

Chapter 1

We live in a two-story brick house skirted by a wide porch where four wicker rockers, two on either side of a bright red door, beckon our neighbors to visit. At the south end of the porch a matching swing creaks in the warm breeze. And potted plants, whose contents change with Rose Marie's whims, are scattered everywhere. In the front yard a gnarled magnolia takes an imposing stance, transforming an ordinary lawn into something regal. Small flowerbeds lay beside the steps that lead to the porch. Pansies add color there in the winter, but now a fresh crop of impatiens is the ornament of choice.

This is the home where I brought Rose Marie about a decade ago. This is where we've cobbled out most of our life together, where the two of us—day by day, joy by joy, and chore by chore—have grown together, inseparable, and into one flesh. Let me tell you about Rose Marie: She is breathtaking. Her hair is long and thick and the color of maple syrup. Her eyes are darker than ink; they're lively, alert, and always eager. She's child-like and wise; frugal and generous; honest and kind. To anyone who's in her presence, she is effortless company, and she grows prettier, happier, and more captivating by the day.

Our son, Christopher, joined us two years into the marriage. He's a mess almost all the time. At twelve years old, he's a boy's boy who, at the end of the school day, is jumpier than a thoroughbred in the starting gate—waiting for the bell that will set him free. He is forever enthralled by the wonders a drainage ditch offers, and he explores the banks of the Cherokee River as if he were Lewis or Clark, never failing to find some extraordinary new treasure. Often, he and his friends play baseball or football or some other contest they concoct that demands sliding, falling, or plunging into an

appreciable amount of mud. From the moment he kicked his way into the world, Christopher gave new meaning to Rose Marie's life, and nothing kindles warmth within me like the sight of my wife mothering our son.

Every morning Rose Marie is up before most of the milkmen in town, and before I can form a coherent thought, she's filled the house with smells that make me love home: frying bacon, percolating coffee, simmering grits. I know I'll cherish the memory of these smells when I'm bent and frail. So I savor them now, strongly suspecting that they're the secret ingredients that transform common houses into the homes that families share. Smells of food, or clothing, or of one another are a part of what binds Rose Marie, Christopher, and me together. And when I smell the bacon and coffee, I'm grateful for the new day. For her. For Christopher. For the life we've been given. And for the place where we live.

Like most mornings, I find her on the porch, coffee in hand and resting on the arm of her rocker. A copy of the *Herald* sits on her lap, open to the sports page and to whatever I happened to write the day before. Sounds from the radio drift out from the kitchen; instead of the usual weather report or latest commodity prices, the voice of Nat King Cole serenades the morning. Sipping my own coffee, I lean into the doorframe, shove my free hand into my bathrobe pocket, watch her, and wait for the morning's verdict.

"Well?" I finally ask. She doesn't look up, just continues to read as if she's studying for a college final. Then she begins to nod purposefully.

"This isn't bad, Hall ... in fact, it's good."

I slide into the rocker beside her. "Gee, thanks."

"No kidding," she goes on, "I like this right here:

"In the bottom of the seventh with two outs and with Andrews on second, Taylor waited on a changeup and drove it deep to the right-center gap. Andrews broke on contact, rounded third, and with no hesitation barreled home. The

relay was late and strayed up the first-base line. Andrews was safe standing. The run held and gave the Bobcats a 3-2 win, and a three game lead in the standings.

“Very nice.” She folded the paper in half, stood, and headed for the door, slapping the paper against my shoulder as she passed. “Good work, Hall, I’m proud of you.” Then she reached around me, bent down, and kissed me on the ear. “Chris about ready?”

“Yeah,” I said, tilting my head back to meet hers. “He’ll be down in a second.”

She kissed me again. “Well, breakfast is all set, I’ll get it on the table.”

I sat awhile longer, letting the coffee have its effect, and basking in the approval of the only critic I really care about. Then I headed for the kitchen too. Chris sat before a heap of eggs and bacon, spreading apple jelly onto a biscuit that leaked butter over its sides. I mussed his hair as I passed. “Ready for school, pal?”

“Yep,” he said. “I guess.” He wore a blue-striped pullover shirt that was, for the moment, tucked into faded blue jeans. Clay-stained Keds had been pulled over white socks rimmed by a pair of red stripes. His hair, close-cropped and two shades lighter than his mother’s, fell evenly across his forehead, banglike, just above thin, honey-colored eyebrows.

“Gonna learn anything special today?” I asked.

“Naw,” he answered. Then he looked up and grinned. “Probably just review.”

“Review” was the answer he always gave to end any investigation into his schoolwork. I took the hint and moved on to more interesting matters.

“So what’s up later?” I asked. “You got baseball practice today?”

His cheeks were puffed full of biscuit and he shook his head no. Then he mumbled, “Building a fort.” The response was matter-of-fact, like that of a thirty-year-old man describing an eight-to-five job. “...in the woods,” he continued, “down by the river.”

“Yeah, well, you guys be careful down there. Don’t let any animals eat you, you hear?”

He lifted his eyebrows with waggish gravity. “We all got slingshots,” he

said. "A bear or snake gets close to us ... well, he'll wish he hadn't. And besides, I'd sick Slugger on 'em." At the sound of his name our big brown and gray mutt slapped the table leg with his tail and nosed Chris's hand, prodding him into some overt act of affection.

"What about you?" Rose Marie interrupted. "What's going on with you today, Hall?"

I chased a mouthful of eggs with a gulp of barely warm coffee. "Got an interview with State's baseball coach this morning," I answered, "one he's not looking forward to, I'm afraid. Then I thought I might ride out to South City High, take a look at those kids ... just see what's happening out there."

Rose Marie turned, her eyes rounded wide. "South City? Since when does the *Herald* report on South City High? And since when do you care about what goes on out there?"

"Don't really," I answered, "but they're winning. And William—you remember William, the janitor down at the paper—his boy's on the team. He says they got a few kids who can play. I got some time." I shrugged. "Thought it'd be nice to stop by."

Rose Marie rinsed off a plate. "Think you'll spot the next Jackie Robinson?" She tossed me a sly look. "Is that it?"

I grinned back at her. "You never know. Jackie was a Georgia boy before he moved west; stranger things have happened."

"Well," Rose Marie drawled, "I suspect Jackie's momma moved west for good reason."



I had been in this town for years, but never to the colored high school. Cresting Mason's Mill Road, I spotted it nestled at the end of the dusty street, maybe nine or ten miles south of the town square. I swung into the parking lot and watched the kids amble here and there, joking and jostling with one another, finding excuses to avoid the after-school work that I suspected most of them had. I made my way to the main

entrance feeling more conspicuous than a red cape in a sold-out bullring. Pulling one of the double doors open, I felt suspicious glances follow me. And whenever anyone met my eyes, I saw the faint signs of trepidation that the presence of a white man brings to this part of town.

I stepped into the main hall and the kids parted before me, clearing a wide path. But as I rounded the first corner, a Joe Louis-sized teacher stomped out of a classroom. We crashed together—his chest to my head—and I stumbled. I groped for a locker or the wall. I touched a hand to the floor to keep from falling. Fear flashed across his face. He scolded a handful of stunned students and then quickly turned to me. “I-I-I’m sorry,” he stammered gently, “very, very sorry.” He held out a steadying hand. “Please, sir, what can we do to help you?”

I took his hand and shook it. “Jack Hall.”

“Yes, sir,” he sputtered. “What can I do for you, Mr. Hall?”

“I’m looking for the baseball field.” I glanced toward the back of the school. “It’s back this way, I guess?”

“Yes, sir.” He pointed vaguely in the same direction, “straight ahead and then to your right.” He looked puzzled. “You know, we don’t get a lot of white folks out to our games.”

“No, don’t guess you do,” I answered. “I work for the *Herald*. Write sports and some other things. Heard your team’s pretty good this year. I just came to have a look.”

The tension suddenly turned him loose, and a sparkle wriggled its way into his eyes. “Oh, they’re better’n good.” He grinned. “This bunch ... I tell you what, they got magic.”

From his tone, his stance, and his smile, I knew that I’d come across a fellow traveler, one who’s rightly warmed by the beauty of a well-timed hit-and-run; who marvels at a perfectly thrown changeup when everybody in the stadium’s looking for a fastball; who envies the instincts of an outfielder who can hit the cutoff man from the warning track. I returned the involuntary smile that you give a kindred spirit and feebly replied, “You like baseball?”

The smile widened into an *are-you-kidding-me* grin. “Yes, sir, I do.” A pause hung between us, and then he said, “Why don’t you stay right

here for just one second. I'll show you where the field is myself." He disappeared into his classroom.

"I didn't catch your name," I hollered after him.

He reappeared, pulling a well-worn driving cap onto his head. "Walter," he said, squaring the cap in place, "Walter Jackson."

Trailing in Walter Jackson's wake, I passed a dirt basketball court; the chain net on one goal dangled limply from the rim. The other goal was bare and rusty-orange. There was no half-court line, no foul lines, baselines, or sidelines. As we came closer to the baseball field, I could see that a pale red-clay circle was shaped into a diamond by three cloth bases and a hard-rubber home plate. The outfield was a patchwork of green and brown grass speckled by dandelions and other anonymous weeds. There was no fence or lights. A sun-bleached scoreboard wobbled in right field, maybe 350 feet from home plate. In left field a billowing willow stood, the most resplendent foul pole in all of baseball. And in right a humbler pine performed the same duty. Forty or fifty fans sat on a battered grandstand behind home plate: kids mostly, and a handful of parents. Instead of dugouts, each team occupied a bench halfway down either baseline, open to the elements, and defenseless against slashing foul balls.

A couple of spots were open on the second row of the rickety bleachers.

"Here we go." I motioned to Walter and slid down to make room for him. He stopped. He stood there, flustered—as if he'd been stumped by a problem that was too ticklish to even mention.

Then Walter held up both hands. "You wait right here," he said. He rushed over to a couple of men sitting nearby, farmhands or sharecroppers who sat in tattered, rust-eaten lawn chairs along the first-base line. While I watched Walter, the man beside me—a plant worker I guessed from the smell—rubbed his hands together. He shuffled his feet. His eyes darted back and forth, first at me, then quickly away. He crossed his arms, then uncrossed them. Scratched his head, and his arm. Then he shot up from his seat and rushed to the backstop. And he stood there, staring straight ahead with his fingers laced through the chain-link fence.

Walter returned with one of the lawn chairs, its former occupant straggling behind. He set it down beside the bleachers and said, "Why

don't you sit here. And Horace," he motioned to the chair's owner, "he'll take that seat."

I looked at Walter and then at Horace. Then, slowly, I nodded my agreement. "Sorry," I mumbled. "Guess I wasn't thinking. Thanks, Horace."

"Yes, sir," Horace answered, "it ain't no problem at all." He climbed into the grandstand, and I took his chair—a makeshift "white section" at South City High.

South City's coach stood a few feet in front of home plate. He wore khaki work pants, a sweat-soaked T-shirt, and a bright red South City cap pulled low to shade his eyes from the sun. He motioned toward third. "Get one," he barked, as he stroked a routine ground ball down the baseline.

Walter leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees. He backhanded my leg and motioned toward third. "He's the most magic of all," he said. Walter's eyes traced every motion as the shortstop, second baseman, and first baseman all took a turn scooping up soft grounders. I don't believe I've ever seen anyone so entranced by infield practice.

The coach turned his attention back to third, and this time yelled, "Get two." Walter watched the kid glide to his left, and in a single smooth motion accept the ball into his glove and throw across his body, leading the second baseman perfectly in the first half of an imaginary double play. I studied the kid for a minute—the shape of his nose and mouth, the way he was built—then I looked back to Walter and laughed. "That's your boy, isn't it?"

Walter's head bobbed. "Yes, sir," he said, "and I'll tell you what, that kid can play. Just watch him ... boy's smooth as silk."

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Percy." Walter gleamed, his eyes never leaving the field. "Named after his grandfather."

Percy Jackson was seventeen, and a junior. His legs and arms were too long for his body, but they were synchronized like pistons in a just-tuned V-8. When he wasn't playing third, he pitched: fastballs and changeups

mostly, nothing fancy. He was hitting .364 the day I first saw him, and he had a swing that brought Stan Musial to mind. He was a slow-moving kid who ambled from one place to the next, shiftless and lazy-looking—until a ground ball violated his territory. Then he pounced like a cheetah who'd just spotted dinner.