

A woman with short blonde hair, wearing a white tank top and dark shorts, is seen from behind in a wooden canoe. She is holding a paddle and looking out over a river. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of a sunset or sunrise, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a shimmering reflection on the water. The background is filled with trees, some of which have autumn-colored leaves. The overall mood is peaceful and nostalgic.

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# Reading *the* Sweet Oak

JAN STITES

# READING THE SWEET OAK

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# PART ONE

MAY

# CHAPTER ONE

## TULSA

Tulsa slipped her canoe paddle into the Sweet Oak, a lazy song of a river that threaded the Ozark hills for miles. She knew every bend, every grove of sycamores, and every boulder and fallen tree that could spill unwary paddlers. From behind her came the deep-throated *wahwk* of a great blue heron. The bird glided into view, tipped its massive wings, and landed on a gravel bar with perfect grace. Herons were her totem bird. Perhaps the heron's arrival meant that this was the day to make that call to Ed. If she did, however, life as she knew it could end.

Tulsa thrust her paddle into the water and cut back hard in a J stroke that propelled her canoe straight for home. Beaching the boat, she thought about all she needed to do to prepare for the upcoming Memorial Day weekend: mow the campground, load thirty canoes the high school seniors were renting to float the river Friday, and stock the cabins.

She sprang up the rock steps that led from the river and jogged toward the white clapboard farmhouse she and her grandmother, Ruby, had shared for the last seventeen of Tulsa's twenty-eight years. Perhaps

it would be better if Ruby made that call to their neighbor Ed Logan since the two of them went back decades, to the days of moonshine and one-room schools.

Tulsa reached the door of the two-story house, which sat on the bank overlooking the river and was surrounded by purple lilacs and yellow forsythias, just as she heard the rumble of a large engine coming down the hill. She turned from the door, hoping for a customer. A dust cloud hovered like smoke, marking the trail of the approaching vehicle: a long-bed Chevy pickup that stopped just inches from her. Its driver wasn't a customer. It was Rupert Clancy, a man with the moral scruples of a crawdad.

One of Clancy's two dogs, bulky animals with gleaming teeth, stood vigilant on the backseat, its muzzle poking through the partially lowered window. The other climbed into Clancy's lap. Clancy, who owned the land downriver on the other side of Ed Logan, playfully shook the dog's muzzle before pushing him into the passenger seat.

Tulsa's grandmother emerged from the house to stand beside Tulsa, arms crossed, her wrinkled face furrowed by a scowl that would give fright to saner men. Given their history with Clancy, it was amazing Ruby hadn't grabbed her shotgun.

Clancy leaned out the driver's window and blew a large pink gum bubble. His skin was tanned, his long graying hair pulled back into a ponytail, his eyes the pale green of an old dollar bill. It still stunned Tulsa to think this man had almost become her stepfather.

"What do you want?" Tulsa said.

Clancy popped the bubble. "I guess you heard Ed's selling his place," he said.

Tulsa clenched her teeth to keep from gasping. So the rumor was true.

They'd leased Ed's cabins and campground every summer for as long as she could remember. The people who rented their canoes could float the river and have somewhere to stay. Without Ed's facilities, the Sweet Oak River Oasis canoe rental business could not survive.

“I’m buying it,” Clancy said, giving them a triumphant look. “I know you’ll want it, but you won’t be able to afford it with riverfront land going for twenty thousand an acre. Since I’m in a good mood, I’m offering a consolation prize. Today only. I’m giving you three thousand dollars just for goodwill if you don’t bother Ed.” He held out a check.

“You know damned well that Ed will sell to me,” Ruby said. “That’s why you’re trying to buy us off.”

“Everybody knows Ed’s in love with you, Ruby, but I offered him seven hundred thousand. Cash. What can you afford? Five hundred thousand? Six? No man’s going to let love interfere with that much profit.”

Tulsa swallowed hard. Ruby looked aghast.

“So take my three thousand and be grateful.” Clancy adjusted his side mirror.

“You’re wrong, Rupert,” Ruby said. “As usual. Ed *will* sell to us.”

“Oh? You have seven hundred thousand cash, do you?”

“Maybe not,” Ruby said. “But we have a bank.”

“To get a loan to buy Ed’s place, I imagine you’d have to put your own up as collateral.” Clancy held out the check. “Take it. You’ll save yourselves a world of trouble.”

Tulsa bristled. “What kind of trouble?”

“Oh, you know. This and that.”

Tulsa stepped closer. The dogs snarled. “Are you threatening us?” she said.

“I’m just saying things happen.” Clancy snapped his fingers; the dogs fell silent.

Tulsa snatched the check from Clancy’s hand and ripped it in two.

“Just so you know,” Tulsa said, stance wide, “if you do anything to mess with us, I guarantee you’ll regret it.” She wadded the ripped check into a ball and tossed it into the cab.

Clancy blew another bubble, then popped it. He held up the balled check and looked bemused. “You should both be downright grateful

for my generosity, but if you don't want a free three thousand dollars, I'll just head on over to my bank and have them prepare the check for Ed. Good day, ladies."

Clancy drove slowly up the hill, gravel popping under the tires of his pickup. Tulsa's arms hung limp at her sides.

Ruby appeared lost in thought, but after a few moments, she whirled to face the house. "I'll call Ed," she said. "Give me some privacy."

Tulsa hadn't seen Ruby move that fast in a while. She took long, hurried strides of her own down to the water's edge.

Spring-fed, cool, and clear, the Sweet Oak seemed to absorb all the greens of the trees that lined its banks. After Tulsa's mother died, the river had been her lifeline, and this house the only real home she'd ever known. The closest town of Fiddle, population three thousand, had few people, fewer jobs. If they had to close their canoe business, she would have to move away to find work. Tears stung her eyes. She slipped off her shoes, left on her jeans and T-shirt, waded into the water, and sat. The rocks beneath her bottom had long ago been smoothed by the river's flow. Tulsa let herself feel the steady strength of the current hugging her.

She and Ruby didn't make a lot of money, especially since Ed closed off the cabins and campground during hunting season in fall and winter for his large family's use. Fortunately their own house and land were paid off, and they made enough from the summer months' canoe business to cover their bills and save some for emergencies. Fortunately, too, both she and Ruby were content with simple living. Life at the river brimmed with the riches that mattered to them both: herons, bullfrogs, trees, flowers, whip-poor-wills, fireflies, and so much more.

A twig struck the surface, swirling the reflections of sycamore, maple, and birch. Leaning back, Tulsa immersed her head and counted slowly to sixty, then sat up. Cold water slid down her face and neck. She hugged her knees, shivering.

If she did have to move away, what would she do? She'd dropped out of college after one semester to help Ruby run the canoe business, having learned she would much rather read a river—looking for the ripples that signaled a hidden rock, a potential hazard for paddlers and bonanza for fishermen—than a book. Maybe Guy would have some ideas.

It seemed like both five seconds and five hours later when she heard someone coming down the rock steps. She stood.

Ruby looked somber. “Ed was going to come by this afternoon to talk to us. He and Clare are moving to St. Louis to be closer to their grandkids. Ed doesn't want to sell to Clancy, but these days Ozark land isn't worth much more than two hoots and a holler. 'Course, Ed's got the cabins and that riverfront property, and he wants to sell fast. It's Clancy or us. He'll let us have it for six seventy.”

“Six hundred seventy thousand dollars?”

“Yes.”

Tulsa whistled. That was a lot of money. “Can we afford that?”

“I called George Calhoun over at the bank. I'm meeting him in an hour. We'll have to secure the loan with our place plus most of our savings, but he thinks we can swing it.”

Tulsa's throat felt like she'd swallowed sand. “You mean if we didn't bring in enough, we'd lose not just the canoe business, but our land and the house?”

“Well, yes.”

Ruby's white hair was thinning, her pale-pink scalp visible in places. She was less than two years from eighty. Tulsa called her grandmother by her given name because even as a child she'd loved the sound of the word *Ruby*, a name that seemed soft and welcoming, unlike the unmelodious *Gran*, which sounded harsh, like *slap* or *trap*. When Tulsa got older, she kept calling her Ruby because her grandmother had always seemed a jewel in Tulsa's life.

If it were just herself, Tulsa thought, she would take the gamble, but if something went wrong, Ruby could end up in some tiny apartment



in town or, worse, a nursing home. It was even possible that losing her home at her age could kill her. There was no way Tulsa would let Ruby risk so much.

“We’ll just have to close the business,” Tulsa said. “You’d still have the land and house.” And more. Clifford, Ruby’s late husband, and Tulsa’s mother, Faith, were buried in the front yard overlooking the river. Ruby had lost them both years before. It could destroy her to lose them all over again.

“And what would you do, Tulsa? Flip burgers? Honey, I love you, but your hamburgers taste like roadkill, and there isn’t much else to do in Fiddle.”

“This isn’t up for discussion, Ruby. You are not going to risk everything. Besides, I can find work in Springfield.” Tulsa strove for a nonchalance she didn’t feel. Springfield was a city nearly two hours away, too far to commute. She shrugged like it didn’t matter, though it did. It really did. “I could still come back for weekends.”

Ruby crossed her arms. “Rupert Clancy will not get his claws on Ed’s.”

“It’s too risky.”

Ruby’s angry face seemed to soften. “You love it here.”

“That’s beside the point.”

“Your happiness *is* the point,” Ruby said. “I *will* get that loan, and we’ll keep the business open year-round. That should bring in enough. This will be my gift to you, honey. And while I’m at it, I’m going to transfer ownership of everything, Ed’s and ours, to you.”

“What? Why?”

“I’m almost eighty. I’m not going to live forever. That way, when I die, you can avoid probate.”

Tulsa winced. “Don’t talk like that.”

Ruby just shrugged. Tulsa’s mouth opened and closed. Twice. She reminded herself of a fish out of water, trying to gulp air. Though part of Tulsa wanted to hogtie her grandmother until she could talk some

sense into her, another part wanted to celebrate Ruby's determination to keep the canoe business afloat. Finally she nodded her head. "I'll come with you to the bank." If the bank's terms were too preposterous, she would have a chance to make Ruby reconsider taking out that loan.

"I'm a big girl, and you've got to be here for customers. We sure can't afford to lose any business now." Ruby started walking up the steps.

Her grandmother seemed a little wobbly. Tulsa jumped up beside her and linked her arm through Ruby's to steady her. "Are you okay?" Tulsa asked.

"I'm fine."

Ruby's face seemed so thin these days. "Maybe you should take a nap first."

"Later." They topped the stairs.

Tulsa stopped, putting a hand on each of Ruby's shoulders to hold her in place. "Ruby, are you sure about this?"

"Life is about taking chances," Ruby said. "Chances on the weather. On other people. On yourself. On romance and love."

"Love? What's that got to do with anything?"

"Oh, Tulsa." Ruby looked almost tearful. "Love has everything to do with everything."

Tulsa looked away.

Ruby put her arm through Tulsa's. "Come to the house with me before I go. I got you something."

Ruby's pace was much slower than before. They entered the house through the office, which faced the yard. The antler rack on the wall above Ruby's head made it look as if her grandmother had sprouted horns.

Ruby handed Tulsa a paperback novel, *Sunny Chandler's Return* by Sandra Brown. On the cover a pretty woman gazed adoringly at the man in whose arms she was dancing.

Tulsa groaned.

"You'll like it," Ruby said.

“A romance novel?”

“It’s about a woman trying to start her own business. You should relate to that.”

“Let me guess. She falls in love with Mr. Perfect.”

“No one’s perfect, honey, even in romance novels.”

“I bet it’s got a happy ending,” Tulsa said.

“Romances do.”

Tulsa tossed the book on the desk. “That’s not romance, Ruby. That’s fantasy.”

“True love isn’t a fantasy.”

All those times when her mom had sat on Tulsa’s bed, face flushed, eyes wide, words tumbling out of her about her latest Mr. Right. How many different men had they moved in with? Five? Six? Her mother had loved so fast. Been so sure.

Been so wrong.

“Mom always had a romance novel in her hand. Was that what made her think that every man she met was her Prince Charming?”

“Just because your mom made some bad choices doesn’t mean you will.”

Tulsa thought of Charles. And Donny. And Warren. “I sure have so far.”

Ruby looked near tears. “You can’t give up on love, Tulsa. You just can’t.”

Tulsa sighed. Ruby was risking everything for her. The least she could do was do something to please Ruby. She lifted the book from the desk. “Fine. I’ll read it.”

Ruby’s eyes lit up. “Good.” She raised her hand in the air as if swearing an oath. “Promise me you’ll keep an open mind.”

“It’s open.”

“Honey, if you’ve got an open mind, then I’m a rainbow trout.”

“I’ll try. I promise.”

“Good,” Ruby said. “Oh, and one more thing. You need to read it by tomorrow night.”

That made no sense. “Why?”

“You’ll see.”

Ruby’s smile was maddening. Good thing it was a short book. “Tomorrow, fine.” Damn. She didn’t have time to waste on some silly book. She would just skim the thing.

“I’ve got to use the bathroom and put on some lipstick before I go to the bank,” Ruby said. She kissed Tulsa’s cheek.

Tulsa went back outside and inhaled the late-May morning air, so fragrant with honeysuckle and clover, bees were probably getting drunk. The seventy canoes she’d stacked leaned against one another, their aluminum sides glistening in the sunlight like beached whales. Lose this place? She walked down to the river, where customers had left three boats earlier. She grabbed the gunnels of one, swung it overhead, and carried it up the stairs. Her strong arms made her feel oak hard and deep-rooted.

She glanced at her watch. Guy should be back soon. If the bank did give Ruby a loan to buy Ed’s, they would need to come up with ways to increase their business. She would not let Ruby lose her home. She would not.

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