcome. Nor had they in the weeks since the Faircloths had fled.

Zelma nudged open the double doors. She stepped into the doorway and stopped. Her eyes swept the foyer, ears pricked up like a cat's. "All clear?" Gracie whispered in Zelma's ear. Zelma nodded a tentative "yes."

"Then let's git."

Zelma bolted across the foyer. At the staircase she stopped to catch her breath for a moment and look around again. So far, so good.

Up the stairs Zelma flew. She raced down the second floor hallway, through the portrait gallery and made for the attic door. They were almost home free.

The last potential obstacle was the deep linen closet that stood just before the attic door. As she scurried past the closet Zelma heard a creak and the hairs on the back of her neck bristled.

There was a high-pitched, blood-curdling cry that would have made General Eustice tip his bloomed hat in respect. Out of the closet rushed momma, a straw broom held high overhead.

Zelma ducked as the broom passed inches above her head and struck the wall with a thunderous clap.

“Jee-crawling-hova!” cried Gracie. She rocketed out of Zelma's hair and down the hallway. Momma gave chase, swinging the broom overhead. The two disappeared into the depths of the manor. In the distance Zelma heard the crash of something porcelain.

The Faircloths might have been fooled into believing Zelma was bewitched, but not momma. As the daughter of a backwoods shaman she knew a haunting when she saw one.

Momma tried to reassure the spooked Faircloths. Her daughter was no witch. The manor was haunted, that's all. Some disgruntled relative no doubt. Nothing to get all skittish over. Momma had seen her own mother tussle with far worse.

Anything but reassured, the Faircloths fled to their relatives' pecan plantation. And they weren't coming back until momma had dispatched their disgruntled kin back to her rightful place among the dead. Ever since, momma had taken to chasing Gracie, swearing she was going to “knock that half-pint of a ghost clear back to Hades.”

Zelma couldn't tell if Gracie was really afraid of momma or just having fun. Gracie sure made a big show of it every time momma took after her. But the ghost always showed up later after momma had collapsed in exhaustion.

This evening Zelma found Gracie atop the cupola. Her wisp of a body rippled lengthwise in the breeze, a rebel banner unfurled for battle.

## Chapter 52

# Dupree Manor

It was Zelma's job now to cook. As head chef she'd made a few changes in the menu. And, seeing as it was Friday night, she decided to go all out. No 30-second microwavable Krystal cheeseburgers tonight.

From the kitchen freezer she retrieved two plastic-wrapped paper trays. Zelma popped them into a microwave set atop the old gas stove. The microwave was Zelma's pride and joy. Not only had she bought the thing with her own money at a yard sale for a mere \$25. She also had lugged it home all by herself.

Zelma's finger hovered beside the microwave's timer button. Ear cocked toward the ceiling, she listened. Only when the distant rumble overhead died away did Zelma punch the one-minute timer three times.

As the microwave hummed Zelma set a small kitchen table with matching sets of plastic ware and sheets of paper towel as napkins.

A moment later momma stumbled into the kitchen and plopped down in a chair at the small table. She laid the broom across her lap. A handful of bristles jutted out like broken fingers. A fiery halo of red wisps crowned momma's head.

The microwave dinged and Zelma grabbed the dinners with a rag, rushing them over to the table. "Dinner's served," she announced proudly, dropping a paper tray in front of her mother.

Momma glared at the fogged plastic wrap of the TV dinner.

"Go on," coaxed Zelma. "It's your favorite. BBQ chicken and mashed potatoes."

Momma seized a plastic fork and raised it up like a dagger. Then she stabbed the mashed potatoes through the plastic wrap. One of the fork's tines broke off in the encrusted surface of the potatoes.

“Momma! You’re supposed to take the wrap off first.”

Her mother shook the broken fork at Zelma. “This is all your doing.”

“You’re right,” conceded Zelma, “I overcooked the potatoes by 15 seconds.” She stood, extending a hand toward momma’s tray. “Here, I’ll blast you another. It’ll only take a minute.”

Momma threw down the fork in disgust. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“Really,” said Zelma, lowering herself back down in her chair most lady-like, as if she were Miss Gracious. “I don’t know what you’re going on about.”

“Don’t you, now.”

Zelma wagged a plastic forkful of BBQ chicken at her mother. “You should be thanking me.”

“Thanking you?” momma sounded too stunned to be angry.

“Think about it,” Zelma said. “You’ll never have to bow and scrape to another Faircloth. We rule this manor now.”

Momma looked at Zelma as if she’d gone apey. “And I suppose you’ve figured how to conjure gold out of dust, too?”

“Something like that,” Zelma boasted.

“What in the Sam Hill are you getting on about?”

“You know all those people always gawking outside the gate?”

“Yeah,” spat momma in disgust.

“Well, we’re going to let ’em in.”

Momma snorted. “What kinda fool notion has that ghost put in your head?”

“It’s my idea and it’s brilliant.”

“Is it now?”

Zelma reached over to pat her mother’s hand reassuringly. “All we have to do is to let them think what they’ve already talked themselves into: That the manor is Tara.”

“Sweet weeping Jesus on the cross,” muttered momma. She shook off her daughter’s hand as if it had cooties. “You have gone apey.”

“No – listen,” said Zelma, reaching for her mother’s hand again, but momma slid it off the table and into her lap.

Nonetheless, Zelma rattled on, lost in the telling of her own magnificent scheme. "I'll give the tours, saying how Mamie slept in my slave bed and Rhett kissed off Scarlet in the foyer. You'll keep the place spic and span and make cornpone and other such. And daddy..."

"Your father?" Momma shot up out of her chair, the broom clattering to the floor. "What's he got to do with all this madness?"

"Why, he's going to keep the place running. He'll fix whatever needs fixing."

"You don't say," said momma. Her gaze swept the kitchen, eyeing the broken stove, leaking fridge and a cracked windowpane. "He's doing a fine job so far."

Zelma bristled at momma's sarcasm. She knew now, of course, that it wasn't daddy who'd chased off the Faircloths. In fact, Zelma hadn't seen the battered kepi since Gracie's return.

Then again, she reasoned, that would be just like daddy. Why break a sweat if someone else was willing to do all the work for you. Daddy was no dummy. He was a regular Brer Rabbit.

Still, Zelma couldn't help wonder. Why hadn't her father shown himself now that the hard work of chasing off the Faircloths was done? She forked a cold piece of BBQ into her mouth and chewed it over good.

Meanwhile, momma's gaze drifted to Zelma. She studied her daughter for a long moment and then said, "You're right."

"I am?" Zelma mumbled through a mouthful of cold chicken. Momma's change of heart struck her as a little too sudden.

"Yes sir, we are going to make the manor right as rain." Momma stooped, her knees creaking loudly, and picked up the broom. She held it as if the thing were a battle axe. "First thing we're going to do is knock that little pissant of ghost back to Kingdom come."

The chicken in Zelma's mouth turned to sawdust.

"And then, my little turtle dove, you're going to get down on bended knee and beg Miss Gracious to come home."

Zelma spit out her mouthful of chicken. "Like hell I will!"

Momma heaved the broom at Zelma. It landed in her TV dinner, splattering her blouse with BBQ sauce. "Joking Jesus," sputtered Zelma, jumping up out of her chair.

Lunging toward her daughter, momma hollered, "Now go get rid of that ghost."

Zelma grabbed the BBQ-slathered broom handle and scrambled.

## Chapter 53

# Dethroned

Vanquish Gracie? Yeah, right.

With every prank – and Zelma's delight in it – the ghost had grown bolder, more daring and less willing to listen. She fed off Zelma's vengeance like a tick on a dog.

Not even Zelma was safe from Gracie's pranks. Take the other night at Freedom. As Zelma waited in line a plume of black smoke suddenly began pouring out from under her dress. You'd have thought her panties were afire. Certainly everyone else in the checkout line did. They all fled to other cashiers. As usual, Zelma appeared to be the only one who heard Gracie's cackling.

Still, to keep momma off her back, Zelma feigned hunting down Gracie. It had become a fulltime job. Every day after school for the past week she'd stalked the forgotten corridors of the manor, broom in hand.

It was a job that was becoming harder by the day. Tonight marked the first Monday in April and the honeysuckles were in full bloom. Their sugary scent wafted through the drafty manor. Zelma breathed deeply, eyes closed. She imagined herself atop the cupola. Beneath her lay a tapestry of white, pink, yellow and purple flowering trees; Peachwood gussied up in its finest.

And Zelma was missing it.

“Soooiie!” Zelma hollered, listening as her call echoed through the manor. This was Zelma's way of letting momma know she was indeed stalking Gracie, however half-heartedly.

Truth was, Gracie was probably stalking Zelma. The ghost had taken to leaving clues that signaled she was nearby but hidden. There'd be a corn pipe on a divan or an impression, not unlike a snow angel, in the dust covering the top of some wooden bureau.

At first Zelma hadn't minded this game of hide and seek. Now she found it a exasperating.

She entered a parlor that hadn't been dusted in 100 years, scanning the furniture for angel wings. Instead, something else caught her eye. Under a settee lay what looked like a spent plug of chewing tobacco.

Cute, Gracie, very cute.

Zelma stooped to inspect the dusty lump. This wasn't Gracie's handiwork after all. It was a purple gumdrop. The twins used to devour such candy by the handful. What was it doing here, in a place they rarely, if ever visited?

She picked up the hardened gumdrop and then remembered. It was the spent shell from a pitched battle of a couple months back. The twins had ambushed Zelma from behind the living room couch, pelting her with a rainbow of gumdrops. They'd ripped the cork stoppers out of their popguns and instead loaded them up with candy.

At first Zelma had been driven back. She'd retreated to the kitchen, where she found a turkey baster and filled it with water. What a powerful squirt gun it had make. In no time she'd driven the twins back, passing through this very parlor. Realizing they were in the dark heart of the manor, the twins had thrown down their popguns and fled.

Now Zelma pocketed the forgotten gumdrop and wandered on, but she tired of the search and meandered back toward the inhabited rooms of the manor.

Soon she found herself at the crossroads where the corridor to the inner manor met Miss Gracious' throne room. Zelma realized that she'd never actually been inside. The closest she'd come was the doorway, where she had been trampled by the fleeing Faircloths.

Zelma tested the door, expecting it to be locked. But the door creaked open, revealing a sparse but elegantly furnished room.

Unlike the rest of the manor the room's floor was not bare wood. A blue, red and white oriental rug sprawled from wall to wall. In the center of the room sat a teak letter desk. Papers sprawled across the desktop.

Behind the desk rose a high-backed wooden chair cushioned in red velvet. A pair of lions' heads snarled from the armrests. In those snarling jaws Zelma saw a dare.

She took three steps into the room and then stopped, cringing. She half-expected to be struck down by a bolt of lightning for her insolence. When nothing happened, Zelma took another step, waited, and then walked deep into the room. The rug under her slippers was so thick and soft that she felt as if she were walking on air.

At last Zelma reached the desk and slipped around it to sit in the chair. Now, she gloated, who was queen of Faircloth Manor?

Zelma tried to make herself at home in Miss Gracious' chair. It wasn't easy. The high back forced Zelma to sit uncomfortably upright. While elegant, the velvet cushioning was thin. Her bottom felt the hard wood of the chair. Zelma fingered the growling heads and a fang sliced her left pinky.

Sucking on the bleeding finger Zelma cursed. Miss Gracious plagued Zelma even while cowering on a pecan plantation in South Georgia.

Angrily, Zelma eyed the desktop. What a mess, she thought with scorn. Her alcove was a paragon of neatness compared to Miss Gracious' own lair. Papers and half-opened mail cluttered the desktop. It looked as if the desk's owner had once again been forced to flee cannonballs at a moment's notice.

Zelma dipped her bloody pinky into the piles of paper and wondered: Was trouble here to stir up?

Imagine if Miss Gracious had left behind evidence of her villainy, an arrow of truth that could pierce her veneer of respectability. Something, say, like a letter ordering the closure of the mill or a bank statement showing the pocketing of fundraising proceeds from the children's hospital drive. Such a paper might be used to shake momma's devil worship of Miss Gracious.

Leaning forward, Zelma began plowing through the papers with both hands.

## Chapter 54

# Queen of debt

At first Zelma found nothing but syrupy thank you notes for Miss Gracious' fundraising support. But she didn't give up. She dug ever deeper into the pile.

What Zelma found was a muck of unpaid bills. No wonder the attic was freezing last winter and now sweltering as spring began to heat up. Miss Gracious owed Peachwood Power alone more than \$1,000.

It was a chilling discovery. A year ago Zelma's mother had waged a losing struggle against bill collectors. Zelma never realized it at the time, but the unpaid bills were mounting up on the kitchen table like grains of sand in a hourglass, ticking off the days until she and momma would lose their house.

Was Miss Gracious in danger of losing the manor? "We're not the only ones who've taken a licking from the mill's closing," momma had once said.

Zelma swept the bills up in her hands and threw them into the air, as if this gesture could break Miss Gracious' hourglass of mounting debt. The bills rained down on Zelma, burying her feet in Miss Gracious' woes.

Sweeping the desk clean of bills revealed something else. Two letters laid side-by-side: one finished; the other barely begun.

Zelma began reading the finished letter.

"It was with the deepest regret that I read about the closing of Faircloth Mill. Peachwood has lost an important employer, and a worthy competitor."

Competitor? Zelma glanced at the letterhead, which read "Odom Industries International." Odom, as in maker of that lacy black underwear in the mall? Zelma's eyes jumped to the bottom of the page. The letter was signed August D. Odom, II, Chairman.

Zelma read on.

"I'm sure this has been a terrible blow, both personally and financially. Allow me, then, to offer an honorable way to regain your standing. It will not only secure your high position in the community, but provide you with financial security as well. I'm willing to buy Faircloth Manor – and at a good price. I want to restore and open the manor to the public, marketing it as a 'Tara,' if you will."

So, Zelma's idea was a good one. Good enough to steal.

"You may remain in the manor," the letter continued. "In fact, I encourage you to do so. How wonderful, don't you think, if a Miss Scarlet herself were there to give guided tours of our new Tara?"

"Our" new Tara? Who was this guy kidding. Miss Gracious would be no more than costume jewelry, a parody of herself. Surely, whatever her financial troubles, Miss Gracious would reject such an odious proposal.

Zelma began to read the second letter. As she suspected it was Miss Gracious' reply. She wrote on ivory paper with the flowing broad strokes of a fountain pen, which laid beside the letter. "Dear Mr. Odom," Miss Gracious wrote, "Thank you for your gracious offer..." and there the reply trailed off unfinished.

Was it because of Miss Gracious' sudden flight, or was she contemplating surrender but couldn't quite bring herself to say the words? Or at least not yet.

Not ever, if Zelma had her way. As the new Queen of Faircloth Manor she crumbled Miss Gracious' unfinished letter and took up the fountain pen. "I'm afraid, my dear Mr. Odom," Zelma wrote, matching her predecessor's ornate handwriting, "that I must tell you TO GO STUFF IT!"

Touché, thought Zelma, holding up the letter to admire her handiwork. Her free hand stroked the fangs of an armrest. This time it didn't bite.

Zelma neatly folded the letter in thirds and inserted it into an envelope she found inside a desk drawer. Then she pocketed the letter. It was the same pocket as the gumdrop, which she now withdrew.

Leaning back in the high chair, Zelma rolled the gumdrop between her index finger and thumb. What were the twins up to right now; did they have a teenage cousin in South Georgia? If so, Zelma bet she didn't let them pelt her with gumdrops under the Spanish moss of the pecan groves.

Out of the inkbottle curled a sepia wisp. It scowled at Zelma. "Jee-crawling-hova," said Gracie. "You think a body's got all day to wait to be found?"

"Hmm?" said Zelma, lost in thought.

“Say,” said Gracie, smacking her lips, “What’s that?” She lunged at the gumdrop between Zelma's fingers.

“None of your business,” snapped Zelma, wrapping her hand securely around the gumdrop.

“What in tarnation is eating you?”

## Chapter 55

# Haunting Peachwood High

No one complained if Zelma didn't show up for homeroom, let alone classes. Heck, if she had wanted, Zelma could have floated right out of Peachwood High.

Don't think she hadn't thought about it. Sadly, Zelma had concluded the idea made about as much sense as a dog chasing its own tail. Where would she go, home? Not unless she wanted to get chased upstairs and down by a mad woman swinging a broom. Nor did she dare hang out at the 88 Mart.

So Zelma had taken to haunting the first floor of Peachwood High. It was an odd sort of place, sitting underground. Students entered the three-story school through the second floor.

Rumor had it that Peachwood High had purposely been built into a hillside. That way the buried first floor could serve as a town bunker in case of a nuclear attack during the Cold War years of the 1960s.

The Cold War had gone the way of the Hula-Hoop. Maybe that's why the school had recently closed the first floor for renovations. Today it sat in limbo, sandwiched between the bustling second floor and the basement purgatory of the boiler room.

It was a limbo Zelma found appealing. She could wander the first floor without worry. In her wake, soda cans didn't spill over, dresses fly up or lockers bang open.

That's not to say the first floor was empty. There were a handful of men, boys really, not much older than Zelma. They swaggered about in low slung leather belts as if gunslingers. Except dangling from their belts were hammers, not six-shooters.

At first some of the boys ogled Zelma. But she soon broke them of that habit. All it took was making their metallic tape measurers flicker like the tongue of a snake. Now those boys kept clear of the shadow of a girl haunting the first floor.

So Zelma wandered alone. But this morning for the first time, she heard the sound of a fellow wanderer. It was metallic, like the twang of those flickering tape measurers, but continuous and with a beat.

Zelma tracked the sound to the door of a boy's bathroom. Faint smoke wafted through the door frame. Her nose cringed from the smell of stale tobacco.

She pressed an ear against the door. What she heard sounded not unlike the strumming of an unplugged electric guitar. The voice of some boy struggled - half-talking, half-singing - to find words to accompany the strumming.

Zelma's pocket quivered with excitement. A sepia hand reached out and did what Zelma could not quite bring herself to do: It pushed open the door. Then the hand tugged Zelma by the folds of her skirt into the bathroom.

Immediately Zelma's eyes teared. Cigarette smoke hung trapped inside the bathroom like the fog on a Scottish moor.

While blinded Zelma could hear clearly.

"She got smoky pocket;

She see with raven eye.

She creep on slippered footsteps."

There was a pause and then the voice began again.

"She hurl chocolate arrows,

Which scribble promises of doom."

As a child, Zelma's daddy use to serenade her with his own ditties. He'd call Zelma his beautiful brainiac; his Princess Bookworm; the Queen of the Lost Cause. All this sounded stupid and childish compared to what Zelma heard now.

This was poetry, beautiful and beguiling. Zelma felt herself begin to swoon - and it wasn't from the suffocating cigarette smoke.

Gracie, however, was no romantic. The ghost's little fingers may have been no more than wisps of smoke but they had the strength of metal jaws. They pinched Zelma's thigh and she yelped.

The voice hidden within the cloud of smoke fell silent.

Then, after a long pause, it called out hopefully, "Alyssa?"

Holding her breath, Zelma plowed through the wall of smoke. On the other side she found a powwow of sorts.

Three boys, cigarettes dangling from their lips, sat in a semi-circle in front of a peeling windowsill. Atop the sill perched Bunky, cradling the nicked body of an aging Fender Stratocaster. He grimaced as if his lyrics had summoned the devil herself. His audience looked equally frozen in expectation of something painful.

Zelma didn't need a ghost. As Gracie would say, these boys had scared themselves slap to death all by their lonesome.

Zelma struggled to think of some gesture that would show these boys she meant no harm. Luckily, her hands came up with a simple but effective idea on their own. They began to clap. It wasn't the sarcastic patter of fingertips against palm. Zelma blushed at her hands unbridled enthusiasm.

Bunky's frozen grimace thawed enough for him to speak. "You...you liked it?"

Zelma nodded.

"There's more," Bunky offered.

She waved for him to play on and Bunky began strumming again.

As Zelma listened goose bumps rippled down her thigh. This time it wasn't from Bunky's playing.

Gracie was on the move again.

Zelma lowered her head, nodding in time to Bunky's strumming, as if lost in his music. In fact, she studied the chipped tiles at her feet for any sign of Gracie.

It didn't take long to find the ghost. A sepia cobra slithered around Zelma's ankles.

Zelma began trying to stomp on the snaking ghost.

The strumming stopped, and Bunky and his friends turned to eye Zelma warily.

"Can't a girl dance?"

Bunky raised an eyebrow in doubt.

Zelma tried to stand as still as a breeze-less day, the picture of tranquility. It wasn't easy, given that Zelma had lost sight of Gracie. All the same she urged Bunky, "Go on."

Bunky's fingers hovered over the strings. He looked unsure about whether it was safer to play as a commanded or make a run for it.

His guitar suffered no such doubt. Its strings began to twang, no thanks to Bunky's frozen fingers. The strings played a song strange to Zelma's ears – and apparently Bunky's, too.

His jaw dropped in amazement at the self-playing strings. Out of his open mouth came the words of a song – although they weren't in his voice. Unless, that is, he'd learned how to mimic a 10-year-old girl who'd lived 140 years ago.

“Peas, peas, peas, peas, eating goober peas,” the voice rang out in gusto. “Wonder how delicious, eating goober peas.”

The song was cut short by the twanging crack of the guitar, which Bunky had let drop to the floor. He joined his friends in a stampede.

In their fright, the boys lost all fear of Zelma. They ran right over her in their rush for the exit. Joking Jesus, she was flattened again. Lying in a woozy heap, Zelma heard the bathroom echo with a knee-slapping cackle.

Even Zelma, addled as she was, had to admit: The self-playing guitar bit was dang funny – but only if you weren't scared out of your boxer shorts.

## Chapter 56

# Teenage assassin

Goober peas were what Gracie called peanuts. And boiled peanuts were about all those poor reb boys had to eat in the trenches of Peachwood in the summer of '64. Joshing about their meager rations in song was what kept them from going nuts with hunger.

That Gracie knew how to play this song on the guitar made her feel she'd "done herself right proud." Or so she said, perched atop the bathroom windowsill. She played "goober peas" over and over again on Bunky's guitar.

Zelma retreated to a bathroom stall, where she sat atop a broken toilet seat, chin resting on upturned palm.

"Hey, where you a going?" called Gracie.

Zelma didn't answer, hoping her absence would silence Gracie. No such luck. The ghost kept playing her goober of a song. Which made Zelma stew, but not on boiled peanuts, now considered a delicacy down at Egg Betty's.

No, what boiled Zelma's blood was this: She hadn't asked Gracie to spook Bunky and his friends. Nor had she intended to. Yet Gracie had done it all the same.

"Hey, listen to this'n." Gracie began to pluck out another song. This time it wasn't any Civil War ditty, but a song Zelma often played on her tiny CD player.

"Got a devil's haircut in my mind," yodeled Gracie off key as she played. "Got a devil's haircut in my mind."

Zelma poked her head out from the stall.

The ghost beamed. "Now ain't I something?"

Zelma scowled.

"You love that song," Gracie protested.

"Not the way you sing it."

"What's wrong with my singing?"

Nothing and that was the problem. Gracie could have been Beck himself, singing his own twisted lyrics. The ghost was figuring out how to seep deeper and deeper into Zelma's world. The next thing you know she'd be showing up in class for Zelma.

"Just stop it, that's all," hissed Zelma.

"Like, meeeow," said Gracie.

"Don't talk like that."

"Like what?"

"Like your some modern day girl."

"But aren't I now?" Gracie stood, brandishing the guitar like Courtney Love, a battle-axe ready to strike down anything that smacked of maturity.

"You're dead, dawg-gum-it," snapped Zelma, jumping to her feet.

"The devil I am."

Suddenly the door to the bathroom creaked.

Bunky, thought Zelma. He'd come to retrieve his guitar. Here was her chance to apologize. "Scat," she hissed at Gracie.

"Scat, yourself," Gracie spat back.

That did it. Zelma charged from the stall, lunging at the ghost with fingers clawed.

Gracie vanished in a swirl. The Strat again clattered to the floor. Zelma knelt to pick up the fallen instrument, cradling its badly nicked body in her arms.

A figure emerged from the cigarette smoke. It was the last person Zelma expected to see.

There stood Alyssa, her mouth and nose veiled behind a pink handkerchief. Alyssa's white blouse still bore a faint chocolate stain, like a wound that wouldn't heal.

At first Alyssa acted as if she didn't see Zelma and Zelma played along. Cradling the guitar, she watched Alyssa. Her nemesis slowly circled the bathroom, peering long and hard down every sink drain and toilet bowl.

Had Alyssa lost her marbles? She should be terrified, especially alone with Zelma in an abandoned boy's toilet.

Zelma was certainly nervous. Her hands wrung the neck of the poor guitar. At any moment she expected Gracie to pop up out of a toilet bowl like some demon Jack-in-the-box.

But the ghost stayed hidden. Now that was a first. Gracie usually couldn't resist a spooking. And she certainly hadn't shown any fondness for Alyssa. The best Zelma could figure was that Alyssa's behavior baffled Gracie, too.

Alyssa finished her inspection and then circled around until she stopped in front of Zelma. She lowered her pink veil, revealing a frown. "Well?"

"Well...what?" said Zelma, truly baffled now.

"Is this it?"

"Is this what?" Then it dawned on Zelma what Alyssa was getting at. "You think this stinking boy's room is my witch's den, some toilet my cauldron?"

Alyssa beamed.

"You're apey."

"Well, then, where is it?" Alyssa's voice dripped skepticism.

Zelma pictured her charred coffee can and Sterno. "None of your business."

For a fleeting moment Alyssa's eyes glinted like the blue steel of a hunting knife. But then she smiled and reached out to touch Zelma's sleeve. "Let's not quarrel."

Not quarrel? They'd done nothing but since Zelma arrived at Peachwood High eight months ago.

"We're not so different," cooed Alyssa.

With raised eyebrow, Zelma studied Alyssa from the pennies in her loafers to the pink hanky dangling from her fingertips. "You're right. We're both the daughters of mill hands who grew up on the wrong side of the tracks."

Alyssa crumpled the hanky dangling from her fingertips but her smile didn't waver. "What I mean," she politely corrected, "is that we've both been wronged."

"Wronged?"

"Yes, and by the same boy."

Zelma pretended not to understand.

It didn't deter Alyssa. She shook her head until the strands of her blonde hair stood on end. Then she jabbed an index finger into Zelma's chest. "Hey, man, where's the broom?"

“All right,” groused Zelma, retreating out of reach of Alyssa’s jabbing finger. She was more than familiar with the particulars of her many humiliations.

Alyssa sauntered over to a toilet. She nodded toward the grimy bowl as if were Zelma's cauldron. “Let’s say you and me open a can of whup ass on ol’ Bunky boy.”

Joking Jesus, Alyssa could play more roles than Mike Meyers in an Austin Powers movie. One minute she was a Peachwood Heights debutante, the next some wise ass boy and now a waitress down at Egg Betty’s. Who would she be next? Zelma couldn’t resist finding out. She accepted Alyssa’s challenge. “What did you have in mind?”

“You turn Bunky into a toad, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

“What can you do?” scoffed Zelma.

Alyssa raised a loafer high and then smashed it down, grinding the heel into the chipped tiles.

Zelma watched aghast.

“Well?” demanded Alyssa, her eyes steeled for revenge.

Zelma didn’t answer. Any moment now, she told herself, the murky water in the toilet bowl would rise up in a mighty geyser, drenching Alyssa. Or a monstrous brown turd of a water bug would fall into her hair.

Zelma waited and waited and waited.

## Chapter 57

# Gracie goes AWOL

Zelma appeared in the doorway of the Videorama, Bunky's Strat slung across her shoulders. You'd have thought she were an axe-wielding Orc. At the sight of her all the boys scattered like helpless peasants into the neon tinged gloom of the arcade.

"Ya'll seen Bunky?" Zelma called out.

No one answered, no one human, that is. A character from one of the games cried out, "Please, oh God, please don't kill me."

With a sigh Zelma left the Videorama. Down one alley and up another she searched for Bunky.

Foot sore and shoulders slumping, Zelma finally plopped atop a barrel in the alleyway of the 88 Mart. The Strat lay prostrate across her lap.

Zelma rubbed a swollen foot, but that's not what really hurt. Her heart ached with a bruising question: Had she become Cruella De Ville in eyes of everyone in town? If it were evil you needed doing, why, Zelma was your girl. Alyssa certainly thought so.

In her mind Zelma heard the pages of the red book rustle. She saw Mr. Wong pull so hard on his earlobe that it about came off.

Well, Alyssa couldn't squash Bunky. Not without Zelma. And Zelma planned to warn him to stay out of sight for a while. But would he listen – or run away from her like everyone else? Zelma rubbed her foot until the slipper about wore through.

"Why cat my dog. Lookee who's here."

The sound of Gracie's voice about jolted Zelma off her barrel perch. She twisted around trying to spot the ghost. At last her eyes found Gracie. She sat atop a towering stack of barrels, legs crossed and corn pipe clenched between her teeth.

“Where have you been?” demanded Zelma. She struggled to her feet atop the barrel. This time she held the Strat by the neck like the handle of a battle-axe.

Gracie ignored the question. “I’m slap sorry I put a hurt on that girl, slap sorry.”

“What girl?”

“Why your friend, Alyssa.”

“So you were in the bathroom!”

Gracie just blew smoke rings out of her pipe like the inscrutable caterpillar in Alice in Wonderland.

“Why didn’t you drench her in toilet water, drop some monstrous bug on her head?”

“Now why would I go and do a fool thing like that?”

Zelma shook the Strat at Gracie. “Why? You scared off Bunky and his friends.”

“Didn’t I now,” Gracie boasted.

“So why not Alyssa?”

“She’s different.”

“Different?” said Zelma, incredulous.

“That girl’s an interesting piece of strange.”

“But she thinks I’m evil!”

“Don’t she now,” chuckled Gracie.

“What’s so funny?” Zelma raised her guitar.

Gracie harrumphed and tapped out imaginary ashes from her pipe bowl. “Laws alive, what’s all this hoorah? You should be happier than a pig in slop.”

“Happy?” growled Zelma.

“Rotten glad. Ain’t this what you a been angling for? Everybody now thinks your as mean as cat pooh, some big bad witch – all thanks to yours truly.” Gracie stood and curtsied.

“Thanks a lot,” grumbled Zelma.

“Well, enough of this jawing,” said Gracie. She stuffed the pipe back into her dress. “We’ve got work to do.”

“Oh yeah and what’s that?”

“Why turning Bunky into a toad. A deal’s a deal.”

“I didn’t make any such deal.”

“if’n you didn’t. I heard you with my own two ears.”

“Well, you heard wrong.”

Gracie's eyes began to turn orange. “I know what’s eating you.”

“Oh do tell,” sneered Zelma.

“You’re sweet on that Bunky fella.”

Zelma's flushed beet red.

“I knew it,” said Gracie, slapping a thigh.

“And what if I am?” Zelma exploded.

Gracie beamed at Zelma’s lost of control. “Why,” she chortled, “that makes about as much sense as going frog sticking without a lantern.”

“And I’m supposed to know what that means?”

Gracie frowned like a disapproving parent. “I know’d raggedy farm boys with more sense than Bunky. At least they knew better than to comb their hair with bacon grease.”

“Careful,” growled Zelma.

“Or what?” challenged Gracie.

“Or I’ll send you back to the world of the dead.”

“Hah,” scoffed Gracie, “As if’n you know how.”

Zelma felt herself snap like a guitar string pluck hard one too many times. She hurled the Strat at Gracie. It passed through the ghost like a sword through fog. The ghost giggled as if she’d been tickled with a feather.

Gracie would get a tickling she’d never forget. Zelma lunged for the ghost, scrambling up the tower of barrels. Her fingers managed to grab one of Gracie's ankles. But Zelma might as well have seized a plume of smoke. The ghost easily slipped free of her grasp.

The tower of barrels trembled under Zelma and then they collapsed. As Zelma plunged to the ground, barrels raining down on top of her, she heard Gracie chortle: “I can git Bunky all by my lonesome. Just see if’n I don’t!”

## Chapter 58

# Mashed Zelma surprise

Amazingly, Zelma hadn't been squashed. Not that she'd gotten away unscathed. The falling barrels had given her a good pummeling. Then they'd piled atop one another like a troupe of wooden acrobats, imprisoning Zelma underneath.

She lay supine, staring up through the barrels. A breeze purred through her pyramid of a cage and it creaked menacingly. One wrong move, Zelma fretted, and the barrels might yet come toppling down.

It wasn't as if Zelma didn't deserve a good pummeling. How could she have been so foolish, thinking that she could control such a willful spirit as Gracie? She, who couldn't even conjure a charred bat into a vanquishing spell. Zelma was no Gamby, that's for sure, and never would be.

The barrels had finally knocked some sense into her. If she ever got out of this alive, Zelma promised to hang up her candy cane stockings.

But not until she saved Bunky, no matter how improbable that looked at the moment. Zelma pictured him atop the windowsill, singing: "She see with raven eye; she creep on slippered footsteps."

Zelma sighed deeply.

The barrels trembled.

It wasn't from Zelma's pounding heart.

Something was clawing at a barrel beside her head. It sounded not unlike a raccoon rummaging through some garbage. Had the critter mistaken the piled barrels as a dumpster, and Zelma as discarded meat, some edible white trash?

A slender hand reached through the barrels, groping for Zelma's neck.

Barrels be damned.

Zelma was nobody's dinner. She struggled against the groping fingers.

It was no use. The fingers were relentless. They seized Zelma by the collar of her blouse and yanked her up hard.

Zelma rose through the toppling pyramid until she was standing on wobbly legs. She smarted something awful, but she was in one piece.

In the glare of a bright spring day Zelma was blinded. Had she died, the claws of death yanking her through the mirror of life into the World of Yin?

As her eyes adjusted to the light Zelma did see a spirit. Staring up at her was a pale lichee nut of a face under a halo of fine black hair. Zelma embraced the figure in a bear hug.

"Oh, Lili, can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive, forgive," gasped Lili, struggling to free herself from Zelma's crushing hold.

Zelma released Lili and the girls faced each other, a hand on one another's shoulders, panting in sync.

Suddenly Zelma stiffened and began hobbling around the alley, searching for something – or someone.

"Looking for ghost?"

Zelma stopped in mid-hobble. "You know about Gracie?"

"Ah, so that name."

"How did you find out?" Zelma looked away, face reddening at the memory of avoiding Lili for weeks.

"Oh, I follow. Like always."

Of course, thought Zelma, remembering how Lili had surprised her at the back of the school.

"But this time keep safe distance," Lili continued. "Not good if ghost see," she said, pointing at herself.

"But how did you know I even had a ghost?"

"Easy. When come back from errand, find you listening hard to Gung-Gung. Then no longer want to be friend. Figure, up to no good."

Zelma hung her head, trying to hide the tears welling in her eyes. Not only had she endangered Bunky, but she'd betrayed the one person who had tried to befriend her at Peachwood High.

"Not to worry," said Lili.

"I listen to Gung-Gung after you run out."

Zelma wiped her eyes and looked at Lili. "You know how to send Gracie back?"

"No harder than baking cookies."

Zelma had tried Lili's attempt at chocolate chip cookies. They'd tasted like wood chips. Lili could no more bake American cookies than Zelma could whup up a working spell.

What a team – yet Zelma and Lili were Bunky's only hope.

## Chapter 59

# Dragon bones and fish scales

The 88 Mart was creepy enough during the daytime. In the dead of night it was downright frightening.

As promised, Lili had left the Mart's backdoor unlocked when she closed up Friday night. In a long frumpy raincoat, Zelma crept inside, keeping low to the ground, a black cat warily entering a new room.

The only light came from a single candle. It sat in the crossed legs of the big jade Buddha atop the stack of drawers behind the counter. His green smile flickered in and out of the light. Was he pleased to see Zelma or sneering at her foolishness?

She was a foolish girl, all right. Why, of all times, did Zelma now have to remember the time Mr. Wong had dusted an unhappy woman with powdered lizard tongues. The woman had lurched backward as if something unseen had leaped out of her heart. Then she'd smiled for the first time.

Did whatever leapt out of the woman's heart that day still lurk in the mart? It wouldn't surprise Zelma one bit. "Lili?" She whimpered.

Slowly she crept through the mart, eyes trying desperately to see in the dark. Her hands grabbed hold of a silken lump with big wings.

It grabbed back.

Zelma screamed and then the thing screamed too, which made Zelma only scream louder.

The thing clamped a scrawny paw over Zelma's mouth and dragged her to the ground. While her head spun from the smell of red pepper oil and ginger, Zelma sighed in relief.

"You scared me half to death."

Lili shivered in agreement.

The girls embraced each other on the floor, ears turned out like a rabbit's, listening for any sound other than the thumping of their own hearts.

"Do you think there's any dead ancestors floating about?" asked Zelma.

Lili nodded.

"Tell you what," said Zelma, trying to gather up the shreds of her courage, "I won't think about it, if you won't think about it."

"Sound like good deal," said Lili. She released Zelma and struggled to her feet. She wore a long silk robe. It had two deep side pockets that looked loaded down with large smooth cylindrical stones.

From the floor Zelma watched Lili trundle over to the counter. There she dumped out her pockets. The contents thudded on the counter like soap.

Now that was a first. Mr. Wong never concocted potions out of household products. Again Zelma remembered Lili's wooden cookies and wondered if her friend had indeed heard Mr. Wong right.

Lili lined the bars of soap along the edge of the counter. Then she struck a match. In the flash of light Zelma saw she was wrong. The lumps weren't soap but stubby candles. Lili set the counter aglow in a soft light that kept the darkness at bay.

Zelma jumped up and dashed into the protective halo of candlelight.

Lili frowned at a crumpled slip of paper in her hand. A list of ingredients ran the length of the paper. "I think all here."

"You think?"

"Gung-Gung whisper fast."

"Let me see."

Lili handed the list to Zelma, who studied it as if she understood what she was reading. Fish scales, tortoise shell, dragon bones.

Dragon bones? Dispatching Gracie back to the World of Yin must require the most powerful of Chinese spells.

"Fetch ladder," commanded Lili, snatching the list back from Zelma.

Zelma did as she was told, propping the ladder against the wall of drawers. Most of the ingredients were out of the reach of 15-year-old girls. So Lili climbed the ladder, list clenched between her teeth.

Lili became a human conveyor belt. She moved methodically up and down the ladder, dumping pinches of ingredients into the mortar Zelma held out.

Soon the mortar grew heavy and Zelma's hands began to tremble from the weight. "Done?" she called up hopefully.

Lili descended from the very top of the drawers. Between her fingers was the tiniest of pinches of something that looked – and smelled – like rotten eggs. It looked beyond ancient.

"Dragon bone," Zelma murmured.

Lili nodded.

As if bearing the remains of her own ancestors, Zelma carried the mortar to the counter and gently set it down.

Lili slipped off her robe and picked up the pestle. "We take turns," she said, moving the pestle in a wide arc against the sides of the mortar. It emitted a sound that reminded Zelma of her brothers chewing a mouthful of pumpkin seeds, shells and all.

As Zelma watched Lili grind fish scales into dragon bone, she fondled a bulge in her long coat that looked not unlike the butt of a sawed off shotgun. She imagined blowing Gracie clear to, well, you know where.

## Chapter 59

# Chinese fairy dust

Fish scales, dragon bone and tortoise shell became a powder as fine as talc. Lili stopped grinding and grabbed a pinch of the powder. She flicked it into the flame, which sizzled in a rainbow of colors.

“Wow,” whispered Zelma. She reached a hand toward the mortar to grab a pinch-full for herself.

Lili blocked her arm, frowning. “No time to play.”

“Well, excuse me,” grumped Zelma, but dutifully withdrew her hand. If Lili weren’t becoming more like her Third Uncle every day.

Lili carefully tipped the mortar, spilling out a small pyramid of powder onto the counter. “Dip into powder,” she directed, pointing to a candle.

Zelma did as commanded. The pyramid crackled and then ignited like a roman candle, spitting upward a rainbow of sparkles.

The fireworks quickly fizzled out and the pile began to glow. It turned red, then green and finally the same lovely robin egg blue of Gamby’s scrawl. A blue plume spiraled from the glowing powder.

Lili smiled at her handiwork. “Blue color of good magic.”

“Hmm?” Mesmerized, Zelma watched the plume form a blue question mark and wondered. Had she been trying to make pancakes with baking soda, using good magic for mischief? Maybe that’s why all of Gamby’s spells had fizzled.

Zelma felt a poke in the ribs. She turned to see Lili glaring at her impatiently.

“Doll, please,” Lili said, extending a hand.

Zelma reached into her coat and retrieved Sissy, handing it to Lili.

Holding the doll by the ankles, Lili passed it back and forth through the plume of blue smoke.

Sissy began to throb and slowly turn blue. The paint under one of her eyes bubbled into the shape of a tear. It made the doll look as if it were pleading for mercy. Did it plead for Gracie, too?

“What are you doing?” asked Zelma.

“Think of smoke as glue,” explained Lili. “Sissy become flypaper.”

“Really?” Zelma reached out to stroke the doll’s teary cheek. A hardened wad of chewing gum had more stickum. Zelma shot Lili a skeptical look.

Ignoring Zelma, Lili laid Sissy face up on the counter. Then she reached into her discarded robe. Lili retrieved a crumpled piece of paper that looked like it had been torn from a book. “Now,” she said, handing the paper to Zelma, “your turn.”

Zelma unrolled the paper. Printed on it was a grainy black and white photo of a boy. Zelma stared at the photo as if she didn’t recognize the boy in his oxford shirt and slick-ered hair, parted neatly to one side.

“Sorry, only find sixth grade yearbook.”

“Shouldn’t make a difference,” Zelma shrugged. But to herself she fretted, it better not. Zelma had insisted they combine spells to try and save Bunky. At the time her motivation had been nothing more than stupid pride.

Now Zelma realized she was facing a moment of truth: Would using the red book to do good release the power of its magic?

Zelma set the crumpled photo of 11-year-old Bunky on the counter. She retrieved from her skirt pocket a tissue and laid it alongside the photo.

“Hnn,” snorted Lili, a glint of skepticism in her glasses. “What that?”

“A little mountain mojo,” said Zelma. She unfolded the tissue to reveal two lines of red powder. It was ground bloodwort.

Zelma leaned over the tissue and snorted up a line of powder in one nostril. The powder stung so bad it made her eyes cross.

“Aiy!” cried Lili, reaching to seize the tissue. But Zelma raised an arm to deflect Lili’s hand. She snorted up the second line in her other nostril. It stung like all bejeezus but nothing like what was to come next.

Zelma tipped the photo into a candle flame and inhaled its acrid smoke in both nostrils.

"You crazy!" shrieked Lili.

Gagging, nostrils burning, Zelma stumbled backward, pinching her nose shut so no smoke would escape. She could feel the smoke worm its way into the frontal lobe of her brain. Tears soaked Zelma's cheeks and she closed her eyes.

For a long while Zelma didn't speak. She struggled to keep her eyes shut and her mind focused on the smoke worming into her brain.

Finally Lili squeaked in worry, "brain burn up?"

It surely felt like it, but Zelma nodded no.

"It working?"

This time Zelma nodded yes. There on the back of her eyelids a sleeping Bunky flickered as part of a silent movie – and it wasn't just her imagination. She would never have pictured him like this: His head laid cocked back, mouth agape, spittal running down his cheek. This was Bunky au natural, stripped of any homey pretense.

"Thank you, Gamby," Zelma whispered.

"Who?"

"Nobody. It's okay."

"Not okay."

Suddenly the image of Bunky on the back of Zelma's eyelids blazed orange as if lit with a match. The first ray of dawn had pierced the gloom of the 88 Mart, striking Zelma's closed eyelids.

Her eyes began to open, but a bony hand clamped them shut.

"Might break spell," cautioned Lili.

Zelma nodded in agreement, turning her eyes away from the piercing orange light. Instead, the sunlight struck her cheek, and it warmed to the rising heat of a new day.

"Come," said Lili, grabbing Zelma's hand and pulling her away from the counter.

"Shouldn't we clean up?" said Zelma, resisting Lili's insistent tug.

"Yes – but no time."

The front door creaked.

Mr. Wong!

Eyes closed, Zelma let Lili tow her by the hand through the mart and out its back door. From behind Zelma heard a low grumble, like the sound of an approaching thunderstorm. Was it the sound of Mr. Wong finding the burning candles and spilled powder?

In the alley Zelma found herself straddling two worlds. One was the gritty cobblestones under her slippers; the other a cavernous bedroom displayed across the back of Zelma's eyelids.

In Lili's guiding hand Zelma decided to trust. As her friend pulled Zelma through the alley she let herself slip away into Bunky's bedroom.

Down she drifted like a feather. Zelma had no sense of arms and legs, head or torso. It was as if all that remained was an idea of herself. Was this what it felt like to be Gracie?

Beneath Zelma lay the slumbering Bunky. For a second Zelma feared she might land right on top of his face. But no, his snoring broke her gentle, drifting fall. Like a dandelion puff, she bobbed above Bunky's mouth as he breathed.

If Bunky sensed the girl bobbing above him he didn't show it. He continued to slobber and snort in deep slumber.

Zelma looked down on the slumbering boy and wished she were more than just an idea.

How did Gracie come and go, Zelma wondered, did she just imagine herself into appearing? When it came to imagining Zelma was no slouch. So she tried to picture a hand.

Sure enough, five vaporous fingers appeared. They looked not unlike her own fingers.

She gave them a try. Zelma reached down and raked her vaporous fingers through Bunky's stumpy forest of bent spikes. He curled into a fetal ball, purring.

A bony finger jabbed Zelma in the ribs, a sharp reminder that she did still have a body, even if left unattended in another dimension.

"No fool round," grouched Lili.

"I'm not," protested Zelma.

Lili grunted "Hnn." Her skepticism was understandable.

Zelma felt her face beam like one of Mr. Wong's good luck statuettes.

Her smile didn't last. "Hold it," said Zelma, seizing Lili's arm.

"What?"

"Bunky's opening his eyes."

"Must hurry," said Lili, starting to sprint.

Eyes shuttered, Zelma stumbled along behind her friend.

## Chapter 60

### Poor little rich boy

The lemony scent of blooming magnolia trees enveloped Zelma and she nearly swooned. There was only one place in town with so many magnolias and their showy yellow, white, pink and green flowers. “We’re on the Heights?”

“Hao, hao.”

Hao, hao was right. It figured that Bunky lived among the faux chateaus of Peachwood Heights, thought Zelma. What next, that his Third Uncle owned the mysterious Odom Industries?

“What Bunky do now?” asked Lili as she ascended the Heights, Zelma in hand.

Zelma scanned the back of her closed eyelids. She watched Bunky kick off his comforter. “Joking Jesus.”

“Oyo, now what?”

“He slept in the clothes he wore yesterday.” In fact, it was the same outfit Bunky wore every day to school. Sure, Zelma wore the same uniform, too, but at least she changed into a clean one every morning.

“No wonder smell like laundry basket.”

True enough. Zelma's brothers had often smelled likewise. But what surprised her about Bunky was this: In his own bedroom, Bunky looked out of place, like a ratty stowaway on one of “The Donald’s” luxurious yachts.

He lay in a bed big enough to hold Zelma's entire family. On the wall opposite his bed hung a wafer-thin television screen the size of a store window. A speaker hung from every ceiling corner of his room.

Bunky rolled out bed and shuffled in holey white socks into an adjacent bathroom. It had a separate bathtub and shower. And what a shower it was, encased in glass and tiled in black ceramic. All the faucets were gilded.

In front of the shower's glass door Bunky stopped, frowning and scratching his crotch.

"Uh oh," muttered Zelma.

"What wrong now?"

"He's gonna take a shower!"

"Bunky no shower," scoffed Lili.

"How do you know? He needs one, bad."

"Easy. Did brothers ever shower?"

"Not unless mamma made'em."

"You see his mamma?"

"No."

Sure enough, Bunky turned away from the shower and shuffled to a mirror over the sink. Eying his reflection, Bunky set to straightening his bent spikes. Once Bunky's platinum forest was standing tall again, he exited the bathroom.

At the foot of the bed stood Bunky's yellow boots. A ratty trench coat lay draped across the chair of a desk. Bunky slipped his feet into the boots and threw on the trench coat.

Zelma had to chuckle at his choice of attire. It was as if she, Bunky and Lili were starring in some film noir, in which all the characters wear either trench coats or silky robes. The only thing missing were the pork pie hats.

Bunky galumphed out of his room and Zelma tried to give chase. It wasn't easy. She wafted after Bunky like a dandelion puff trying to navigate a breeze upstream. Somehow she managed to keep Bunky just in sight.

He traveled along a wide hallway of spotless ivory carpet. It led to a big staircase that descended into a marble rotunda. Each of its eight corner's boasted an ionic column. The sun beamed through a skylight.

In the center of the rotunda stood a chipped stone warrior brandishing a broadsword. He didn't have the modesty to cover himself with even a fig leaf.

Zelma blushed for the stone warrior, but Bunky paid him no mind. He stood on the last step, gazing hard at the marble floor. Finally, he lowered a boot, its toe testing the floor as

if it were the surface of a frozen pond. The toe of the boot squeaked on the marble and Bunky winced.

Suddenly the rotunda reverberated with an orotund voice: "August?"

Was that Bunky's real name? Zelma wondered. She'd never heard anyone call him that, not even a teacher in class.

If August were his real name, Bunky didn't appear to care for it. He ducked as if the call were a blast of buckshot.

Crouched, he waited for the echo of the name to fade away. Then he began to tiptoe across the rotunda. But no matter how softly he walked his boots continued to squeak.

"You still see Bunky?" called Lili, fretfully.

"I'm on him like flies on a watermelon." Zelma was beginning to get the hang of traveling like a dandelion puff. She caught a draft blowing in Bunky's direction, one she would have never have sensed in her clunky old body.

As Zelma fluttered along she marveled at Bunky's house. Every hallway was lined with lights set in protruding fig leaf scones. They passed through a second rotunda. It featured a giant fresco of winged fairies dropping grapes into the open mouth of some lounging Caesar.

Ahead loomed an opened double doorway and Bunky slowed to a crawl. He inched to the frame and paused. Holding his breath, Bunky tried to tiptoe head down passed the open doorway.

Again a voice boomed "August." This time the call scored a direct hit. Bunky stopped dead in his tracks.

## Chapter 60

# Breakfast with the Odoms

Bunky stood twitching in front of the opened double doors, a fly stuck in some invisible web.

Zelma peered over his shoulder into the room.

A chandelier the size of a UFO hovered over a long blond wood table. Commanding the head of the table was a burly man in a black bathrobe. It appeared to be made of the same silky material as the underwear Zelma had admired at the mall.

“ATO” was initialed in white cursive across the robe’s breast pocket. Grey hair bristled out from under the silk, although the robe was pulled tightly around the man’s chest.

The man brooded over a cup of black coffee, a fist clenched on the table. On his right sat a little girl in a pink dress, feet dangling above the floor. Quietly and without much enthusiasm she nibbled on a slice of baguette smeared with Brie.

Opposite the girl sat a woman in curlers. Her face was still creased with sleep. Fruitlessly, she stabbed a gold fork at green grapes rolling around on her china plate.

Servants fussed about the three, scooping up any empty plates and setting down new ones with dainty portions of fresh fruit, baguette and cheese.

An empty chair stood between the man and the woman. In front of it sat a plate of scrambled eggs, hardened from sitting out untouched for too long.

The man glanced up at the doorway. “There you are!” The chandelier swayed at the sound of his booming voice. He stood, his fist unclenching to reveal a crumpled ball of manilla paper. It lay on the table by his plate.

The man beckoned Bunky to his side with a ring-studded hand, but Bunky didn't budge. Father and son locked eyes in a standoff. Mother, sister and servant turned to watch the boy skulking in the doorway.

No one seemed to notice Zelma. And that emboldened her. She floated into the dining room toward the big man at the end of the table. She slithered over his silky black shoulder and then down to his plate.

There, she reached out a vaporous hand. It rolled the crumpled ball of paper this way and that. Zelma peered into the folds. At last she caught sight of what she was looking for: her forged signature of Miss Gracious.

"Why smiling?"

Zelma jumped at the sound of Lili's voice. She'd forgotten all about her friend. Zelma pressed one of her fleshy fingers against Lili's lips. She didn't dare speak. What if the Odoms could hear her, too?

Lili hushed. But Zelma could feel her friend's lips trembling with growing exasperation.

Zelma's attention was diverted back to the Odoms. She heard Bunky's mother speak for the first time. "At least have a little breakfast," she pleaded, pointing her golden fork at the hardened eggs.

Sighing, Bunky entered the room but he didn't sit. Instead, he scooped some grapes off his mother's plate.

"Bunky," cried his little sister, opening her mouth wide. He smiled for the first time this morning. Carefully, he tossed a grape at his sister. She easily caught it between her teeth, clearly an old hand at this stunt. They both laughed.

"Honey, don't encourage her," Mrs. Odom scolded mildly. Her eyes pleaded with him to sit.

"Sorry, gotta run." Bunky tossed several grapes into his own mouth and began to tramp out of the room.

Sighing, Mrs. Odom returned to trying to spear a grape.

Mr. Odom, though, wasn't taking no for an answer. His bulbous figure shot up. He tore after his son like an alligator going for a dog that has strayed too near the swamp. He grabbed Bunky in the silky jaw of a crooked arm before he could escape the room.

"Whoa there," Mr. Odom said, his voice modulating up the register from bass to a more soothing baritone.

All the same Bunky cringed at his father's touch.

“You don’t happen to know a Zelma Dupree?”

Bunky blushed – something Zelma had never seen him do.

“Ah, cute, is she?” Mr. Odom playfully tugged on one of his son’s blonde spikes.

Bunky didn’t laugh.

“Why don’t you invite this Zelma over some time,” purred Mr. Odom.

Zelma cringed. And she thought her mother was the most embarrassing person on earth. Poor Bunky. He looked as if he would have slipped away into the depths of his baggy coat had Mr. Odom not snared him in a silky garrote.

“August, leave the boy alone,” said Mrs. Odom, finally impaling a grape on her fork. She glared at her husband.

Mr. Odom ignored his wife’s plea.

“Look,” Mr. Odom said to Bunky. “I’m going to level with you. Your poor ol’ father needs your help.”

Bunky scoffed.

Undaunted, Mr. Odom continued. “I hear this girl is like a daughter to Miss Gracious.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“You could talk to her.”

“About what?”

Mr. Odom bared his teeth in gleeful anticipation of meaty prey.

Bunky wriggled free of father’s grasp. He threw up his hands in exasperation. “Not that stupid manor again!”

Mr. Odom carried on as if everything had already been decided. “Here’s what I want you to do. Wow this girl with the Odom charm.” He slobbered as he spoke, that’s how worked up Mr. Odom was about his plan. “Get her to talk to Miss Gracious into selling out to me.”

“Oh yeah? Then what happens to Zelma and her mother? They live there, you know.”

“They can stay, they can stay,” assured Mr. Odom. “I hear they’re servants. We’ll need good help to keep the place shipshape.”

For a moment Zelma could have sworn Bunky's eyes flared as orange as Gracie's. Then he stomped out of the room.

Zelma fluttered after him, but Bunky moved too fast for her to keep up. Soon the only sign of him was the distant squeak of his boots on the marble floor.

“Where Bunky?” Lili pestered.

## Chapter 61

# Stalking Bunky

Frantically, tumbling head over heel like a beach ball, Zelma rolled through the cavernous marble house in search of Bunky. But she couldn't find him anywhere. Worse, the squeak of Bunky's boots had faded away.

"There!" shrieked Lili. She shook Zelma until her eyes popped open. For a moment they rolled around in her head like the die in a slot machine. Then Zelma's gaze focused on a dark figure striding down a pink cobblestone driveway.

It was Bunky and the deep pockets of his trench coat bulged with what looked like black-jacks. He clinked as he strode down the driveway.

"Come," said Lili. She shot up out of the bushes, dragging Zelma up with her. The thorns shredded the sleeves of Zelma's long coat. Just as well. She needed a good airing. Her body was soaked in sweat. Who knew floating around was such work? Never again would she consider a dandelion puff as carefree.

Zelma looked up at the house in front of the bushes. It was the new manse that crowned Peachwood Heights. Bunky had to be the richest boy in town.

No wonder Alyssa had been so desperate to hold onto him. He was the top rung of the ladder she'd wanted to ascend. Was that why she wanted him dead? If he couldn't be her man, well, than he'd belong to nobody.

"No dilly dally." Lili seized Zelma's hand and yanked her off in pursuit of Bunky. The girls kept a safe distance, dashing from mailbox to manicured hedge to gardening truck.

Bunky led them down the Heights. In no time he entered the Square. A group of boys hailed him from the Videorama, but Bunky didn't even look up.

He crossed the railroad tracks and wend his way through the dilapidated brick buildings as if he knew exactly where he was going.

How odd, Zelma thought. Why would Bunky know this side of the tracks at all?

He led Zelma and Lili to a knee-high forest of weeds that covered an abandoned playground. The girls stopped and crouched among the weeds. Zelma found herself kneeling inside an empty sandbox. It was her childhood battleground.

Ahead stood the First Baptist Church. Beside it stood a brick placard where the preacher posted weekly messages to his flock. The last one was still preserved under a scratched plastic window. It exhorted the Pleasant Crump Middle Rebels to maul the Toccoa Cherokees. If Zelma remembered right, the Rebels had done as so ordained.

The skeletal brick remains of First Baptist now served as the town's homeless shelter. The shelter was the one place Zelma had never come looking for a grey kepi.

Zelma and Lili squatted in the weedy sandbox holding hands. Seeing without being seen, they watched as Bunky approached a long line of frowzy men snaking out from the shelter's front door.

As Bunky reached the line he plunged both hands into the pockets of his trench coat. The men fell silent, every watery eye on those clinking pockets.

Bunky's hands rocketed out of his pockets, each gripping a bottle of Southern Comfort by the neck. He waved the bottles over his head and a cheer went up along the line. As Bunky strode passed the men they clapped him on the back. He finally disappeared through the front door of the shelter.

If that didn't beat all. Never had Zelma smelled liquor on Bunky's breath. Nor had she seen him stumble around in school. There were no empty liquor bottles hidden in his bedroom, at least as far as Zelma could see. Yet here he was, cavorting as if he were Prince Besotted.

Gracie had it all wrong. It was Bunky – not Alyssa - who was the interesting piece of strange. He didn't add up at all. His platinum spikes, his Jane Austin manse, his bottles of Southern Comfort. How did each of these pieces fit together to solve the puzzle that was Bunky?

Lili looked equally perplexed. Not about Bunky, mind you. She frowned like a scout struggling to discern a camouflaged route around the enemy.

Slowly Lili rose to a crouch and began creeping through the weeds, an unseen tiger stalking its prey.

Zelma let her fingers slip from her friend's hand and stayed put.

Lili stopped. "Oyo, now what?"

"He's a drunk," said Zelma, waving dismissively at the shelter.

“Don’t know for sure.”

Zelma harrumphed, crossing her arms.

“Anyway, doesn’t matter.”

“Gracie can have him. I’m not risking my skin for some drunk.”

Lili’s eyes narrowed. “Bu shi.”

“What!?” Zelma was momentarily stunned by Lili’s sudden profanity.

“Bu shi. Chinese for ‘not so,’ ” corrected Lili. “This not about Bunky.”

She was right, of course. Still, Zelma didn’t let on to what she really found unnerving. “Oh no, then why are we here?”

Lili’s pupils became pinholes. They bored into Zelma’s thick skull like a sharp awl. “Gracie like spilled poison. Must mop up before others hurt.”

“All right, all right,” grumped Zelma. No need to say who should be carrying the mop here. She rose up on her haunches and crept behind Lili through the weeds. Lili circled in a wide arc toward the rear of the shelter.

Zelma tried to keep her eyes trained on Lili’s back. But it was no use. Her gaze kept yawning to the left, where the line of men shuffled into the old church.

Down the line her eyes ticked off each man. There had to be at least 50 of them. Thank goodness not a one wore a battered, grease stained kepi.

Zelma relaxed. Well, as much as one could, creeping along on bended knee in a raincoat on a sunny day through prickly weeds. Her calves began to cramp. “Do we have to crouch?” she grumbled.

Lili frowned, pressing an index figure pressed against her lips.

“Oh they don’t care a fig about us,” said Zelma, nodding toward the line of men. If she and Lili popped up out of the weeds whistling Dixie the men would pay them no more mind than a steaming cup of hot coffee.

All eyes were locked on the now opening door of the shelter. The men shuffled orderly through the door, smiling as if they were entering heaven. Heaven, in this case, defined as free bourbon, courtesy of Bunky Odom. What kind of shelter was this, anyway? Zelma wondered.

Lili frowned at Zelma. “True, men no care. But ghost does. See us; ruin plan.”

Ah, the plan. Zelma fingered a blue leg that stuck out of the pocket of her raincoat. If you asked Zelma the so-called plan was starting to look a little hair-brained. A doll and a

packet of blue powder didn't seem like much of a defense. Especially against an angry ghost who had a heart as hard and as sharp as a bayonet.

Why, Gracie could be stalking them now as they stalked Bunky. It would be just like her to pop out at any moment, catching them off guard.

A clump of weeds rustled to Zelma's right and she turned sharply to look. A big old hare darted out and ran past the girls. Its flight reminded Zelma of something her father had once said: "Run ol' hare, run. If I was an ol' hare I'd run, too."

## Chapter 62

# Drunken chef

“Okay, now what?”

Zelma crouched alongside a giant green dumpster behind the shelter. She pinched her nose shut from the smell of rotting garbage.

Beside Zelma knelt Lili. Her eyes focused on the rear door of the shelter, as if trying to will it open.

Sure enough, the door swung open. Out teetered two spindly black legs beneath a giant white plastic bag. The legs staggered toward the dumpster until their kneecaps banged into the metal box. There was a muffled groan and then the legs rose up on tiptoes. The plastic bag tumbled into the dumpster, revealing a tiny black woman with a halo of steely curls.

Lili popped out and blurted, “Excuse, please.”

At the sound Lili's voice the woman about jumped into the dumpster herself. She landed back down on wobbly legs and glared at Lili. “Liked to have scared me plum to death,” the woman wheezed, clutching her heart.

Lili bowed and whispered, “much sorry.”

It wasn't Lili who caught the woman's interest. She eyed

Zelma's grass-stained candy cane stockings, shredded coat sleeves and the blue legs of a doll sticking out of her raincoat.

“You girls living on the street?” the woman asked.

“Want to volunteer,” replied Lili.

“Lordy Chil', you don't have to volunteer,” said the woman. “There's plenty of food for those who needs it.”

“Not hungry,” insisted Lili. “Want to help. Good friends of Bunky.”

“You don’t say now?” The woman sounded impressed.

Lili bowed her head ever so slightly.

“Well, there’s some pots in sore need of washing.”

“We do it!”

The woman smiled, obviously impressed with Lili's enthusiasm. She extended a hand of welcome. “You girls can call me Miss Maudie.

“And next time,” she said, leading the girls inside the shelter, there’s no need to hide out back. Come through the front door like regular folk.”

Lili and Zelma found themselves in a windowless room of gleaming stainless steel. There was a sink, stove and counters. Yet it didn’t resemble a kitchen so much as one of those morgues in TV cop shows.

Zelma's gaze was drawn to a trash can alongside the stove. Empty bottles of Southern Comfort rose out of the can. What was Miss Maudie running, some black-market gin mill?

Except the place smelled anything but like a bar. Zelma had been to a couple in her time, sent by momma to fetch home her daddy. Those places all reeked of stale cigarette smoke, worn vinyl and sweaty men.

Not this morgue of a kitchen. It reeked of the sticky sweet smell of BBQ.

“There’s them pots that need washing,” said Miss Maudie, pointing toward the stove. On it sat three large pots, the lip of each encrusted bloody red.

Zelma ran a finger along the lip of one of the pots and stuck it in her mouth. If it wasn’t the most heavenly BBQ sauce she’d ever tasted: Sweet as sorghum, with a rich aftertaste of bourbon, minus the alcoholic kick. “Who made this?”

Miss Maudie’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “I thought you said you was friends of Bunky.”

“Oh yes,” chimed in Lili. “Love Bunky's spaghetti sauce.”

“Spaghetti sauce?”

Zelma cut in. “Are you telling me Bunky make this?” She wagged a red tipped finger at Miss Maudie.

A beatific smile crossed Miss Maudie’s lips. “On the third Saturday of every month, Bunky comes in here and whups up the most powerful batch of drunken chicken.”

“Get out!”

"Yep," said Miss Maudie, "Boys come from as far South as Macon to get they selves some of Bunky's special sauce."

"Well I'll be," said Zelma. She scooped up a dirty pot in each hand and carried it over to the sink. This was one mess she'd be honored to clean up.

Lili turned on the hot water and squirted in some dish soap. "See? Told you Bunky not drunk."

"I knew that," said Zelma.

"Vuh, vuh, vuh," clucked Lili.

"Well I did."

The girls stood shoulder-to-shoulder, scrubbing pots in sudsy hot water. Not for a moment did they forget their mission. Each kept an eye peeled for Gracie.

There was a long rectangular slot above the sink at eye level. It afforded a clear view of the main hall of the shelter.

Zelma peered through the slot. There was no sign of Gracie. But she could see Bunky fine.

He stood behind a long table on which sat two pots. One held white rice and the other chicken in BBQ sauce. Bunky ladled heaping portions of rice and chicken onto the Styro-foam plates of the men who filed passed him. Their faces lit up as if receiving a magic elixir.

Maybe they were, thought Zelma. Bunky's sauce struck her as a nicotine patch for alcoholics. They could enjoy the sweet taste of their addiction without suffering the DTs. This was drunken chicken without the drunk.

Why, it was down right brilliant. Who would have expected such from a white homey who worshipped idleness? Bunky was a puzzle, all right.

Now that she thought about it, who wasn't a puzzle? Maybe Bunky wasn't meant to add up. Maybe he was just the sum of his contradictions. Maybe that's what they all were. Lord knows Zelma made about as much sense as a black cat that chased its own shadow.

While much about Bunky didn't make sense, one thing about him was clear. He wasn't Alyssa's type. Not at all. But he might be just right for another girl Zelma had in mind. Her face reddened – and it wasn't from the rising steam of the sink's hot water.

"Girls?" Miss Maudie appeared behind them with a furrowed brow. "Is there a carving knife in that sink?"

Zelma swished a hand around in the soapy water. "Nome."

Shaking her head, Miss Maudie wandered off, muttering, "Bunky must have put it down somewheres funny."

## Chapter 63

# Demon in the dumpster

Bunky revealed another hidden talent. He sure knew how to gunk up a pot. Head down, Zelma scrubbed until her fingers were raw. She kept an ear cocked toward the slot above the sink, ever listening for a faint whirl or a distant cackle.

What she heard instead was the steady clunk of Bunky's ladle slowing to stop. A new sound rose up: the uneven draw of fifty dull saws through knotty logs.

Zelma peered through the slot. Along the tables sat rows of men slumped forward, their hair brushing the Styrofoam plates in front of them. Every once in a while a head would bob up, revealing a smiling face smeared red in BBQ sauce.

Who Zelma didn't see was Bunky.

Suddenly the kitchen's door swung open, banging the wall. Bunky barged in, rear first. He carried two empty pots stacked one atop of the other. "Miss Maudie?" he called out.

"Joking Jesus." Zelma dropped her pot into the sink and grabbed Lili by the tight collar of her blouse. Gagging, Lili scrambled with Zelma to behind the stove. From there, the girls watched Bunky toss his pots into the sink, splashing soapy red water onto the floor.

"I'm not cleaning that up," whispered Zelma. Lili motioned for her to shush.

"Miss Maudie," Bunky called again. He looked none too sad when she didn't appear. Out the back door he clomped.

The girls dashed to the door and peered out through its little window. Bunky stood hunched in front of the dumpster, his back toward them. Slipping out the door, the girls scurried behind the dumpster, out of Bunky's sight.

Bunky looked up sharply. "Miss Maudie?"

The girls dared not even breathe.

There was a long silence. Not even Bunky spoke or moved. Then Zelma smelled the sulfur of a struck match. She took a chance and peered around the dumpster.

Bunky dragged deeply on a cigarette. Nothing queer there.

That didn't mean all was right.

There was a faint cackling and Bunky looked up. The cigarette fell from his lips. So Gracie could control who saw her - and when.

Bunky stomped on the fallen cigarette, as if this might disperse the apparition floating above him. It did no such thing, of course.

Still, Bunky refused to believe his eyes. He rubbed them, looked up, and then rubbed his eyes some more. But this was one stubborn hallucination. If anything the image of the girl grew sharper. Her smile widened with Bunky's growing frustration.

Zelma began to rise to her feet, but Lili pull her back down.

As if to confirm beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was indeed real, Gracie finally spoke. "Ya'll remember me?"

Bunky looked blank, which struck Zelma as odd. How could he forget Gracie? Unless he was scared dumb.

Gracie began singing. "Peas, peas, peas, peas, eating goober peas. Wonder how delicious, eating goober peas."

Bunky's face turned as white as Gracie's dress would have been, if not stained by gunpowder and masonry.

"I reckon you remember me now," chortled Gracie.

Bunky jabbed a damning finger at Gracie. "You're...you're Zelma's demon." His eyes darted about the alley.

Zelma pulled her head back behind the dumpster.

"Demon...lil' ol' me?"

Zelma again peered out from behind the dumpster.

Gracie had one hand thrust inside her dress, as if clutching a heart deeply wounded. "Why, I ain't a lick of trouble."

Bunky looked anything but convinced.

"It's Miss Zelma. She's a harum sacrum lot, all right. She makes a body do wicked things."

Again, Zelma began to rise to her feet and Lili once more pushed her back down.

“Bad, bad, wicked Zelma,” moaned Gracie. She drifted down toward Bunky.

He tried to sidestep the ghost, but she checked his every move, finally driving him back against the dumpster.

Zelma remembered Bunky's playful game of grape toss with his little sister. Would he now succumb to ghosts's request?

Turning to face Lili, she whispered harshly, “We’ve got to do something – now!”

Lili shook her head violently no.

With an almost audible harrumph Zelma turned back to watch Bunky and the ghost.

“Who...who are you?” stammered Bunky.

“I reckon I’m just a little girl who needs a big brother.”

“But you’re....”

“Dead?”

All Bunky could muster in response was a feeble nod.

“Ghosts are people, too,” sighed Gracie. “At least we were onc’t.”

Were Gracie's eyes tearing up? Zelma couldn't believe it.

“Imagine if’n you had nairy a body to play with for years and years and years.”

Bunky's forehead creased at the thought.

“Do you have a little sister?” Gracie asked.

“Uh huh.”

“Do you ever give her a big ol’ hug?” As Gracie spoke she slipped an arm around Bunky, drawing herself to his chest.

Bunky’s arms instinctually reached out, too, but then stopped midway, as if unsure where – or what – to hug.

That didn’t stop Gracie. She laid her head on his shoulder, whimpering. Then she slowly withdrew the hand kept hidden inside her dress.

The carving knife was missing no more.

“Now,” shouted Lili, leaping to her feet.

Zelma bound forward toward Bunky.

Gracie spun around, pinning Bunky face forward against her chest. She held the knife under his chin.

Poor Bunky. His legs gave out and his eyes rolled backward. He would have oozed to the ground like melted butter if not pinned to Gracie's chest.

"Let him go," commanded Zelma.

Gracie smirked at Zelma's own quivering legs. The ghost tickled Bunky under the chin with the tip of the knife. "Ain't your gal a real belly buster?"

Bunky giggled uncontrollably from the tickle of the knifepoint.

"The doll, the doll!" Lili cried out from behind the dumpster.

Of course! In the excitement Zelma had forgotten all about Sissy. She grabbed the doll by its protruding legs and brandished it like a cross to thwart Dracula.

## Chapter 64

# Knife in the heart

Gracie's eyes burned orange and their fury ignited Sissy's magic coating. The doll lit up, throbbing in a cobalt halo. At first the light was blinding and Zelma had to turn her head.

Gracie was stunned, too. She released Bunky, who slipped to the ground like a wet noodle. There, he curled into fetal ball.

Gracie thrust the knife between her teeth like a pirate and tried to zoom skyward. But she couldn't rise higher than the roof of the shelter. It was as if one of her ankles were stuck to Sissy. The doll was indeed a kind of otherworldly flypaper.

While trapped, Gracie hadn't given up the ghost. She struggled as if Zelma had hooked Bubba Largemouth himself.

Jerked off balance, Zelma fell to her knees. She hit the ground so hard that Sissy almost popped out of her hands. Almost, but not quite. Zelma knew that all would be lost if she let go of the doll.

Unfortunately, Gracie had figured that out, too. Maybe she couldn't fly or fade away. But she still could give Zelma quite a drubbing. And that's clearly what she aimed to do.

Tethered to the throbbing cobalt doll, Gracie raked the kneeling Zelma back and forth across the alley's gritty cobblestones. Soon Zelma's stockings were shredded and her knees bloodied.

Teeth gritted, Zelma fought off the pain. She forced herself to think like daddy. What would he do if he had indeed hooked Ol' Bubba?

He'd rear back, for starters, setting the hook good. Then he wouldn't waste his strength trying to muscle Bubba into the boat. Better to hang on like dead weight. Left the bass wear itself out against you. That's what Zelma tried now with Gracie.

Except Gracie was proving stronger than a dozen Bubbas. Zelma feared she couldn't hang on much longer.

Where in the Sam Hill was Lili? This was supposed to be a team effort.

"Lili," Zelma gasped, "the powder, the powder."

"Coming," blubbered Lili.

Zelma glanced over her shoulder. What she saw made her think that she must be in real trouble. Never had Zelma seen Lili so flustered.

Lili stood, fumbling the packet of blue powder. It tumbled out of her trembling hands and onto the cobblestones. Blue powder spilled out of a tear in the packet.

"Aiy!" cried Lili in despair.

Zelma couldn't agree more, but she didn't have the strength left to cry out. She watched in growing desperation as Lili stooped over the packet. Fingers trembling, Lili frantically tried to light it. Match after match flickered out in the wake of the ghost swooshing overhead.

At the sight of Lili trying to light the packet Gracie switched tactics. She began ramming Zelma head first into the dumpster. In all her years of fishing no bass had ever tried to brain Zelma senseless.

Zelma's head thumped the dumpster as if it were a kettledrum signaling a dark turn in some Wagnerian opera. Dazed, Zelma's grip slid down Sissy's legs. She held the doll now by the ankles and her grip was beginning to loosen altogether.

The booming dumpster so rattled Lili that she dropped the box of matches. She crouched over the packet, wringing her hands and muttering "vuh, vuh, vuh."

The ominous booming of Zelma's head, however, proved a call of arms to someone else. The crumpled figure on the cobblestones began to stir. Bunky raised himself up on an elbow. Cross-eyed, he looked at Zelma as if he didn't recognize her. Then his head flopped sideways to look at Lili. She crouched amid a circle of burnt matches.

"Bunky," Zelma hollered, expending the last of her strength. Had she shaken him out of his daze?

He began crawling on his belly along the cobblestones. When he reached Lili, Bunky reached into his pocket and withdrew a lighter. He flicked it on and easily lit the packet.

The packet exploded in a rainbow of sparks. Then it began to glow cobalt just like Sissy. A trickle of blue smoke curled skyward from the packet.

Gracie's nose twitched as a wisp of smoke reached her. She stopped cold but her eyes were aflame.

The ghost withdrew the knife from between her teeth and raised it high. Keening like ol' Hood himself making a final desperate charge, Gracie hurled down toward Zelma.

"Aiy!" Zelma cried. "Throw the dang thing. Throw it now!"

Startled out of her trance, Lili seized the packet. She stood and heaved it at the dive-bombing ghost.

Who would have guessed such a bamboo shoot of an arm could be so strong and true.

The packet struck Gracie square in the chest. She was enveloped in a ball of blue smoke and flame. A terrible scream echoed through the alley.

The carving knife plummeted from the pall of blue smoke. Zelma tried to get out of its path, but she wasn't quick enough. The knife plunged through the collar of her blouse, driving Zelma face first into the cobblestones.

She hit the ground so hard that her grip on Sissy was finally broken. The doll bounced out of Zelma's hands and landed face up in the alley alongside her.

Zelma laid pinned face down, the knife in her collar sunk deep into the crumpling grout between the cobblestones. Blood oozed along a thin line that the blade had scored along Zelma's throat.

At least Zelma was alive, but she dared not move. The knife might yet slit her throat. The most she chanced was a glance skyward.

Above her the fiery blue cloud began to swirl into the shape of a funnel. It rotated downward toward Zelma.

There was a strange noise, a backward whistle that sounded like a boiling teakettle inhaling its own steam. Zelma's ears tracked the noise to the doll lying next to her.

With pursed lips, the doll sucked in the funneling cloud. Its cheeks bulged, glowing bluer than ever.

There was no sign of Gracie, until the final wisp of blue smoke. It reared back from the doll's pursed lips, like a child resisting a good whupping. The wisp morphed into the shape of General Eustice's saber.

In horror, Zelma watched the saber plunge toward her heart. She struggled to roll away, but pinned down by the carving knife, the best she could manage was to roll up on one arm, exposing her back to the plunging saber. A pain sliced between Zelma's shoulder blades and pierced her heart.

Then everything went black.

## Chapter 65

# Kilt

Zelma awoke to find herself face up, hands neatly folded on her chest. She lay atop on some slab. It radiated a stony chill that penetrated her to the bone.

The slab sat in a windowless room. The only light came from a single bulb dangling in a high corner. It's dim yellow light cast Zelma in a sepia glow.

Had she died after all, her body dumped in the town morgue while her soul passed through the two-way mirror of life into the World of Yin?

Not if Zelma could help it. As if wrestling with death itself, she struggled to rise up from the stony slab. But she could only make it up on one elbow. A stabbing pain drove through her heart and Zelma collapsed back onto the slab.

In a corner Zelma espied a shadowy figure. Was it Gracie, coming to gloat at her demise? "You git, hear?" croaked Zelma. "I ain't kilt, I ain't!"

Zelma's tongue froze. That couldn't be her speaking; Gracie must have grabbed hold of her tongue.

The shadowy figure lurched out of the corner.

Zelma shrieked. At least that Gracie couldn't control. Zelma tried to roll off the slab but her chilled body wouldn't budge. The figure fell upon Zelma, seizing her about the legs.

Salty tears stung Zelma's bloodied knees, but this time she didn't cry out. "'Laws alive,'" she sighed, as the warmth of Lili's embrace radiated up her legs, thawing her chilled body.

Lili looked up with tear-stained cheeks. "Xiao taiyang, thought Gracie...."

"Shoot," said Zelma. "I might be knocked a little bow-legged, but it would take more than some pissant of a haint to git me kilt."

Lili frowned. "Now who talk funny?"

"Just you help git me up," grumped Zelma.

With Lili's help Zelma managed to sit up on the slap. She looked around the windowless room with the dirt floor. "Where am I?"

"Basement of 88 Mart. Gung-Gung help carry."

"Jee-crawling-hova," Zelma groaned, sure that Lili had told Mr. Wong everything. Lili's sheepish look told her it was true. "Just tell me this: air we shut of her?"

Lili beamed.

"Hot damn!" Zelma slapped her thigh.

Celebration proved premature. Zelma's suffered another sharp jab. It felt as if the tip of a black saber had broken off in her heart. Zelma keeled over, writhing on the slab. Desperately, she tried to find a position to escape the jabbing shard.

"Get Gung-Gung!" said Lili. She turned and pounded up the basement stairs.

You do that, thought Zelma, although she had a sinking feeling about what ailed her. That dagger tip was a shard of Gracie embedded in Zelma's heart. Now the wound was starting to fester, sending poisoned tentacles of the ghost to every part of her body. Already she had seized hold of Zelma's tongue.

What next? Would the jagged remnant of Gracie eventually blacken Zelma's soul, turning her as mean-spirited as the ghost?

It was a thought that made Zelma shiver from head to toe.

Lili returned with Mr. Wong.

At first Zelma curled in on herself, not so much to elude the jabbing shard. She feared Mr. Wong's wrath now that he knew of her theft of his spell and its shameful aftermath.

But, as always, Mr. Wong surprised Zelma. He stood calmly over her, his owlish eyes unblinking. You'd have thought he had heard news no more troubling than a cloudy forecast.

Gently, as if uncrumpling a wad of paper, Mr. Wong spread Zelma out face up on the slab. Then he pressed an apricot of an ear against her heart. His touch was as light as the feet of a butterfly.

Zelma listened with Mr. Wong to the beating of her own heart. It sounded the same as always: pounding a little harder than really necessary.

Awaiting Mr. Wong's prognosis, Zelma made a vow. She would suffer any punishment: Scrub the 88 Mart on hands and knees with a toothbrush. Wear Miss Gracious' pink

sweater. Cook momma a homemade dinner every night. If only Mr. Wong would uproot the ghost taking hold of Zelma's soul.

He was her only hope. Zelma could tell by the worried look on Lili's face that she thought so, too.

Mr. Wong raised his head and sighed.

"What, Gung-Gung?" asked Lili.

"Heart divided against itself."

"Sound bad."

Mr. Wong nodded gravely. "Like two headed turtle. Can only go in one direction." He drew a circle in the air.

"Two-headed turtle? Jee-crawling-hova."

Mr. Wong raised an eyebrow.

"Talk like ghost," explained Lili.

"Ah," said Mr. Wong, as if this made perfect sense.

Lili seized Mr. Wong's elbow. Hopefully, she asked, "Gung-Gung, you fix xiao taiyang?"

"Mr. Wong cannot fix," he said, waving a wrinkled hand dismissively.

"Now wait a red-hot minute," snapped Zelma.

"So sorry, but cannot."

The shard inside Zelma's heart jittered as if snickering.

Zelma struggled up on an elbow and pleaded. "I'll do anything. Snort bat dung. Swaller live beetles."

"Eat hundred beetles. Make no difference."

"You mean xiao taiyang talk like Gracie forever?" said Lili.

Zelma would rather swallow her tongue.

"Didn't say she talk like ghost forever," corrected Mr. Wong.

"Then Jee-crawling-hova, what air you a sayin'?"

"Just said Mr. Wong couldn't fix."

"Then how xiao taiyang get better?" Even Lili sounded exasperated with her Third Uncle.

Mr. Wong turned to gaze at Zelma as if waiting for her to answer Lili's question.

## Chapter 66

# A Blue riddle

“There’s no curing them not fit to be well.”

Zelma pondered Gamby’s adage once more, this time while perched atop Faircloth Manor. Legs entwined in the cupola’s railing, she balanced the opened red book on the banister. Her index finger tapped the blue scrawl of a line as if this might release its hidden meaning.

She and Lili had discovered the adage a week ago. Or should she say, the adage had discovered them?

Forsaken by Mr. Wong, the girls had turned to the red book as a last resort. To Zelma it had proven a dead end. She couldn’t find a word, in neither recipes nor musings, about how to dislodge a shard of a ghost lodged in one’s heart.

Lili thought otherwise. She looved the red book. It had “chuming.” Which, Lili translated, meant “inside knowing things.” She called the red book Zelma’s I Ching.

The I Ching, Zelma learned, was an ancient book of Chinese proverbs. She took a gander at Lili’s copy of one. Lili was right. The I Ching was just like the red book. Both were full of sayings that sounded wise, sure enough. But who in the devil could tell what they meant? Zelma couldn’t, that’s for sure.

Not so Lili. To her every line of the red book was rich in meaning and portent. And it was especially meaningful that, every time the girls consulted the book, it opened to the passage about “not fit to be well.”

“See?” Lili declared, “book show how to chase off Gracie.”

“How you figure?” said Zelma, scratching her head as she studied the line so rich in meaning to Lili.

Lili looked at Zelma as if she were dumber than a barrel of hair. “Gung-Gung, he treat every customer?”

Zelma pondered the question. “Hell, no,” she finally answered. With Mr. Wong, you had to be worthy of fixing. Which meant fessing up to how you’d dug the hole you were a standing in. Zelma bowed her head. “I reckon I got a heap to answer for.”

“Hao, hao,” seconded Lili.

Zelma re-read the prophetic line in the red book. She clutched her heart and looked up at Lili. “But, if’n I square things with Miss Gracious and all, this here haint will skedaddle?”

Lili smiled.

“Well, slap me silly,” Zelma declared. “I’ll be the sorriest, most ding-busted apologetic girl this side of the Chattahoochee.”

Which is why Zelma straddled the cupola on this breezy April afternoon. She tinkled in the wind, adorned with every pendant, earring and bracelet that Miss Gracious had given her. For good measure, she’d even thrown on the fuzzy pink cardigan over her black blouse.

Beneath her Zelma heard grumbling. She looked down to see the beat-up Mercedes park in front of the manor.

Zelma hopped off her railing perch. Down the cupola ladder she scurried. She stowed away Gamby’s book and then jingled down through the manor like a welcoming chime.

At the top of the foyer staircase she stopped. There in the front doorway stood Ambrose and Ashley. They looked dapper in matching blue sport coats, chinos and loafers.

Hand in hand, feet glued to the jamb, they eyed the foyer as if entering the haunted house at the annual Halloween Fest in the Square. Zelma couldn’t blame them for being cautious. The last time the twins were here Sissy had chased after them with a rusted poker.

In fact, it was a near miracle they were here at all. It had taken Zelma weeks to persuade the Faircloths to return home. Shoot, at first Miss Gracious wouldn’t even take Zelma’s phone calls.

So Zelma had momma call instead. When Miss Gracious answered, momma handed the phone to Zelma. There was a stony silence on the other end of the line, and Zelma sensed Miss Gracious was about to hang up. She blurted into the phone, “I’d be rotten glad of it if’n y’all come on home.”

“Zelma...is that you?” said an astonished Miss Gracious.

“Yessum.”

“Devil’s got her tongue,” quipped momma, who stood behind her daughter.

Miss Gracious agreed to come home, but not so much because of assurances that her long last relative had been chased off. She was concerned that Zelma had taken a big turn for the worse in her absence. “Clearly, the girl needs help,” declared Miss Gracious. Momma couldn’t have agreed more.

Now Zelma jingled down the foyer staircase to welcome the twins.

“Is she really gone?” asked Ambrose, his eyes darting about the foyer.

“Shoot, yeah,” said Zelma, greeting the twins. “I ain’t a putting a hoot on y’all.”

Ashley’s brow wrinkled. “How come you talk so funny?”

“I swallered a ghost.”

“Get out!” the twins answered in unison, eyes wide.

“Here, have a look-see.” Zelma opened her mouth wide.

The twins peered down her gullet.

As they did so Zelma attacked. She jabbed a wriggling finger into each of their armpits. They roared in giggling protest.

Then the twins counterattacked. They knew Zelma's weakness: the inside of her thighs were as sensitive as a frog’s belly. Soon the three of them were collapsed onto the floor in a rollicking, giggling heap.

“Boys, boys – not in your good clothes.”

Zelma glanced up to see momma coming through the doorway. Under each arm she carried two valises. Although her brow was drenched in sweat, momma smiled. It was the first time she’d done so since the Faircloths had fled.

Miss Gracious trailed in behind momma. She stopped in the doorway at the sight of the writhing mass of arms and legs in the middle of the foyer.

The returning Queen of Faircloth frowned, but not at her squirming offspring. Zelma was the target of her displeasure. She was, by then, a tangle of hair and jewelry, panting and teary with laughter.

“Really, Zelma,” said Miss Gracious. “What have you done to yourself?”

Zelma released the twins. They scampered up the stairs toward their room, chortling all the way. The manor creaked as if it were tickled slap to death at their return.

Rising up on her elbows, Zelma looked down at herself. "Shoot, I think this here sweater kinder goes with black." She laid a pink arm across her saw-toothed skirt.

Miss Gracious arched an eyebrow. "You know what you need?"

"A good spanking?" offered momma.

"I'll leave that to your discretion," said Miss Gracious, winking at momma. "As for myself, I had something else in mind."

"Like what?" Zelma asked suspiciously.

"A lesson in accessorizing," Miss Gracious said triumphantly.

"Accessorizing?" momma pronounced the word hopefully, as if it might be some modern form of tar and feathering.

To Zelma it was. All the same she smiled encouragingly, a black swan awaiting a pink feathering.

Maintaining her smile wasn't easy. That mean-spirited shard of Gracie kept jabbing Zelma in the heart.

The only good thing was that the jabbing had slowly but steadily been softening over the past week. The blows were now less jagged, more akin to a poke from an elbow, as if trying to draw her attention.

But to what?

## Chapter 67

# Drunk on Easter chicken

It was an Easter feast that would have made momma proud. Indeed, she'd lent Zelma her favorite cleaver. It was as heavy as a battleaxe and Zelma wielded it now to dismember two dozen chickens. That shard in her heart was having a high old time, elbowing Zelma with each swing of the cleaver.

Bunky and Lili were having a grand time, too. They worked with Zelma in the kitchen of the First Baptist homeless shelter. Bunky gathered up the butchered chicken and dumped it into a bubbling vat of bourbon flavored BBQ sauce.

As for Lili, she stood with her face buried in the red book of blue magic, which lay open on a stainless steel countertop.

"What is that," teased Bunky, "Zelma's book of black magic?"

Lost in concentration, her finger running along the red book's blue scrawl, Lili didn't answer. Suddenly she looked up and shouted, "Oyo!"

"How what?" said Bunky.

Lili reached into a pocket of her jeans and withdrew a handful of iridescent green wings. "Just as thought." She marched over to a pot of boiling BBQ sauce and crumpled in the green wings.

"Jesus, Lili!" Bunky grabbed up the heavy pot and hauled it over to the sink.

"What doing?" shrieked Lili.

"What am I doing? I'm preventing you from poisoning us all."

"Not poison. Sweeten with best medicine. Wing of dung beetles."

Zelma dropped her cleaver and raced over to the sink. She caught the lip of spilling pot and raised it back up. "Ye god, such little faith," she scolded Bunky. She knew that dung beetle wings could warm the coldest heart. Zelma grabbed Bunky's hand and dipped his index finger into the sauce and then thrust it into his mouth.

Instantly Bunky smiled as if bewitched with a love spell.

Zelma dipped in her own finger. "Shoo-ee," she yodeled. The sauce was fine. Mighty fine. But alas its magic failed to melt the icy shard lodged in Zelma's own heart.

Still, Zelma wasn't abandoning the plan she'd cooked up. The Easter feast had been her idea. It was bait, so to speak, to catch a fish more elusive than Bubba Largemouth.

Zelma had persuaded Miss Gracious to gussy up at least part of Faircloth Manor as a faux Tara. Mr. Odom, according to Bunky, had pulled out a fistful of grey chest hairs when he'd heard the news.

If only he'd known the truth. It was a lot harder than Zelma had ever figured to open Faircloth Manor to tourists. The place was falling down. What Miss Gracious needed most of all was a good handyman, someone who could replace a wobbly floorboard or jumpstart the furnace.

Zelma had just the handyman in mind, and she knew he couldn't resist good BBQ.

Men had come as far away as Red Top Mountain, a good 40 miles north of Peachwood, to get themselves a helping of Bunky's famous drunken chicken. Somewhere in that grungy sea had to be a gray kepi.

Zelma and Lili lugged pots of rice and chicken out to a long folding table. Men waiting with Styrofoam plates rushed them. The girls doled out drunken chicken as fast as they could ladle.

In no time they emptied first one pot, then another and another. Through it all Zelma saw not a single forage cap.

Truth was, she was relieved. All day long Zelma had dreaded looking up into the faces of the men she served. What if one of them had been daddy, all grubby, smelly and unshaven? She wouldn't have been surprised if she ladled the sauce right into his face.

It had been nine months since daddy had left and Zelma had seen no more of him than a glimpse out of the corner of her eye. Why, she'd seen more of her shadow on a cloudy day.

The shard didn't take kindly to this line of thinking. It started elbowing Zelma something awful, as if trying to get her attention. "Jee-crawling-hova, now what?" she cried, looking up.

Zelma's ladle dropped into the pot with a clang, making Lili jumped back with a start. As in a trance, Zelma edged out from behind the serving table and began inching down the rows of tables.

Ahead a grey forage cap hunkered down over a Styrofoam plate.

At first the man didn't look up at the girl suddenly at his side. He was too intent on chasing a final slippery grain of rice around his Styrofoam plate. At last he cornered the grain and wolfed it down.

The man dropped his plastic fork in surrender. He leaned back in his chair, face up, and sighed deeply.

Zelma stared hard into his face. With its salt and pepper stubble, scabby cheeks and chapped lips, it looked as she imagined her father would after a year on the streets. But it was just that, her imagination.

This man bore no more resemblance to her daddy than Zelma did to the Wicked Witch of the West, or a Chinese medicine woman. Not even the kepi was the same. It was some cheap toy cap a boy might wear playing a reb soldier.

Zelma plopped down in the empty chair next to the man. Anger and dread drained out of her as if she'd peed on the floor.

If this man weren't her daddy than her daddy was truly gone. Zelma had spent the past nine months chasing a something that never was, her own Tara, a cause lost even before it had begun.

The sorry sack of rags seated next to her might have been a stranger but Zelma felt a powerful urge to hug him. The shard in her heart nudged her on.

Zelma threw her arms around the man. He wasn't very huggable. His layers of clothing gave him the girth of a grizzly and the fur of a billy goat. The man's frayed wool shirt scratched Zelma's cheek. Gracie finally let go of her tongue and Zelma began to weep.

Her body shook with great heaving sobs. Nine months worth of tears soaked the wool shirt. It began to stink like the dumpster behind the shelter.

As for the man, he paid no mind to Zelma. He stared up at the ceiling as if her tears were just another drenching rain he had to endure.

There was still a jabbing in Zelma's heart, but now it felt more like the soft patter of a farmer's rain. Would it always be with her? If so, Zelma figured, she could live with it.

Zelma felt a tug. It was neither mean nor urgent, but insistent all the same. She unburied her face from the man's wool shirt. Lili knelt beside Zelma, gently trying to pry her free of the man. She carried the red book under her other arm.

That dang book. It sure had a sense of timing. The thing was forever popping up at the telling moments of Zelma's life. Or was it the other way around, the book acting as a red beacon guiding Zelma through a tortuous journey? Dang if she could tell for sure, but Zelma had her suspicions.

Despite Lili's insistent tugging, Zelma resisted letting go of the man. But her fingers, exhausted from ladling sauce, couldn't hang onto his thick layers of wool clothing. She peeled away from the man and fell into Lili's gentle embrace – but only for a moment.

Zelma pushed Lili away as she staggered to her feet. At first Zelma wobbled something awful, but it passed. When she could stand on her own Zelma held out a hand to Lili. Hand in hand, the girls walked back toward the kitchen.

"I hear tell there's some mighty fine BBQ in these here parts," said Lili. "What say we get us some?"

Zelma stopped in her tracks and gave her friend a look of mock surprise. "Why Miss Lili, I do declare. If'n you ain't becoming a right Southern lady."

Lili curtsied as if Zelma had honored her with a dance at the cotillion.

Hooking an arm through Lili's, Zelma continued walking toward the kitchen. "I do believe I'd be right honored to share some BBQ with you, Miss Lili. Right honored."