

Chapter 1

The hill people and the Mexicans arrived on the same day. It was a Wednesday, early in September 1952. The Cardinals were five games behind the Dodgers with three weeks to go, and the season looked hopeless. The cotton, however, was waist-high to my father, over my head, and he and my grandfather could be heard before supper whispering words that were seldom heard. It could be a 'good crop'.

They were farmers, hardworking men who embraced pessimism only when discussing the weather and the crops. There was too much sun, or too much rain, or the threat of floods in the lowlands, or the rising prices of seed and fertilizer, or the uncertainties of the markets. On the most perfect of days, my mother would quietly say to me, 'Don't worry. The men will find something to worry about.'

Pappy, my grandfather, was worried about the price for labor when we went searching for the hill people. They were paid for every hundred pounds of cotton they picked. The previous year, according to him, it was \$1.50 per hundred. He'd already

heard rumors that a farmer over in Lake City was offering \$1.60.

This played heavily on his mind as we rode to town. He never talked when he drove, and this was because, according to my mother, not much of a driver herself, he was afraid of motorized vehicles. His truck was a 1939 Ford, and with the exception of our old John Deere tractor, it was our sole means of transportation. This was no particular problem except when we drove to church and my mother and grandmother were forced to sit snugly together up front in their Sunday best while my father and I rode in the back, engulfed in dust. Modern sedans were scarce in rural Arkansas.

Pappy drove thirty-seven miles per hour. His theory was that every automobile had a speed at which it ran most efficiently, and through some vaguely defined method he had determined that his old truck should go thirty-seven. My mother said (to me) that it was ridiculous. She also said he and my father had once fought over whether the truck should go faster. But my father rarely drove it, and if I happened to be riding with him, he would level off at thirty-seven, out of respect for Pappy. My mother said she suspected he drove much faster when he was alone.

We turned onto Highway 135, and, as always, I watched Pappy carefully shift the gears – pressing slowly on the clutch, delicately prodding the stick shift on the steering column – until the truck reached its perfect speed. Then I leaned over to check the speedometer: thirty-seven. He smiled at me as if we both agreed that the truck belonged at that speed.

Highway 135 ran straight and flat through the farm country of the Arkansas Delta. On both sides as far as I could see, the fields were white with cotton. It was time for the harvest, a wonderful season for me because they turned out school for two months. For my grandfather, though, it was a time of endless worry.

On the right, at the Jordan place, we saw a group of Mexicans working in the field near the road. They were stooped at the waist, their cotton sacks draped behind them, their hands moving deftly through the stalks, tearing off the bolls. Pappy grunted. He didn't like the Jordans because they were Methodists – and Cubs fans. Now that they already had workers in their fields, there was another reason to dislike them.

The distance from our farm to town was fewer than eight miles, but at thirty-seven miles an hour, the trip took twenty minutes. Always twenty minutes, even with little traffic. Pappy didn't believe in passing slower vehicles in front of him. Of course, he was usually the slow one. Near Black Oak, we caught up to a trailer filled to the top with snowy mounds of freshly picked cotton. A tarp covered the front half, and the Montgomery twins, who were my age, playfully bounced around in all that cotton until they saw us on the road below them. Then they stopped and waved. I waved back, but my grandfather did not. When he drove, he never waved or nodded at folks, and this was, my mother said, because he was afraid to take his hands from the wheel. She said people talked about him behind his back, saying he was rude and

arrogant. Personally, I don't think he cared how the gossip ran.

We followed the Montgomery trailer until it turned at the cotton gin. It was pulled by their old Massey Harris tractor, and driven by Frank, the eldest Montgomery boy, who had dropped out of school in the fifth grade and was considered by everyone at church to be headed for serious trouble.

Highway 135 became Main Street for the short stretch it took to negotiate Black Oak. We passed the Black Oak Baptist Church, one of the few times we'd pass without stopping for some type of service. Every store, shop, business, church, even the school, faced Main Street, and on Saturdays the traffic inched along, bumper to bumper, as the country folks flocked to town for their weekly shopping. But it was Wednesday, and when we got into town, we parked in front of Pop and Pearl Watson's grocery store on Main.

I waited on the sidewalk until my grandfather nodded in the direction of the store. That was my cue to go inside and purchase a Tootsie Roll, on credit. It only cost a penny, but it was not a foregone conclusion that I would get one every trip to town. Occasionally, he wouldn't nod, but I would enter the store anyway and loiter around the cash register long enough for Pearl to sneak me one, which always came with strict instructions not to tell my grandfather. She was afraid of him. Eli Chandler was a poor man, but he was intensely proud. He would starve to death before he took free food, which, on his list, included Tootsie Rolls. He would've beaten me with a stick if he

knew I had accepted a piece of candy, so Pearl Watson had no trouble swearing me to secrecy.

But this time I got the nod. As always, Pearl was dusting the counter when I entered and gave her a stiff hug. Then I grabbed a Tootsie Roll from the jar next to the cash register. I signed the charge slip with great flair, and Pearl inspected my penmanship. 'It's getting better, Luke,' she said.

'Not bad for a seven-year-old,' I said. Because of my mother, I had been practicing my name in cursive writing for two years. 'Where's Pop?' I asked. They were the only adults I knew who insisted I call them by their 'first' names, but only in the store when no one else was listening. If a customer walked in, then it was suddenly Mr. and Mrs. Watson. I told no one but my mother this, and she told me she was certain no other child held such privilege.

'In the back, putting up stock,' Pearl said. 'Where's your grandfather?'

It was Pearl's calling in life to monitor the movements of the town's population, so any question was usually answered with another.

'The Tea Shoppe, checking on the Mexicans. Can I go back there?' I was determined to outquestion her.

'Better not. Y'all using hill people, too?'

'If we can find them. Eli says they don't come down like they used to. He also thinks they're all half crazy. Where's Champ?' Champ was the store's ancient beagle, which never left Pop's side.

Pearl grinned whenever I called my grandfather by his first name. She was about to ask me a question when the small bell clanged as the door

opened and closed. A genuine Mexican walked in, alone and timid, as they all seemed to be at first. Pearl nodded politely at the new customer.

I shouted, *'Buenos días, señor!'*

The Mexican grinned and said sheepishly, *'Buenos días,'* before disappearing into the back of the store.

'They're good people,' Pearl said under her breath, as if the Mexican spoke English and might be offended by something nice she said. I bit into my Tootsie Roll and chewed it slowly while rewrapping and pocketing the other half.

'Eli's worried about payin' them too much,' I said. With a customer in the store, Pearl was suddenly busy again, dusting and straightening around the only cash register.

'Eli worries about everything,' she said.

'He's a farmer.'

'Are you going to be a farmer?'

'No ma'am. A baseball player.'

'For the Cardinals?'

'Of course.'

Pearl hummed for a bit while I waited for the Mexican. I had some more Spanish I was anxious to try.

The old wooden shelves were bursting with fresh groceries. I loved the store during picking season because Pop filled it from floor to ceiling. The crops were coming in, and money was changing hands.

Pappy opened the door just wide enough to stick his head in. 'Let's go,' he said; then, 'Howdy, Pearl.'

‘Howdy, Eli,’ she said as she patted my head and sent me away.

‘Where are the Mexicans?’ I asked Pappy when we were outside.

‘Should be in later this afternoon.’

We got back in the truck and left town in the direction of Jonesboro, where my grandfather always found the hill people.

We parked on the shoulder of the highway, near the intersection of a gravel road. In Pappy’s opinion, it was the best spot in the county to catch the hill people. I wasn’t so sure. He’d been trying to hire some for a week with no results. We sat on the tailgate in the scorching sun in complete silence for half an hour before the first truck stopped. It was clean and had good tires. If we were lucky enough to find hill people, they would live with us for the next two months. We wanted folks who were neat, and the fact that this truck was much nicer than Pappy’s was a good sign.

‘Afternoon,’ Pappy said when the engine was turned off.

‘Howdy,’ said the driver.

‘Where y’all from?’ asked Pappy.

‘Up north of Hardy.’

With no traffic around, my grandfather stood on the pavement, a pleasant expression on his face, taking in the truck and its contents. The driver and his wife sat in the cab with a small girl between them. Three large teenaged boys were napping in the back. Everyone appeared to be healthy and well-dressed. I could tell Pappy wanted these people.

‘Y’all lookin’ for work?’ he asked.

‘Yep. Lookin’ for Lloyd Crenshaw, somewhere west of Black Oak.’ My grandfather pointed this way and that, and they drove off. We watched them until they were out of sight.

He could’ve offered them more than Mr. Crenshaw was promising. Hill people were notorious for negotiating their labor. Last year, in the middle of the first picking on our place, the Fulbrights from Calico Rock disappeared one Sunday night and went to work for a farmer ten miles away.

But Pappy was not dishonest, nor did he want to start a bidding war.

We tossed a baseball along the edge of a cotton field, stopping whenever a truck approached.

My glove was a Rawlings that Santa had delivered the Christmas before. I slept with it nightly and oiled it weekly, and nothing was as dear to my soul.

My grandfather, who had taught me how to throw and catch and hit, didn’t need a glove. His large, callused hands absorbed my throws without the slightest sting.

Though he was a quiet man who never bragged, Eli Chandler had been a legendary baseball player. At the age of seventeen, he had signed a contract with the Cardinals to play professional baseball. But the First War called him, and not long after he came home, his father died. Pappy had no choice but to become a farmer.

Pop Watson loved to tell me stories of how great Eli Chandler had been – how far he could hit a baseball, how hard he could throw one. ‘Probably

the greatest ever from Arkansas,' was Pop's assessment.

'Better than Dizzy Dean?' I would ask.

'Not even close,' Pop would say, sighing.

When I relayed these stories to my mother, she always smiled and said, 'Be careful. Pop tells tales.'

Pappy, who was rubbing the baseball in his mammoth hands, cocked his head at the sound of a vehicle. Coming from the west was a truck with a trailer behind it. From a quarter of a mile away we could tell they were hill people. We walked to the shoulder of the road and waited as the driver downshifted, gears crunching and whining as he brought the truck to a stop.

I counted seven heads, five in the truck, two in the trailer.

'Howdy,' the driver said slowly, sizing up my grandfather as we in turn quickly scrutinized them.

'Good afternoon,' Pappy said, taking a step closer but still keeping his distance.

Tobacco juice lined the lower lip of the driver. This was an ominous sign. My mother thought most hill people were prone to bad hygiene and bad habits. Tobacco and alcohol were forbidden in our home. We were Baptists.

'Name's Spruill,' he said.

'Eli Chandler. Nice to meet you. Y'all lookin' for work?'

'Yep.'

'Where you from?'

'Eureka Springs.'

The truck was almost as old as Pappy's, with slick tires and a cracked windshield and rusted fenders and what looked like faded blue paint

under a layer of dust. A tier had been constructed above the bed, and it was crammed with cardboard boxes and burlap bags filled with supplies. Under it, on the floor of the bed, a mattress was wedged next to the cab. Two large boys stood on it, both staring blankly at me. Sitting on the tailgate, barefoot and shirtless, was a heavy young man with massive shoulders and a neck as thick as a stump. He spat tobacco juice between the truck and the trailer and seemed oblivious to Pappy and me. He swung his feet slowly, then spat again, never looking away from the asphalt beneath him.

‘I’m lookin’ for field hands,’ Pappy said.

‘How much you payin’?’ Mr. Spruill asked.

‘One-sixty a hundred,’ Pappy said.

Mr. Spruill frowned and looked at the woman beside him. They mumbled something.

It was at this point in the ritual that quick decisions had to be made. We had to decide whether we wanted these people living with us. And they had to accept or reject our price.

‘What kinda cotton?’ Mr. Spruill asked.

‘Stoneville,’ my grandfather said. ‘The bolls are ready. It’ll be easy to pick.’ Mr. Spruill could look around him and see the bolls bursting. The sun and soil and rains had cooperated so far. Pappy, of course, had been fretting over some dire rainfall prediction in the *Farmers’ Almanac*.

‘We got one-sixty last year,’ Mr. Spruill said.

I didn’t care for money talk, so I ambled along the center line to inspect the trailer. The tires on the trailer were even balder than those on the truck. One was half flat from the load. It was a good thing that their journey was almost over.

Rising in one corner of the trailer, with her elbows resting on the plank siding, was a very pretty girl. She had dark hair pulled tightly behind her head and big brown eyes. She was younger than my mother, but certainly a lot older than I was, and I couldn't help but stare.

'What's your name?' she said.

'Luke,' I said, kicking a rock. My cheeks were immediately warm. 'What's yours?'

'Tally. How old are you?'

'Seven. How old are you?'

'Seventeen.'

'How long you been ridin' in that trailer?'

'Day and a half.'

She was barefoot, and her dress was dirty and very tight – tight all the way to her knees. This was the first time I remember really examining a girl. She watched me with a knowing smile. A kid sat on a crate next to her with his back to me, and he slowly turned around and looked at me as if I weren't there. He had green eyes and a long forehead covered with sticky black hair. His left arm appeared to be useless.

'This is Trot,' she said. 'He ain't right.'

'Nice to meet you, Trot,' I said, but his eyes looked away. He acted as if he hadn't heard me.

'How old is he?' I asked her.

'Twelve. He's a cripple.'

Trot turned abruptly to face a corner, his bad arm flopping lifelessly. My friend Dewayne said that hill people married their cousins and that's why there were so many defects in their families.

Tally appeared to be perfect, though. She gazed

thoughtfully across the cotton fields, and I admired her dirty dress once again.

I knew my grandfather and Mr. Spruill had come to terms because Mr. Spruill started his truck. I walked past the trailer, past the man on the tailgate who was briefly awake but still staring at the pavement, and stood beside Pappy. 'Nine miles that way, take a left by a burned-out barn, then six more miles to the St. Francis River. We're the first farm past the river on your left.'

'Bottomland?' Mr. Spruill asked, as if he were being sent into a swamp.

'Some of it is, but it's good land.'

Mr. Spruill glanced at his wife again, then looked back at us. 'Where do we set up?'

'You'll see a shady spot in the back, next to the silo. That's the best place.'

We watched them drive away, the gears rattling, the tires wobbling, crates and boxes and pots bouncing along.

'You don't like them, do you?' I asked.

'They're good folks. They're just different.'

'I guess we're lucky to have them, aren't we?'

'Yes, we are.'

More field hands meant less cotton for me to pick. For the next month I would go to the fields at sunrise, drape a nine-foot cotton sack over my shoulder, and stare for a moment at an endless row of cotton, the stalks taller than I was, then plunge into them, lost as far as anyone could tell. And I would pick cotton, tearing the fluffy bolls from the stalks at a steady pace, stuffing them into the heavy sack, afraid to look down the row and be reminded of how endless it was, afraid to slow down because

someone would notice. My fingers would bleed, my neck would burn, my back would hurt.

Yes, I wanted lots of help in the fields. Lots of hill people, lots of Mexicans.

Chapter 2

With the cotton waiting, my grandfather was not a patient man. Though he still drove the truck at its requisite speed, he was restless because the other fields along the road were getting picked, and ours were not. Our Mexicans were two days late. We parked again near Pop and Pearl's, and I followed him to the Tea Shoppe, where he argued with the man in charge of farm labor.

'Relax, Eli,' the man said. 'They'll be here any minute.'

He couldn't relax. We walked to the Black Oak gin on the edge of town, a long walk – but Pappy did not believe in wasting gasoline. Between six and eleven that morning, he'd picked two hundred pounds of cotton, yet he still walked so fast I had to jog to keep up.

The gravel lot of the gin was crowded with cotton trailers, some empty, others waiting for their harvest to be ginned. I waved again at the Montgomery twins as they were leaving, their trailer empty, headed home for another load.

The gin roared with the chorus of heavy machines at work. They were incredibly loud and

dangerous. During each picking season, at least one worker would fall victim to some gruesome injury inside the cotton gin. I was scared of the machines, and when Pappy told me to wait outside, I was happy to do so. He walked by a group of field hands waiting for their trailers without so much as a nod. He had things on his mind.

I found a safe spot near the dock, where they wheeled out the finished bales and loaded them onto trailers headed for the Carolinas. At one end of the gin the freshly picked cotton was sucked from the trailers through a long pipe, twelve inches around; then it disappeared into the building where the machines worked on it. It emerged at the other end in neat square bales covered in burlap and strapped tightly with one-inch steel bands. A good gin produced perfect bales, ones that could be stacked like bricks.

A bale of cotton was worth a hundred and seventy-five dollars, give or take, depending on the markets. A good crop could produce a bale an acre. We rented eighty acres. Most farm kids could do the math.

In fact, the math was so easy you wondered why anyone would want to be a farmer. My mother made sure I understood the numbers. The two of us had already made a secret pact that I would never, under any circumstances, stay on the farm. I would finish all twelve grades and go play for the Cardinals.

Pappy and my father had borrowed fourteen thousand dollars in March from the owner of the gin. That was their crop loan, and the money was

spent on seed, fertilizer, labor, and other expenses. So far we'd been lucky – the weather had been nearly perfect, and the crops looked good. If our luck continued through the picking, and the fields yielded a bale an acre, then the Chandler farming operation would break even. That was our goal.

But, like most farmers, Pappy and my father carried debt from the previous year. They owed the owner of the gin two thousand dollars from 1951, which had seen an average crop. They also owed money to the John Deere dealer in Jonesboro for parts, to Lance Brothers for fuel, to the Co-op for seed and supplies, and to Pop and Pearl Watson for groceries.

I certainly wasn't supposed to know about their crop loans and debts. But in the summertime my parents often sat on the front steps late into the night, waiting for the air to cool so they could sleep without sweating, and they talked. My bed was near a window by the porch. They thought I was sleeping, but I heard more than I should have.

Though I wasn't sure, I strongly suspected Pappy needed to borrow more money to pay the Mexicans and the hill people. I couldn't tell if he got the money or not. He was frowning when we walked to the gin, and he was frowning when we left it.

The hill people had been migrating from the Ozarks for decades to pick cotton. Many of them owned their own homes and land, and quite often they had nicer vehicles than the farmers who hired them for the harvest. They worked very hard,

saved their money, and appeared to be as poor as we were.

By 1950 the migration had slowed. The postwar boom had finally trickled down to Arkansas, at least to some portions of the state, and the younger hill people didn't need the extra money as badly as their parents. They simply stayed at home. Picking cotton was not something anyone would volunteer to do. The farmers faced a labor shortage that gradually grew worse; then somebody discovered the Mexicans.

The first truckload arrived in Black Oak in 1951. We got six of them, including Juan, my buddy, who gave me my first tortilla. Juan and forty others had traveled three days in the back of a long trailer, packed in tightly together, with little food, no shade from the sun or shelter from the rain. They were weary and disoriented when they hit Main Street. Pappy said the trailer smelled worse than a cattle truck. Those who saw it told others, and before long the ladies at the Baptist and Methodist churches were openly complaining about the primitive manner in which the Mexicans had been transported.

My mother had been vocal, at least to my father. I heard them discuss it many times after the crops were in and the Mexicans had been shipped back. She wanted my father to talk to the other farmers and receive assurances from the man in charge of labor that those who collected the Mexicans and sent them to us would treat them better. She felt it was our duty as farmers to protect the laborers, a notion my father shared somewhat, though he seemed unenthusiastic about leading the charge.

Pappy didn't give a damn. Nor did the Mexicans; they just wanted to work.

The Mexicans finally arrived just after four o'clock. There had been rumors that they would be riding in a bus, and I certainly hoped this was true. I didn't want my parents straining at the issue for another winter. Nor did I want the Mexicans to be treated so poorly.

But they were in a trailer again, an old one with planks for sides and nothing over the top to protect them. It was true that cattle had it better.

They carefully hopped down out of the trailer bed and onto the street, three or four at a time, in one wave after another. They spilled forth, emptying in front of the Co-op, and gathered on the sidewalk in small bewildered groups. They stretched and bent and looked around as if they had landed on another planet. I counted sixty-two of them. To my great disappointment, Juan was not there.

They were several inches shorter than Pappy, very thin, and they all had black hair and brown skin. Each carried a little bag of clothing and supplies.

Pearl Watson stood on the sidewalk in front of her store, hands on hips, glaring. They were her customers, and she certainly didn't want them mistreated. I knew that before church on Sunday the ladies would be in an uproar again. And I knew my mother would quiz me as soon as we arrived home with our gang.

Harsh words erupted between the man in charge of labor and the driver of the truck. Somebody down in Texas had, in fact, promised that the

Mexicans would be shipped in a bus. This was the second load to arrive in a dirty trailer. Pappy never shied away from a fight, and I could tell he wanted to jump into the fray and finish off the truck driver. But he was also angry with the labor man, and I guess he saw no point in whipping both of them. We sat on the tailgate of our truck and waited for the dust to clear.

When the yelling stopped, the paperwork began. The Mexicans clung together on the sidewalk in front of the Co-op. Occasionally, they would glance at us and the other farmers who were gathering along Main Street. Word was out – the new batch had arrived.

Pappy got the first ten. The leader was Miguel. He appeared to be the oldest and, as I noticed from my initial inspection, he had the only cloth bag. The rest of them carried their belongings in paper sacks.

Miguel's English was passable, but not nearly as good as Juan's had been. I chatted him up while Pappy finished the paperwork. Miguel introduced me to the group. There was a Rico, a Roberto, a José, a Luis, a Pablo, and several I couldn't understand. I remembered from a year earlier that it would take a week to distinguish among them.

Although they were clearly exhausted, each of them seemed to make some effort to smile – except for one who sneered at me when I looked at him. He wore a western-style hat, which Miguel pointed to and said, 'He thinks he's a cowboy. So that's what we call him.' Cowboy was very young, and tall for a Mexican. His eyes were narrow and mean. He had a thin mustache that only added to

the fierceness. He frightened me so badly that I gave a passing thought to telling Pappy. I certainly didn't want the man living on our farm for the weeks to come. But instead I just backed away.

Our group of Mexicans followed Pappy down the sidewalk to Pop and Pearl's. I trailed along, careful not to step close to Cowboy. Inside the store, I assumed my position near the cash register, where Pearl was waiting for someone to whisper to.

'They treat them like animals,' she said.

'Eli says they're just happy to be here,' I whispered back. My grandfather was waiting by the door, arms folded across his chest, watching the Mexicans gather what few items they needed. Miguel was rattling instructions to the rest of them.

Pearl was not about to criticize Eli Chandler. But she shot him a dirty look, though he didn't see it. Pappy wasn't concerned with either me or Pearl. He was fretting because the cotton wasn't getting picked.

'It's just awful,' she said. I could tell Pearl couldn't wait for us to clear out so she could find her church friends and again stir up the issue. Pearl was a Methodist.

As the Mexicans, holding their goods, drifted to the cash register, Miguel gave each name to Pearl, who in turn opened a charge account. She rang up the total, entered the amount in a ledger by the worker's name, then showed the entry to both Miguel and the customer. Instant credit, American style.

They bought flour and shortening to make

tortillas, lots of beans in both cans and bags, and rice. Nothing extra – no sugar or sweets, no vegetables. They ate as little as possible, because food cost money. Their goal was to save every cent they could and take it back home.

Of course, these poor fellas had no idea where they were going. They did not know that my mother was a devoted gardener who spent more time tending her vegetables than she did the cotton. They were quite lucky, because my mother believed that no one living within walking distance of our farm would ever go without food.

Cowboy was last in line, and when Pearl smiled at him, I thought he was going to spit on her. Miguel stayed close. He'd just spent three days in the back of a trailer with the boy and probably knew all about him.

I said good-bye to Pearl for the second time that day, which was odd because I usually saw her only once a week.

Pappy led the Mexicans to the truck. They got into the bed and sat shoulder to shoulder, feet and legs intertwined. They were silent and stared blankly ahead as if they had no idea where their journey would end.

The old truck strained with the load but eventually leveled out at thirty-seven, and Pappy almost smiled. It was late in the afternoon, and the weather was hot and dry, perfect for picking. Between the Spruills and the Mexicans we finally had enough hands to harvest our crop. I reached into my pocket, and pulled out the other half of my Tootsie Roll.

Long before we arrived at our house, we saw

smoke and then a tent. We lived on a dirt road that was very dusty for most of the year, and Pappy was just pattering along so the Mexicans wouldn't get choked.

'What's that?' I asked.

'Looks like a tent of some sort,' Pappy said.

It was situated near the road, at the far end of our front yard, under a pin oak that was a hundred years old, very near the spot where home plate belonged. We slowed even more as we approached our mailbox. The Spruills had taken control of half our front yard. The large tent was dirty white with a pointed roof and was erected with a mismatched collection of hand-whittled sticks and metal poles. Two sides of the tent were open, and I could see boxes and blankets lying on the ground under the roof. I could also see Tally napping inside.

Their truck was parked beside it, and another canvas of some sort had been rigged over its bed. It was anchored with baling rope staked to the ground so that the truck couldn't move without first getting unhitched. Their old trailer had been partially unloaded, its boxes and burlap bags scattered on the grass as if a storm had hit.

Mrs. Spruill was tending a fire, hence the smoke. For some reason, she had chosen a slightly bare spot near the end of the yard. It was the exact spot where Pappy or my father squatted almost every afternoon and caught my fastballs and my curves. I wanted to cry. I would never forgive Mrs. Spruill for this.

'I thought you told them to set up out behind the silo,' I said.

'I did,' Pappy answered. He slowed the truck

almost to a stop, then turned into our place. The silo was out back, near the barn, a sufficient distance from our house. We'd had hill people camping back there before – never in the front yard.

He parked under another pin oak that was only seventy years old, according to my grandmother. It was the smallest of the three that shaded our house and yard. We rolled to a stop near the house, in the same dry ruts Pappy'd parked in for decades. Both my mother and grandmother were waiting at the kitchen steps.

Ruth, my grandmother, did not like the fact that the hill people had laid claim to our front yard. Pappy and I knew this before we got out of the truck. She had her hands on her hips.

My mother was eager to examine the Mexicans and ask me about their traveling conditions. She watched them pile out of the truck as she walked to me and squeezed my shoulder.

'Ten of them,' she said.

'Yes ma'am.'

Gran met Pappy at the front of the truck and said, quietly but sternly, 'Why are those people in our front yard?'

'I asked them to set up by the silo,' Pappy said, never one to back down, not even from his wife. 'I don't know why they picked that spot.'

'Can you ask them to move?'

'I cannot. If they pack up, they'll leave. You know how hill people are.'

And that was the end of Gran's questions. They were not about to argue in front of me and ten new Mexicans. She walked away, toward the house,

shaking her head in disapproval. Pappy honestly didn't care where the hill people camped. They appeared to be able-bodied and willing to work, and nothing else mattered to him.

I suspected Gran was not that concerned either. The picking was so crucial that we would've taken in a chain gang if they could've averaged three hundred pounds of cotton a day.

The Mexicans followed Pappy off to the barn, which was 352 feet from the back porch steps. Past the chicken coop, the water pump, the clothes-lines, and the toolshed, past a sugar maple that would turn bright red in October. My father had helped me measure the exact distance one day last January. It seemed like a mile to me. From home plate to the left field wall in Sportsman's Park, where the Cardinals played, was 350 feet, and every time Stan Musial hit a home run I would sit on the steps the next day and marvel at the distance. In mid-July he'd hit a ball 400 feet against the Braves. Pappy had said, 'He hit it over the barn, Luke.'

For two days afterward, I'd sat on the steps and dreamed of hitting 'em over the barn.

When the Mexicans were past the toolshed, my mother said, 'They look very tired.'

'They rode in a trailer, sixty-two of them,' I said, eager, for some reason, to help stir things up.

'I was afraid of that.'

'An old trailer. Old and dirty. Pearl's already mad about it.'

'It won't happen again,' she said, and I knew that my father was about to get an earful. 'Run along and help your grandfather.'

I'd spent most of the previous two weeks in the barn, alone with my mother, sweeping and cleaning the loft, trying to make a home for the Mexicans. Most of the farmers put them in abandoned tenant houses or barns. There'd been a rumor that Ned Shackelford three miles south had made his live with the chickens.

Not so on the Chandler farm. For lack of another shelter, the Mexicans would be forced to live in the loft of our barn, but there wouldn't be a speck of dirt anywhere to be found. And it would have a pleasant smell. For a year my mother had gathered old blankets and quilts for them to sleep on.

I slipped into the barn, but stayed below, next to Isabel's stall. She was our milk cow. Pappy claimed his life had been saved in the First War by a young French girl named Isabel, and to honor the memory, he named our Jersey cow after her. My grandmother never believed that story.

I could hear them up in the loft, moving around, settling in. Pappy was talking to Miguel, who was impressed with how nice and clean the loft was. Pappy took the compliments as if he and he alone had done the scrubbing.

In fact, he and Gran had been skeptical of my mother's efforts to provide a decent place for the laborers to sleep. My mother had been raised on a small farm at the very edge of Black Oak, so she was almost a town girl. She actually grew up with kids who were too good to pick cotton. She never walked to school – her father drove her. She'd been to Memphis three times before she married my father. She'd been raised in a painted house.

Chapter 3

We Chandlers rented our land from Mr. Vogel of Jonesboro, a man I'd never seen. His name was rarely mentioned, but when it did slip into a conversation, it was uttered with respect and awe. I thought he was the richest man in the world.

Pappy and Gran had been renting the land since before the Great Depression, which arrived early and stayed late in rural Arkansas. After thirty years of backbreaking labor, they had managed to purchase from Mr. Vogel the house and the three acres around it. They also owned the John Deere tractor, two disks, a seed planter, a cotton trailer, a flatbed trailer, two mules, a wagon, and the truck. My father had a vague agreement that gave him an ownership interest in some of these assets. The land deed was in the names of Eli and Ruth Chandler.

The only farmers who made money were those who owned their land. The renters, like us, tried to break even. The sharecroppers had it the worst and were doomed to eternal poverty.

My father's goal was to own forty acres of land, free and clear. My mother's dreams were tucked

away, only to be shared with me as I grew older. But I already knew she longed to leave the rural life and was determined that I would not farm. By the time I was seven, she had made a believer out of me.

When she was satisfied that the Mexicans were being properly situated, she sent me to find my father. It was late, the sun was falling beyond the trees that lined the St. Francis River, and it was time for him to weigh his cotton sack for the final time and call it a day.

I walked barefoot along a dirt path between two fields, looking for him. The soil was dark and rich, good Delta farmland that produced enough to keep you tied to it. Ahead, I saw the cotton trailer, and I knew he was working his way toward it.

Jesse Chandler was the elder son of Pappy and Gran. His younger brother, Ricky, was nineteen and fighting somewhere in Korea. There were two sisters who'd fled the farm as soon as they'd finished high school.

My father didn't flee. He was determined to be a farmer like his father and grandfather, except he'd be the first Chandler to own his land. I didn't know if he had dreams of a life away from the fields. Like my grandfather, he had been an excellent baseball player, and I'm sure at one point he'd dreamed of major league glory. But he took a German bullet through his thigh in Anzio in 1944, and his baseball career came to an end.

He walked with a very slight limp, but then so did most people who toiled in the cotton patch.

I stopped at the trailer, which was almost empty. It sat on a narrow cotton road, waiting to be filled.

I climbed up on it. Around me, on all sides, neat rows of green and brown stalks stretched to the tree lines that bordered our land. At the top of the stalks, puffy bolls of cotton were popping forth. The cotton was coming to life by the minute, so when I stepped on the back of the trailer and surveyed the fields, I saw an ocean of white. The fields were silent – no voices, no tractor engines, no cars on the road. For a moment, hanging on to the trailer, I could almost understand why my father wanted to be a farmer.

I could barely see his old straw hat in the distance as he moved between rows. I jumped down and hurried to meet him. With dusk approaching, the gaps between the rows were even darker. Because the sun and rain had cooperated, the leaves were full and thick and weaving together so that they brushed against me as I walked quickly toward my father.

‘Is that you, Luke?’ he called, knowing full well that no one else would be coming to find him.

‘Yes sir!’ I answered, moving to the voice. ‘Mom says it’s time to quit!’

‘Oh she does?’

‘Yes sir.’ I missed him by one row. I cut through the stalks, and there he was, bent at the waist, both hands moving through the leaves, adroitly plucking the cotton and stuffing it into the nearly full sack draped over his shoulder. He’d been in the fields since sunrise, breaking only for lunch.

‘Did y’all find some help?’ he asked without looking at me.

‘Yes sir,’ I said proudly. ‘Mexicans and hill people.’

‘How many Mexicans?’

‘Ten,’ I said, as if I’d personally rounded them up.

‘That’s good. Who are the hill people?’

‘The Spruills. I forgot where they’re from.’

‘How many?’ He finished a stalk and crept forward, with his heavy sack inching along behind him.

‘A whole truckload. It’s hard to tell. Gran’s mad because they’ve set up camp in the front yard, even got a fire goin’ where home plate is. Pappy told ’em to set up by the silo. I heard him. I don’t think they’re real smart.’

‘Don’t be sayin’ that.’

‘Yes sir. Anyway, Gran’s not too pleased.’

‘She’ll be all right. We need the hill people.’

‘Yes sir. That’s what Pappy said. But I hate they’ve messed up home plate.’

‘Pickin’ is more important than baseball these days.’

‘I guess.’ Maybe in his opinion.

‘How are the Mexicans?’

‘Not too good. They stuffed ’em in a trailer again, and Mom’s not too happy about it.’

His hands stopped for a second as he considered another winter of squabbles. ‘They’re just happy to be here,’ he said, his hands moving again.

I took a few steps toward the trailer in the distance, then turned to watch him again. ‘Tell that to Mom.’

He gave me a look before saying, ‘Did Juan make it?’

‘No sir.’

‘Sorry to hear that.’

I'd talked about Juan for a year. He had promised me last fall that he'd be back. 'That's okay,' I said. 'The new guy is Miguel. He's real nice.'

I told him about the trip to town, how we found the Spruills, about Tally and Trot and the large young man on the tailgate, then back to town where Pappy argued with the man in charge of labor, then the trip to the gin, then about the Mexicans. I did all the talking because my day had certainly been more eventful than his.

At the trailer, he lifted the straps of his cotton sack and hung them over the hook at the bottom of the scales. The needle settled on fifty-eight pounds. He scribbled this in a ragged old ledger wired to the trailer.

'How much?' I asked when he closed the book.

'Four-seventy.'

'A triple,' I said.

He shrugged and said, 'Not bad.'

Five hundred pounds equaled a home run, something he accomplished every other day. He squatted and said, 'Hop on.'

I jumped on his back, and we started for the house. His shirt and overalls were soaked with sweat, and had been all day, but his arms were like steel. Pop Watson told me that Jesse Chandler once hit a baseball that landed in the center of Main Street. Pop and Mr. Snake Wilcox, the barber, measured it the next day and began telling people that it had traveled, on the fly, 440 feet. But a hostile opinion quickly emerged from the Tea Shoppe, where Mr. Junior Barnhart claimed,

rather loudly, that the ball had bounced at least once before hitting Main Street.

Pop and Junior went weeks without speaking to each other. My mother verified the argument, but not the home run.

She was waiting for us by the water pump. My father sat on a bench and removed his boots and socks. Then he unsnapped his overalls and took off his shirt.

One of my chores at dawn was to fill a washtub with water and leave it in the sun all day so there'd be warm water for my father every afternoon. My mother dipped a hand towel in the tub and gently rubbed his neck with it.

She had grown up in a house full of girls, and had been raised in part by a couple of prissy old aunts. I think they bathed more than farm people, and her passion for cleanliness had rubbed off on my father. I got a complete scrubbing every Saturday afternoon, whether I needed it or not.

When he was washed up and dried off, she handed him a fresh shirt. It was time to welcome our guests. In a large basket, my mother had assembled a collection of her finest vegetables, all handpicked, of course, and washed within the past two hours. Indian tomatoes, Vidalia onions, red-skin potatoes, green and red bell peppers, ears of corn. We carried it to the back of the barn, where the Mexicans were resting and talking and waiting for their small fire to burn low so they could make their tortillas. I introduced my father to Miguel, who in turn presented some of his gang.

Cowboy sat alone, his back to the barn, making no move to acknowledge us. I could see him

watching my mother from under the brim of his hat. It frightened me for a second; then I realized Jesse Chandler would snap Cowboy's skinny little neck if he made one wrong move.

We had learned a lot from the Mexicans the year before. They did not eat butter beans, snap beans, squash, eggplant, or turnips, but preferred tomatoes, onions, potatoes, peppers, and corn. And they would never ask for food from our garden. It had to be offered.

My mother explained to Miguel and the other men that our garden was full and that she would bring them vegetables every other day. They were not expected to pay for the food. It was part of the package.

We took another basket to the front of the house, where Camp Spruill seemed to be expanding by the hour. They had crept even farther across the yard, and there were more cardboard boxes and burlap sacks strewn about. They'd laid three planks across a box on one end and a barrel on the other to make a table, and they were crowded around it eating dinner when we approached them. Mr. Spruill got to his feet and shook my father's hand.

'Leon Spruill,' he said with food on his lip. 'Nice to meet you.'

'Happy to have you folks here,' my father said pleasantly.

'Thank you,' Mr. Spruill said, pulling up his pants. 'This here is my wife, Lucy.' She smiled and kept chewing slowly.

'This is my daughter, Tally,' he said, pointing.

When she looked at me, I could feel my cheeks burning.

‘And these are my nephews, Bo and Dale,’ he said, nodding to the two boys who’d been resting on the mattress when they had stopped on the highway. They were teenagers, probably fifteen or so. And sitting next to them was the giant I’d first seen on the tailgate, half-asleep.

‘This is my son Hank,’ Mr. Spruill said. Hank was at least twenty and was certainly old enough to stand up and shake hands. But he kept eating. Both jaws were ballooned with what appeared to be corn bread. ‘He eats a lot,’ Mr. Spruill said, and we tried to laugh.

‘And this here is Trot,’ he said. Trot never looked up. His limp left arm hung by his side. He clutched a spoon with his right hand. His standing in the family was left undeclared.

My mother presented the large basket of vegetables, and for a second, Hank stopped his chomping and looked up at the fresh supply. Then he returned to his beans. ‘The tomatoes and corn are especially good this year,’ my mother was saying. ‘And there’s plenty. Just let me know what you like.’

Tally chewed slowly and stared at me. I studied my feet.

‘That’s mighty nice of you, ma’am,’ Mr. Spruill said, and Mrs. Spruill added a quick thanks. There was no danger of the Spruills going without food, not that they had missed any meals. Hank was burly with a thick chest that narrowed only slightly where it met his neck. Mr. and Mrs. Spruill were both stocky and appeared strong. Bo and Dale

were lean but not thin. Tally, of course, was perfectly proportioned. Only Trot was gaunt and skinny.

‘Didn’t mean to interrupt dinner,’ my father said, and we began backing away.

‘Thanks again,’ Mr. Spruill said.

I knew from experience that within a short time we would know more than we wanted about the Spruills. They would share our land, our water, our outhouse. We would take them vegetables from the garden, milk from Isabel, eggs from the coop. We would invite them to town on Saturday and to church on Sunday. We would work beside them in the fields from sunrise until almost dark. And when the picking was over, they would leave and return to the hills. The trees would turn, winter would come, and we would spend many cold nights huddled around the fire telling stories about the Spruills.

Dinner was potatoes, sliced thin and fried, boiled okra, corn on the cob, and hot corn bread – but no meats because it was almost fall, and because we’d had a roast the day before. Gran fried chicken twice a week, but never on Wednesdays. My mother’s garden was producing enough tomatoes and onions to feed all of Black Oak, so she sliced a platter of them for every meal.

The kitchen was small and hot. A round oscillating fan rattled away on top of the refrigerator and tried to keep the air circulating as my mother and grandmother prepared dinner. Their movements were slow but steady. They were tired, and it was too hot to hurry up.

They were not particularly fond of each other, but both were determined to exist in peace. I never heard them argue, never heard my mother say anything bad about her mother-in-law. They lived in the same house, cooked the same meals, did the same laundry, picked the same cotton. With so much work to do, who had time to bicker?

But Gran had been born and bred deep in the cotton patch. She knew she would be buried in the soil she worked. My mother longed for an escape.

Through daily ritual, they had silently negotiated a method to their kitchen work. Gran hovered near the stove, checking the corn bread, stirring the potatoes, okra, and corn. My mother kept to the sink, where she peeled tomatoes and stacked the dirty dishes. I studied this from the kitchen table, where I sat every night and peeled cucumbers with a paring knife. They both loved music, and occasionally one would hum while the other sang softly. The music kept the tension buried.

But not tonight. They were too preoccupied to sing and hum. My mother was stewing over the fact that the Mexicans had been hauled in like cattle. My grandmother was pouting because the Spruills had invaded our front yard.

At exactly six o'clock, Gran removed her apron and sat across from me. The end of the table was flush against the wall and served as a large shelf that accumulated things. In the center was an RCA radio in a walnut casing. She turned on the switch and smiled at me.

The CBS news was delivered to us by Edward R. Murrow, live from New York. For a week

there'd been heavy fighting in Pyongyang, near the Sea of Japan, and from an old map that Gran kept on her night table, we knew that Ricky's infantry division was in the area. His last letter had arrived two weeks earlier. It was a quickly written note, but between the lines it gave the impression that he was in the thick of things.

When Mr. Murrow got past his lead story about a spat with the Russians, he started on Korea, and Gran closed her eyes. She folded her hands together, put both index fingers to her lips, and waited.

I wasn't sure what she was waiting for. Mr. Murrow was not going to announce to the nation that Ricky Chandler was dead or alive.

My mother listened, too. She stood with her back to the sink, wiping her hands with a towel, staring blankly at the table. This happened almost every night in the summer and fall of 1952.

Peace efforts had been started, then abandoned. The Chinese withdrew, then attacked again. Through Mr. Murrow's reports and Ricky's letters, we lived the war.

Pappy and my father would not listen to the news. They busied themselves outside, at the toolshed or the water pump, doing small chores that could've waited, talking about the crops, searching for something to worry about besides Ricky. Both had fought in wars. They didn't need Mr. Murrow in New York to read some correspondent's cable from Korea and tell the nation what was occurring in one battle or the next. They knew.

In any case, it was a short report that night about Korea, and this was taken in our little farmhouse

as something good. Mr. Murrow moved along to other matters, and Gran finally smiled at me. 'Ricky's okay,' she said, rubbing my hand. 'He'll be home before you know it.'

She'd earned the right to believe this. She had waited for Pappy during the First War, and she had prayed long distance for my father and his wounds during the Second. Her boys always came home, and Ricky would not let us down.

She turned the radio off. The potatoes and okra needed her attention. She and my mother returned to cooking, and we waited for Pappy to walk through the back screen door.

I think Pappy expected the worst from the war. The Chandlers had been lucky so far in the century. He wouldn't listen to the news, but he wanted to know if things looked good or bad. When he heard the radio go off, he usually made his way into the kitchen. That evening he stopped at the table and tousled my hair. Gran looked at him. She smiled and said, 'No bad news.'

My mother told me that Gran and Pappy often slept less than an hour or two before waking and worrying about their younger son. Gran was convinced Ricky was coming home. Pappy was not.

At six-thirty, we sat around the table, held hands, and gave thanks for all the food and all the blessings. Pappy led the praying, at least over dinner. He thanked God for the Mexicans and for the Spruills, and for the fine crops around us. I prayed quietly, and only for Ricky. I was grateful for the food, but it didn't seem nearly as important as he did.

The adults ate slowly and talked about nothing but cotton. I was not expected to add much to the conversation. Gran in particular was of the opinion that children should be seen and not heard.

I wanted to go to the barn and check out the Mexicans. And I wanted to sneak around front and maybe catch a glimpse of Tally. My mother suspected something, and when we finished eating, she told me to help her with the dishes. I would've preferred a whipping, but I had no choice.

We drifted to the front porch for our nightly sitting. It seemed like a simple enough ritual, but it wasn't. First we would let the meal settle, then we'd tend to baseball. We would turn on the radio and Harry Caray at KMOX in St. Louis would deliver the play-by-play of our beloved Cardinals. My mother and grandmother would shell peas or butter beans. Any loose ends of dinner gossip would be wrapped up. Of course, the crops were fretted over.

But that night it was raining two hundred miles away in St. Louis, and the game had been canceled. I sat on the steps, holding my Rawlings glove, squeezing my baseball inside it, watching the shadows of the Spruills in the distance and wondering how anyone could be so thoughtless as to build a fire on home plate.

The outside radio was a small General Electric that my father had bought in Boston when he left the hospital during the war. Its sole purpose was to bring the Cardinals into our lives. We seldom missed a game. It sat on a wooden crate near the

creaking swing where the men rested. My mother and grandmother sat in padded wooden chairs not far away, on the other side of the porch, shelling peas. I was in the middle, on the front steps.

Before the Mexicans arrived, we'd had a portable fan we put near the screen door. Each night it would hum away quietly and manage to push the heavy air around just enough to make things bearable. But, thanks to my mother, it was now in the loft of our barn. This had caused friction, though most of it had been kept away from me.

And so the night was very quiet – no ball game, no fan – just the slow talk of weary farm people waiting for the temperature to drop a few more degrees.

The rain in St. Louis inspired the men to worry about the weather. The rivers and creeks in the Arkansas Delta flooded with frustrating regularity. Every four or five years they left their banks and washed away the crops. I couldn't remember a flood, but I'd heard so much about them I felt like a veteran. We would pray for weeks for a good rain. One would come, and as soon as the ground was soaked, Pappy and my father would start watching the clouds and telling flood stories.

The Spruills were winding down. Their voices were fading. I could see their shadows moving around the tents. Their fire flickered low, then died.

All was quiet on the Chandler farm. We had hill people. We had Mexicans. The cotton was waiting.

Chapter 4

At some point in the vast darkness of the night, Pappy, our human alarm clock, awoke, put on his boots, and began stomping around the kitchen making the first pot of coffee. The house was not large – three bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room – and it was so old the plank floors sagged in places. If one person chose to wake up the rest, he or she could certainly do so.

I was allowed to stay in bed until my father came after me. It was difficult to sleep, though, with all those people on the farm and all that cotton to pick. I was already awake when he shook me and said it was time to go. I dressed quickly and met him on the back porch.

There was no hint of sunrise as we walked across the backyard, the dew soaking our boots. We stopped at the chicken coop, where he bent low and slipped inside. I was told to wait in front of it, since last month while gathering eggs in the darkness, I'd stepped on a huge rat snake and cried for two days. At first my father had not been sympathetic; rat snakes are harmless and just a part

of life on the farm. My mother, however, intervened with a fury, and for the time being, I was not permitted to collect eggs alone.

My father filled a straw bowl with a dozen eggs and handed it to me. We headed to the barn, where Isabel was waiting. Now that we'd roused the chickens, the roosters began crowing.

The only light came from a pale bulb hanging from the hayloft. The Mexicans were awake. A fire had been lit behind the barn, and they were huddled near it as if they were cold. I was already warm from the humidity.

I could milk the cow, and on most mornings that chore belonged to me. But the rat snake still had me frightened, plus we were in a hurry because we had to be in the fields by sunrise. My father rapidly milked two gallons, which would've taken me half the morning. We delivered the food to the kitchen, where the women were in charge. The ham was already in the skillet, its rich aroma thick in the air.

Breakfast was fresh eggs, milk, salt-cured ham, and hot biscuits, with sorghum optional. As they cooked, I settled into my chair, ran my fingers across the damp, checkered oilcloth, and waited for my cup of coffee. It was the one vice my mother allowed me.

Gran placed the cup and saucer before me, then the sugar bowl and the fresh cream. I doctored the coffee until it was as sweet as a malt, then sipped it slowly.

At breakfast, conversation in the kitchen was held to a minimum. It was exciting to have so many strangers on our farm for the harvest, but the