

## Chapter One:

*South Mississippi 2009*

### I.

Somehow the idea didn't seem as good now that Lee was on the bus heading down to see his grandfather, Tom. The focused zeal he'd felt originally faded as Picayune got closer and the Greyhound pumped out the smell of diesel drifting noxiously into the last row of seats. All his excitement about seeing his grampa for the first time in three years suddenly evaporated leaving instead a kind of dread, a hesitation not only to deal with the past but also to uncover things perhaps better left buried.

The drone of the engine and nauseating fuel smell left Lee a bit dazed as he remembered how good it felt to be away from his parents for a couple of days but also anxious about his trip. This school year being his second true year in high school, the eleventh grader had gotten off to a rough start as the special half semester elective class on the stock market had been filled when he went to register so he had to take instead the "chick class" on genealogy. All the guys had been having fun ribbing him asking if he was also taking home economics. Lee just wanted to get the commitment over with so he could sign up for something new; first, however, he had to interview his estranged grandfather to gather as much family information as he could to complete the project assignment.

Tom Bradburn was definitely an odd character. For over three years now he'd simply dropped out of sight into the swamps around the Catchahoula River in Pearl River county, Mississippi, a secluded area just across the Louisiana state line fifty miles or so from New Orleans. Lee had always been close to his grampa having grown up hunting in the woods all round Picayune from the Honey Island Swamp to the Wolf River, but since Tom had suddenly withdrawn from contact with everyone in the family, no one really knew how he was making out these days. Feeling hopeful concern, Lee intended to investigate.

Part of the angst he felt inside grew from showing up to see his grampa without actually having talked to him. Tom had no phone or mail, so the only contact anyone had was through his oldest friend, Mike Hamlin, who lived in Picayune but drove out to visit Tom occasionally taking him a little flour and sugar. Tom pretty much lived off the land the rest of the time by hunting and fishing, eating native plants, raising a fruit orchard and growing a sizable garden. Lately Mike had been worried about Tom as well and when Lee contacted him to check on his grandfather, it didn't take much for Mike to agree to help Lee organize the grandson's reunion with his old friend.

Lee and Tom had always had a special relationship. Glenna, Lee's mom, had three kids, the oldest and youngest being girls, so Lee as the only grandson was the one who had spent much of his time on the river with his grampa. From day one these two had known a bond that didn't require much talk but rather just a nice place to be, some fireside on a chilly night, or trotline down the river trying to catch a little supper were the simple places both enjoyed the most. Lee's childhood had been one about girl talk in the house most days, fishing and hunting with his

grampa on many weekends. Harold, Lee's father, drove a big semi-truck and lived on the road most of the time it, so in the early years Lee spent countless hours stomping around the woods with his idol, Tom.

As the bus bounced into the station, Lee could see the A&W root beer sign across the street where his mom had taken him for hamburgers nearly every time they visited her hometown. Hattiesburg was only sixty miles north of Picayune so weekend trips to see her parents tended to be common when her kids were young. Today, all alone back in the place where he'd spent many a summer at his grandmother's house, Lee Mitchell recognized the faded A&W maroonish colored sign but didn't feel the comfortable welcome he'd always known before; this time, things seemed distant, unfamiliar, like a town he'd never visited or a smiling person he couldn't quite remember.

"Good Lord, Lee, look how big you are. My Heavens, you must be six foot tall already. Lordy mercy."

"Hello, Mr. Hamlin. How are you? Yea, I'm pretty much six one these days, and still growing I think." And Lee shook the hand firmly of his granddad's oldest friend, the person who'd stuck close through some pretty tough times over the years though Lee only knew him as the happy jokester always enjoying the companionship of his grampa.

"Tell me, Lee, what are you now, 'bout fifteen or so?"

"Yes sir, I'll be sixteen in a couple of months. That is if grampa don't cook me up for supper."

Mike just laughed at the quip cutting Lee a quick look to see if he looked scared or was just having a little fun. "Oh, don't worry, the old codger is tough as shoe leather but he ain't too mean. He'll try to scare you a bit, but don't you let him buffalo you 'cause most of the piss and vinegar is out of his system these days and he's pretty darn mellow for an old coot. Heck, he's pretty near seventy five, so he ain't got too much to bother about, or shouldn't have anyways. . . Hey, you hungry? We could stop by the A&W if you want?"

"Naw, I'm good. I had a couple ham sandwiches on the bus. I'd rather get on out to the creek."