



Lydia remembered being only six years old when she first began wondering if her mama was crazy, though it was the summer of her thirteenth birthday before she was able to lay the question to rest and only then because Francine Hayes' own father came right out and admitted, 'Yep, reckon your mama's a mite strange, all right.'

*Well, Lydia thought, that settles that.*

'But she weren't always that way,' Grandpa added. 'Up till the tornado, Francine acted same as most folks.'

Lydia asked what tornado he was talking about.

He told her 'the one that hit in the spring of '65,' meaning she'd been barely two at the time and didn't remember the tornado at all, so she asked him to tell her about it, to which he replied, 'Francine don't much cotton to you knowing.'

'Why?' she asked, thinking it a pretty good question.

'Has her reasons.'

Not wanting to get into the subject of her mama's reasoning ability, which was sorely lacking, Lydia didn't even bother to ask why the woman had wanted something like a little old tornado kept from her daughter, especially since they lived in Perry, Georgia, located in what folks referred to as 'Tornado Alley,' and Lydia felt, even at thirteen, she'd probably seen more tornadoes than most folks ever saw in a lifetime.

'But,' her grandpa then said, 'I figure you're old enough to know. Besides, it might make you a bit more tolerant of your mama.'

Though she seriously doubted this, Lydia said she was willing to listen, and that's when he proceeded to relate a story that turned out to be a rather amazing tale that began on a sultry April afternoon when a particularly violent storm front came marching in from the west, a setting Lydia had no difficulty imagining—the dark ominous clouds topping the horizon, roiling and churning, their angry faces white hot with lightning, and their stomachs pregnant with foreboding.

'Francine, she was out in the barn trying to milk the cows before the storms hit. I say *trying* 'cause them cows wasn't much in the mood to cooperate none. They was too blame scared. Course, animals, they always know when the weather's gonna get bad.'

Lydia pictured the woman trying to convince a bunch of overwrought cows to stand still and let her pull on their tits, an image that caused her to think maybe Francine Hayes hadn't been exactly right in the head even before the damn tornado.

'Anyways, she give up, seeing she could tell the weather was gonna do something, and took off lickity split for the house, but when she got there, your daddy weren't nowhere to be seen, so she figured he was still down in the field plowing.'

Lydia then wondered just how bright her daddy had been. Couldn't have been too bright, out plowing with thunderstorms darkening the skies.

Like he'd read her mind, her grandpa said, 'You gotta understand, them clouds come in real sudden like, took everybody plumb by surprise.' Pausing, he scratched his beard as if pondering what had transpired next. 'Way I recollect it, your mama, she up and decided to run on down and see what was keeping Roy.'

Lydia had no memories of Roy Hayes. He'd died when she was just a toddler, having succumbed to what her mama said was 'one of them diseases of the brain.' And though sometimes she'd sneak into her mama's bedroom and glance through the now-faded photographs kept in a tin box in the closet Francine once had shared with the man, looking at those pictures was like looking at snapshots of some stranger—this tall, dark-haired man squinting into the sun, his tanned face creased in a smile that didn't reach his eyes and his head cocked to one side like he was contemplating something that had nothing to do with having his picture taken there in the Georgia heat.

Taking his pipe and tobacco pouch from the pocket of his overalls, her grandpa began filling the bowl with Prince Albert. 'Tornado hit right 'bout then,' he said. 'I was driving in from town and I seen it. Seen it slide down outta them clouds like a giant black snake and start hissing and coiling across the fields. Course I didn't know your mama and daddy was out there. Figured they'd done took you and went to hide in the root cellar.'

'And just where was I?' Lydia asked, imagining herself trapped in the playpen with a tornado boiling down on the house.

'You was with Effie. Francine had brung you over for a little visit. Think she was scrubbing floors that day and wanted you outta the way. Or maybe she was baking.' He narrowed his eyes, concentrating, and then admitted, 'Can't rightly recollect why you was there.'

Lydia wasn't too concerned as long as Francine hadn't run off across the field, leaving her only child there in the house alone.

'Anyways, Effie, she'd done took you and went to the cellar. Reckon she figured Francine and Roy, they'd be joining her.' Saying this, he retrieved a box of matches from his pocket, struck a match, and held it to the bowl of the pipe, his cheeks going in and out like a bellows. Finally, the smoke rising to encircle his head, he asked, 'Now, where was I?'

'The tornado was coming and mama was out looking for daddy.'

'Yep, that's right. That tornado was coming. Come roaring outta them woods to the west of where your daddy was plowing. Snapped off a plumb acre of pines like they was so many toothpicks.'

Sighing in exasperation, Lydia thought how she didn't care how many stupid pines it had snapped off.

'Then it made a bee line for the house.'

'Where was Mama?'

'She was somewhere between the house and the field.'

'And Daddy?'

'Roy was still in the field.'

Lydia imagined them seeing one another and frantically waving their arms, Francine motioning for Roy to come on and get in the root cellar and Roy motioning for her to turn around, run for it herself, and not wait for him.

'Then all hell broke loose. That funnel cloud come across the field, sucking up everything in its path, must've sucked up a good two tons of dirt.' He took the pipe from his mouth and glanced at it. 'And while the blamed thing was busy sucking up stuff, it went and sucked up your mama.'

Lydia rocked back in the chair. 'What?' She tried to visualize Francine Hayes being swept up into a whirling dervish of dirt and debris. 'You sure?'

'Sure, I'm sure. Sucked her up like she weren't nothing but a rag doll.'

'That tornado sucked up my mama?'

'That's what I said, ain't it.' He squinted at her through the smoke. 'Lord's my witness. It sucked her right up.'

'It hurt her any?' Lydia asked, concluding he was telling the truth or he'd never have brought the Lord into it.

'That's what's so downright amazing. Francine didn't have but a few little scratches. Course she was wet as a drowned rat.'

'How'd she get down?'

'Tornado set her down just as pretty as you please, right in Harold Wilkin's front yard 'fore it tore on across the road and knocked Old Man Terry's barn into pieces fit for nothing but kindling.'

'She say what it was like up there?' Lydia suspected it must have been something to see and couldn't help but wonder why her mama had never bothered to tell her about it. Looked like the woman would want her own daughter to know she'd been sucked up by a tornado.

'Yep, told us all 'bout it after the shock wore off.'

'What'd she say?'

'Says she seen a mule.'

‘A mule?’

‘Yep, Avery Gill’s old gray mule. Francine said that mule’s eyes were rolled back in its head, and it was kicking and carrying on something fierce.’

‘What happened to it?’

‘Got set down too. Right beside the road at the Perry city limits. Beat anything I ever seen.’

‘Was it dead?’

‘Nope, but it weren’t the same. Kinda touched in head, so Avery, he put it outta its misery.’

‘What about Daddy? Was he sucked up?’

‘Yep, sucked him right outta that field.’

‘So he saw the mule too?’

‘Don’t rightly know.’ Saying this, her grandpa didn’t look at her but at his pipe. ‘Never did find him.’

Lydia didn’t much care for where this story was going. ‘You mean?’

‘Yep,’ Grandpa said, ‘Roy Hayes died in that storm.’

‘But mama said . . .’

‘I know what your mama told you, but like I said, I reckon you’re old enough to hear the truth.’

‘He didn’t have no disease of the brain?’ Lydia asked.

‘Nah, Francine made that up.’

‘Why?’

‘Reckon she thought it sounded a mite better.’ Frowning, he turned the pipe back and forth in his hand. ‘Can’t say I blame her none. Be kinda hard to tell a young’un her daddy got tote off by a funnel cloud.’

Lydia thought of all the years she had wasted imagining Roy Hayes writhing around, foaming at the mouth, and dying from some insidious tumor or such, and how she was now going to have to change that image to one of him sailing through the air and being unceremoniously belched out of a tornado, maybe in a swamp near Valdosta, where the alligators had eaten his rotting corpse.

‘Anyways,’ Grandpa said, ‘it was hard on Francine. She was right fond of the man. Plumb pitiful she was. Moping around, not eating. Course, it was a bad way to lose a husband.’

Lydia thought it was a hell of a way to lose a daddy.

‘Then again, your mama pulled through, but I reckon it was what else she seen up there give her the strength to go on.’

‘She saw something else?’ Lydia asked, not much caring, given she was pretty much caught up in the image of Roy Hayes being torn apart by alligators.

He cleared his throat then cleared it again.

‘Well?’ Lydia prompted. ‘What’d she see?’

‘Well, what she seen was . . .’

‘Was what?’

Still not looking at her, he said, ‘Your mama, she seen Jesus.’

‘Jesus?’ If it was hard to picture her mama and a mule riding in a tornado, Lydia knew it was going to be twice as difficult to picture the Lord, white robe flapping around his legs, long hair and beard whipping in the wind, as a tornado carried him along over Perry, Georgia.

‘Yep, Francine seen the Lord all right.’

‘What was He doing? Riding the mule?’

‘Nope, didn’t say nothing bout Jesus being on no mule.’

‘So what was He doing?’

‘Says He was just floating there beside her, and when she looked over at Him, the Lord, He raised His hand and beckoned.’

‘Beckoned?’

‘Yeah, kinda like this.’ Shifting the pipe to his left hand, her grandpa lifted his right and demonstrated how the Lord had beckoned to Francine Hayes. ‘Your mama, she says He was telling her she was gonna live through that tornado cause He had work for her here on earth.’

Lydia was still straining to imagine the Lord being tossed about in a funnel cloud and found herself wondering if He’d had on jockey shorts.

‘Course, she didn’t know at the time she was gonna be doing His work as a widow woman. But I reckon, it’s like the Good Book says--the Lord giveth and He taketh away.’

After hearing her grandpa’s account, Lydia did try, at least for a few days, to be more tolerant of her mama’s behavior, but then she decided, though her grandpa had been trying to help, her knowing what had happened didn’t make living with the woman any easier, and in some ways made it even more difficult since knowing left no doubt that, indeed, the woman was crazy, given no sane person was going to go around claiming the Lord had beckoned to her in a

tornado or making up stories about her husband's dying from some fictitious disease of the brain. She also considered telling Francine she now knew the truth about Roy Hayes as well as about her seeing the Lord in a funnel cloud over Perry but concluded she wouldn't bother, given telling wouldn't change anything. Roy Hayes would still be just as dead and Francine Hayes just as crazy as ever.

Then again, considering her doubts had been erased, Lydia thought she bore up pretty well, probably because she continued to ignore Francine and let her do whatever it was she thought Jesus was leading her to do. And she could have kept right on ignoring her had Francine not set her mind on something that would affect Lydia personally.

On a day toward the end of August, a day so hot the Redbone hounds lay in the shade of the porch and didn't even bother to twitch when their fleas worked up enough energy to take an occasional half-hearted bite, Lydia was sitting at the kitchen table and glancing through a movie magazine she'd borrowed from her friend, Janice, when Francine, who was washing dishes at the time, announced, 'You know it's bout time you made things right with the Lord.'

Nodding, Lydia mumbled, 'Uh huh,' which was her usual response whenever her mama got to talking about religion.

'Yes ma'am,' Francine said. 'You're thirteen now. Got to step out for Jesus. Thirteen's the age of accountability.'

Finally tuning her in, Lydia looked up from the magazine and yelled, 'What'd you say?' since her mama was now scrubbing a skillet under the running water and making a racket.

'Said you gotta step out for Jesus.'

'The hell I will,' Lydia said, unfortunately just as her mama cut off the water so that her words were loud and clear, and before she could react, Francine wheeled, slapping her with the wet dishrag.

'What I done told you about using such language?' she said.

Lydia jumped from the chair and darted to the other side of the table.

'Ought to wash your mouth out with soap,' Francine added, 'talking like that.'

'Hell ain't no bad word. It's right there in the Bible.'

'The way it's used in the Good Book and the way you're using it are two different things.'

Not being much in the mood to argue with the woman, Lydia wiped her face on the hem of her shirt, pulled out another chair, and picked up the gray tom cat Francine had named Moses because she'd found it one stormy night down near the river when she'd been walking home from the Wednesday night prayer meeting at Covenant Baptist Church.

'Poor thing,' she'd told Lydia. 'You should've seen him, all huddled there under them cattails. Just like Moses in the bulrushes.'

Lydia had seen any comparison between a mangy cat and the prophet Moses as being one mighty big stretch of the imagination.

Now turning back to the sink, Francine informed her, 'I been thinking.'

Sitting down, Lydia rubbed the cat's ears and tried to ignore the implications of that statement.

'Preacher Avery, he's gonna be baptizing folks next month on the fifteenth. Got several lined up, all of 'em just hankering to start doing the Lord's work. Like Myrtice Taylor. You know her. Works at the Feed and Grain.'

Moses beginning to purr in her lap, Lydia thought how she didn't know the woman from a hole in the ground.

'Well, Myrtice, she's more than ready. Told me, she did, just last Sunday. Francine, she said, I just feel like I'm on fire for Jesus. Course, her husband, that no-account heathen, he's . . .'

Now watching the fleas scurry for cover on the cat's scabby head, Lydia started wondering what Janice was doing Saturday. Maybe she'd want to sneak out and catch a movie, then hitch a ride over to the new shopping plaza in Perry, take a look around.

'So,' Francine said, 'I figured you ought to let the preacher know you wanna be included.'

Lydia dumped Moses in the floor. 'What'd you say?'

'You heard me. I said, you ought to tell him you want—'

'But I don't want any such thing.'

Again hoisting the dishrag, Francine said, 'Don't you dare talk like that. If you died tomorrow, you'd go to hell. That what you want?'

Lydia suspected hell was right there in that house on White Mill Road where she lived with Francine Hayes.

'Everybody's got to accept Jesus once they're old enough to be held accountable for their sins,' Francine said. 'Thirteen is the cut-off point.'

'Says who?'

'Says the Bible.'

'I ain't never seen nothing where it says thirteen.'

'Maybe it don't say thirteen exactly, but it says when a person is old enough to know the consequences of their sin and accept the Lord as their savior, they got to do it or they're going to hell.'

Figuring it wasn't going to get her anyplace to try reasoning with the woman, given she wasn't exactly the most reasonable person in the world, Lydia concluded she'd be better off not even trying, and snatching the magazine from the table, she headed toward her room.

'You come back here,' Francine yelled. 'We gotta talk about this.'

'Ain't nothing to talk about. It ain't gonna do me no good to go get myself baptized if it's something you want me to do and my heart ain't in it.' Lydia figured even Francine, crazy as she was, would have to admit the logic of this, and as she closed the door to her room, she also figured she was closing the door on the subject, so to speak, but when she awakened the next morning, she realized she had underestimated Francine Hayes.

'What on earth are you doing?' Lydia screamed, slinging back the covers and jumping from the bed. The last thing she wanted to wake up to was the sight of her mama standing at the foot of the bed with her uncombed red hair sticking out all over the place. Looked like a witch or something.

'I was praying over you,' Francine said and headed toward the door.

'Praying?' Grabbing her bathrobe off the chair, Lydia ran after her. 'I don't need nobody praying over me.'

'Everybody needs praying over. And the Lord, he says for us to pray without ceasing. Says right there in Matthew 21, 'whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.'

Lydia sniffed her opinion and went to the cabinet, where she sorted through the bowls, looking for one that was reasonably clean.

'He also tells us to pray one for the other,' Francine added. 'So that's what I'm doing. I'm praying for you.'

Taking a box of cornflakes from the cabinet and the milk from the refrigerator, Lydia sat down at the table and tried to ignore her mama, but Francine pulled out a chair, also sat down, and said, 'And I figure if I pray hard enough and long enough, you're gonna see the error of your ways.'

'The error of what ways?' Lydia asked and filled the bowl.

'You know what ways,' Francine said, propped her elbows on the table and watched Lydia while she ate her cereal and tried to pretend she wasn't sitting at the table with a crazy woman.

By the next weekend, Lydia had conditioned herself to go to bed and not give another thought to those early morning prayer vigils; and when she opened her eyes Sunday morning, smelling the lingering odor of the Lifebuoy soap Francine used, she lay under the covers, listening to the sounds from the other room as her mama got ready for church, and thought how it was going to be a cold day in hell before she'd let Preacher Avery dunk her in the muddy waters of Dog River. Let the woman pray till the cows came home. It wasn't going to change a thing. Not now. Not ever.

Waiting until she heard the screened door slap shut and knew Francine had left for church, Lydia went to the kitchen, turned on the radio, and poured herself a cup of coffee, something her mama thought she was too young to drink, but she disagreed, as was usually the case with anything her mama thought.

Propping her bare feet in a chair, she sipped her coffee, grimaced at the bitter taste, and heard the deejay say, 'Here it is, boys and girls, one of your favorites to get the morning started. B.J. Thomas singing 'He Don't Love You Like I Love You.'" Then, as the song began, Lydia glanced out the window, seeing an unfamiliar black car turn in from White Mill Road and head up their driveway, its arrival prompting the Redbones to crawl out from under the porch and break into a crescendo of long, mournful bays.

Lydia remained seated, wondering who would be coming by on a Sunday morning, as the car straddled the ruts and inched its way toward the house, and the dogs, their red coats glistening in the sun, ran down the drive to escort the visitor, their deep-throated barks ricocheting through the heavy stillness of the morning.

A black Chevrolet, the car's metallic finish was coated with a fine layer of Georgia red dust, and as it pulled to a stop beside the Chinaberry tree, she decided the driver must be someone looking for directions or maybe one of their relatives who'd just bought a new vehicle from Floyd's Used Cars and Trucks on the outskirts of Perry. Standing and tightening the belt of her robe, she watched as a man stepped out, swinging the car door wide so that it clipped the head of the female hound and she yipped, darting to one side.

Heading for the screened door, Lydia latched it. She sure wasn't about to let a stranger in the house, and she didn't know this man from Adam's house cat. Dressed in jeans and a black shirt, his dark hair pulled back in a pony tail, he certainly wasn't anyone she'd ever seen around Perry. Looked like a hippy, that's what. 'What you want?' she yelled. He better have a good reason for being there or she was going straight to the telephone and call the police.

He stopped, raising one hand to shield his eyes. 'Lydia? That you?'

'How you know my name?' She asked, thinking it a good question to ask, given she sure didn't know his.

'Don't you recognize me?' He spread his arms and turned in a slow circle so she could get a good look.

She wondered if he was drunk, standing there in her yard, spinning around like a top. 'Am I supposed to recognize you?' she asked.

'Now Lydia,' he said. 'I'm hurt.'

Squinting, she decided there was something vaguely familiar about the man, like she *should* know him but just couldn't put a name with the face.

Beginning to walk toward the porch again, he said, 'It's me.'

'And just who is *me*?'

Then he smiled, the long sun-tanned planes of his face crinkling, and Lydia knew that smile, had seen it countless times in those old photographs her mama kept stashed away; and seeing it, she swallowed around the sudden tightness in her throat as he climbed the back steps to the porch, walking up them just as natural as you please, like he hadn't been dead for any eleven years but had just gone to town for a loaf of bread.

'Girl,' he said, 'I'm your daddy, Roy Hayes.'

Swallowing again, she replied, 'My daddy's dead,' knowing for her it was true and his walking onto her porch and announcing otherwise would never change a thing.

He laughed and said, 'Well, I got news for you. I'm still alive and kicking,' as though he were relating something of no more consequence than the state of the weather. 'Been out in Las Vegas. Got myself a band. Call ourselves The Four Horsemen. Been making the rounds. Even cut—'

'Las Vegas?' She said. 'The Four Horsemen?'

'You know,' he said, the smile still creasing his face. 'Like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.'

'If you say so.' Personally, she thought he was full of crap.

Then glancing at his cowboy boots as though checking the shine, he asked, 'Where's you mama?'

'At church.'

'At church? Francine?'

'That's what I said, ain't it?'

He leaned forward, his face close to the screen. 'You going to make me stand out here all day?'

'Might,' Lydia said, not being much inclined to let a corpse come strutting into her house.

Hooking his hands in his belt, he rocked back on his heels. 'Have to admit, you've grown up. How old are you now? Fourteen?'

'No, I ain't fourteen,' she said. The man would know how old his own daughter was if he'd been around to celebrate her birthdays, instead of . . . She glared at him. 'Wait a minute. How'd you get to Las Vegas? That where that tornado dropped you?'

'Tornado? What tornado?'

'The one that sucked up you, mama, and Mr. Gill's gray mule.'

'Mule?' His smile broadened. 'Girl, what are you talking about?'

'You know, back in '65. When that tornado tore through and carried you off. Dumped you somewhere and—'

'Wait a minute. Is that what your mama told you? That—'

'Well, ain't it what happened?'

'Heck, no. Your mama knew I was going to Las Vegas.' He swept a hand out, the gesture somehow taking in the rundown house, the kudzu-choked fields, and even the town of Perry that lay somewhere to the east. 'What kinda life is this? I was never cut out to be a farmer. Had music flowing through my veins. Had dreams—'

'So you just up and left me and Francine cause you had dreams?'

Rolling his shoulders, the movement rippling the shirt across his back, he said, 'Look, I wrote, even tried to call. Francine, she never wrote back and wouldn't talk to me. I finally just gave up.' He shrugged again. 'Anyway, we got divorced back in '67.'

'Divorced?' Lydia stepped back from the door.

'Yeah, Francine didn't want it, but I did. Thought it best for both of us. Was a free man in no time.'

Lydia said, 'So you don't know 'bout the tornado of '65? Bout what happened?'

'You mean the one that came through the day I left?' Still smiling, he again rocked on his heels. 'Yeah, I heard about it. Guess I took it as a sign.'

'What kinda damn sign?'

'You know, the end of my old way of life.' He laughed like he found this amusing.

Lydia decided she didn't find it amusing at all.

'So, when's your mama coming home?' he asked.

'Not till late.' Lydia also decided that her mama didn't need to see Roy Hayes.

'Thought you said she's gone to church.'

'Has,' Lydia admitted, 'but she's got a date after the meeting.'

'A date?'

'Yeah, a date.'

'With who?'

'With her boyfriend.'

'Boyfriend?'

'Yeah, B.J.' This was the first name that came to Lydia, given B.J. Thomas's song had just finished playing on the radio. 'They're getting married.'

'Married'

'That's what I said, ain't it? Getting married next month at Covenant Baptist Church.'

Roy looked back at his boots. 'Well, I guess Francine needs herself a good, steady man.'

'Well, she's got one. Steady like a rock, that's old B.J. And I don't think he's gonna like it none too much if when they get home from church, Francine's dead husband is standing here on her doorstep, seeing how B.J. ain't got much of a sense of humor.'

The smile finally fading, he asked, 'What're you saying? That I should leave?'

'Reckon so,' Lydia said, knowing it was for the best. Like she'd always heard, let the dead bury the dead.

'Well, I really just came by to see how my little girl had turned out.'

Lydia thought the man sure had gone one hell of a long time before that urge had hit him. 'I ain't no little girl,' she said.

'No, I guess you're not,' he said. 'Guess you've gone and grown up.' He narrowed his eyes. 'You know, you're just like your mama.'

'No, I ain't,' Lydia told him. 'My mama, she's crazy. Me, I got good sense.'

'What's that mean?'

'It means you better get now before Mama and B.J. come home,' Lydia said and closed the door, heading back to her room, where she sat on the edge of the bed and waited to hear the Chevrolet's engine eventually rumble and then fade into silence as Roy Hayes made his way back down the drive and out of her and Francine's life.

*Well*, Lydia thought, *Mama was telling the truth*. The man did have a disease of the brain. Yet thinking this, she realized something else: maybe the woman was crazy, but Francine was still a good mama, and she owed her an awful lot. So maybe it wouldn't hurt too much if she let Preacher Avery dunk her in the river along with those other sinners next month. Getting a little wet was the least she could do for a mama who had been beckoned to by the Lord in a tornado over Perry, Georgia, which, come to think of it, was something to brag about. Hell, she sure didn't know anyone else who could say that about her mama.