

TOO BLUE TO FLY**CHAPTER
ONE**

Wally had always known who he was and where he belonged. In the spring of 1947, he was a fifth grade student at the Atlanta Montessori School. He was eleven years old, the son of Kathryn McManus, and his place was with her.

Then everything changed.

When Mama discovered her illness, she told Wally in the same quiet way she always revealed bad news. The cancer was ovarian, she said, and it had spread throughout her body. With her usual straightforward bluntness, she said there was no chance she would recover and they hadn't much time. What would he most like to do in the weeks they had left?

"You're going to die, Mama?"

"Yes, I'm dying."

He remembered the way the air smelled, too rich to breathe, and how it burned his nostrils. She had taken him to the old quarry near Stone Mountain for a picnic. It was one of their favorite places. "Who will look after me, Mama?"

"I wrote your father and told him you'll be coming."

"I don't even know him. Does he want me?"

"Anthony is a man who rarely knows what he wants until he has lost it. But in you he'll see himself, Wally, so yes, he'll want you."

Sunlight reflected on the dead green lake of the rock quarry, and birds flitted to and from their nests in the granite walls. Crows beckoned from afar. Everything lovely had turned ugly. "My father never came to visit me," Wally said.

"We've never been to see him, Wally."

"Mama, please, I don't want you to die."

“And I don’t want to, Wally, but it’s going to happen. Now then, how shall we spend our time together?”

At first he punished her for being ill. He pulled away from hugs and turned aside kisses. He sulked and pouted and poisoned the moment as though dying were a selfish choice she’d made. She seemed to understand. “When you think back on this later,” she’d said, “don’t feel guilty. I acted the same way with God.”

She took him out of school and cashed in her war bonds. She wanted to go back to towns where she’d lived and live her life again, she said. “It will be like playing a movie backwards. We’ll pretend we don’t know the ending and visit all the places that ever meant anything to me.”

Over the next two months they searched for landmarks, most of which were gone: the restaurant overlooking the Hudson River where Anthony Edward McManus proposed marriage, the cold-water flat where they lived in Greenwich Village. None of the visits were happy. Mama spoke of marital disputes, “like sparks of flint – sharp, quick, and gone – but each spark left smoldering resentment.”

During the trip Wally changed because she changed. Slow death stole her life in pieces. First it took Mama’s weight, the soft places where she held Wally’s head when he needed cuddling. Then impending death extinguished the twinkle in her eyes and left them deeply set above hollow cheeks. It hurt her to be hugged, so he was limited to holding her hand.

They went back to Atlanta and she bought him a one-way bus ticket to Belle Glade, Florida. “Use this when you have to,” she said, and tucked it into one of the bags packed for his trip. Every day thereafter she grew weaker.

“Are you going to be a big boy about this?” his mother had asked.

“Yes, Mama.”

“Going to live with your father?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Good,” she’d sighed. “He’s expecting you.”

It was their last conversation. She died that night.

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Wally was jarred back to the moment by the bus driver's announcement, "Belle Glade!"

The noonday sun was so bright that Wally peered from beneath cupped hands. The hot concrete sidewalk burned his feet through the soles of his shoes. Every inhalation was as though from an oven. Unlike Atlanta, south Florida humidity soaked his clothes and plastered sandy hair to his forehead. Sweat traced his spine and crawled down the backs of his legs.

The bus driver put Wally's luggage on the ground. "Three bags, right?"

"Yessir."

Air brakes sighed, the diesel engine rumbled, exhaust fumes enveloped Wally and the bus pulled away.

The street was deserted. Stores were closed. Mama had warned him that Anthony was seldom on time. He thought of his father as "Anthony" because that's how she spoke of him. "Anthony was late to our wedding," she'd said. *Undisciplined*, she'd said.

Wally dragged his bags toward the shade of a palm tree but halted abruptly when he realized the shadow was filled with thousands of droning bees. The insects swirled around a droop of dates hanging from the palm, and below them sat a shirtless and barefoot black boy on a wooden bench. Slowly, the boy reached up to pluck a date and bees dripped from the swarm like living liquid, down his arm and off his elbow.

"For a nickel," he said, "I'll weave a spell so they won't sting you."

"I don't have a nickel."

"Yes you do." Again, slowly, he shoved his hand into the mass of bees and plucked another date.

"If you eat a green one," he said, "it makes your tongue curl. For a nickel I'll get you some ripe ones."

"No, thank you. I won't be staying long."

The black boy surveyed the empty street in one direction, then the other. "I don't see nobody rushing to fetch you. Give me a dime and I'll buy us an orange soda."

"I'm going soon," Wally said.

"Where you going, white boy?"

"To live with my father."

“Your father a white man?”

“Of course he’s white.”

“You say ‘of course’ like I’m stupid to wonder,” the black boy said. “Look at me. You wonder if my daddy is black?”

He was the color of dark honey, his body powdered with dust made gray by the tone of his complexion. His eyes were pale green.

“Is your daddy a tall white man, or a short one?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” Wally said.

“For a nickel, I’ll help you watch for him.”

“I’m not giving you a nickel,” Wally replied evenly.

“I ain’t asking you *give* me anything. I’m willing to earn it. You being a city boy from Atlanta, you going to need somebody to get you from here to someplace without getting gator ate. I’m willing, but I ain’t begging.”

“How did you know I’m from Atlanta?”

“By the tags on your bags. Besides, I was sent to get you. I’m your brother, Jeremiah.”