CHAPTER 1

DIRT POOR

"Dreams come in a size too big so that we may grow into them."

Josie Bisset

Independence Day 1926 was not worthy of celebration to most residents of Griffin, Georgia. Nobody had enough money to honor the nation's holiday, and the July afternoon sun forced even the most enthusiastic of children to play in the shade. Adults up and down the street could only sit on porches, swat flies, watch after their children, and wait until nightfall for relief. In the distance, a terse discussion between a man and his wife carried through the neighborhood. The woman complained that it was too hot to cook.

For Rhunette it was impossible to celebrate. The tin roof under which she sweltered did little more than shield direct sunlight. Her worn-out nightgown covered her

plump body, sticking to her sweat-drenched skin. She constantly repositioned her back to support a belly so full it threatened to burst any minute from a long pregnancy. As the sun set, all she could do was fan herself and wait in preparation for her first child to be born. Meanwhile, Bud, the father of Rhunette's child, toiled in vain behind the house to make something grow, listening for a sign to call the midwife down the street.

Their relationship was complicated. Bud and Rhunette had never married. Her circumstances had been forced upon her when Bud chose to mate with the 14-year-old girl. He owned a café and lived across the street from his business in the tin-covered shack she now called home.

Initially she took a liking to Bud when he wanted her to work for him. Her father Johnny Johnson had suspicions about the man but said openly very little. Her more outspoken parent was her mother Lizzy, who regarded employment to be a rare opportunity and encouraged her to pursue it. Rhunette inevitably felt privileged by the prospects and flattered that an older man spoke kindly to her. He flirted with her until one day his harmless overtures turned. She resisted. But he forced himself upon her, changing their lives forever.

Just after her 15th birthday, Rhunette showed signs of pregnancy. When it was confirmed, Lizzy did everything she could to keep the older man away from her daughter, to no avail. Lizzy felt partially responsible, never imagining that Bud would take advantage of a girl so young. Confrontation between them revealed Bud's forceful nature, and Rhunette's parents relented.

Pregnancy made Rhunette feel grown up. She wanted to be an adult, insisting she was capable of making her own decisions.

The morning following Independence Day, Rhunette's baby wasted no time getting started. The sun had not yet risen as she calmly suggested that Bud retrieve the midwife. She slowly stood up and deliberately made her way toward the bed. Characteristic of the women of her day, she demonstrated a strong will to survive, regardless of the conditions. It took every ounce of energy she could muster to position her otherwise strong, resilient frame to deliver this child. Too poor for a sedative and too repulsed to drink from the bottle of grain alcohol Bud left by the side of the bed, she did what she could to prevent her baby from coming before help arrived. When the midwife knocked at the door, Bud let her in and went back outside. He wasn't overly interested in the whole affair as the women went to work to bring his first child into the world.

Without any complications, on July 5 at 8:30 a.m., John Edward Seagraves was born. Rhunette named her son after her father Johnny. Lizzy defiantly insisted on calling him William. The issue would not be resolved until the day John became old enough to answer to his name. Bud didn't care either way. He'd grown distinctly bitter beyond the war.

World War I proved a brutal engagement of men battling the strength of wills and nature. For Bud's opponents, unfortunately, the power in his hands had equaled his desire to live, which had made him a lethal foe in hand-to-hand combat. During battle, any Allied soldier lucky enough to have survived being stabbed, shot, or blown up by the Germans had either lost limbs to the

surgeons or had been poisoned with mustard gas. Bud Seagraves had been fortunate enough to walk off the battlefield with his limbs intact, but his lungs would never be the same.

Bud had been an obedient and reliable infantryman in the United States Army, yet he was an ill-tempered and angry civilian. Every burning breath he took reminded him of how life had changed upon his return to America. The First World War had been a desegregated affair. In contrast, making the long thankless trip back to Georgia from Europe, he had no choice in the deep American South but to accept segregated social conditions subsequent to the war's conclusion. Back home was a world that hated him more than the Germans had, a world that routinely lynched black men – especially those wearing the U.S. Army uniform. Death in war made sense to him; death at home did not. Bud's lungs burned badly this time of year, but he refused to complain. He got his revenge holding it in and hating the world instead.

For the first two years after John's birth, the Seagraves household was an unhappy place. Bud was not an educated man, but he was smart. In his mind, he knew he was right and the world was wrong. Deep down he had no use for a hollering son who kept him up at night. John's father became less and less able to provide for his family as the country approached the Great Depression. With little food or resources, Rhunette was unable to improve conditions for her newborn, her husband, or herself.

When Rhunette became pregnant again, her parents fought back anger. More starving children made no sense. Johnny had had enough of this pedophile and went after Bud with a gun. The two had words. Witnesses thought

Rhunette's father would shoot Bud dead in the street, but Lizzy and Rhunette jumped between them and stopped him. No shots were fired.

Shortly after John's second birthday, Rhunette provided her son with a baby sister named Virginia. John sometimes observed his little sister with curiosity. He wondered what she was so upset about, realizing the noise seemed to increasingly upset his father. Prone to fits of rage, Bud stormed out of the house, causing John to gravitate toward his mother. She tried everything to sooth Virginia's troubled spirit. Nothing worked.

John instinctively stayed close to his mother's maternal warmth. Bud showed no genuine interest in family matters. Lack of money was always his main concern. Sometimes he went days without customers, and when he made a few dollars, Bud found new ways to squander his money. Playing cards, drinking, and carousing helped him forget the family he left behind.

Some of John's earliest memories were about the three-room shack in which he was born. It was here that he began to notice the world around him, taking in his surroundings in greater detail. There wasn't much to look at, but he didn't know any better. He walked around where he once crawled in the small kitchen, bedroom, and living room which doubled as a second bedroom. Not a single flat surface could be found in the house. Everything drooped. Rain or shine, the weather took its toll on this house.

Clearly, the weather was least kind during heavy rain. The broken-down hovel was made of wood appearing grayish-brown, with a porch that sagged and two small wooden steps in need of repair. The house stood on cinder

blocks to keep the floor from saturating during torrential rains. With the slight slope the house was built on, even the cinder blocks did not keep the floor from touching the ground. Georgia soil was made of red clay, hard enough to repel water. At a glance there was nothing to prevent the house from simply washing away. The tin roof overhead was often so loud during heavy rain it both frightened Virginia and drowned out her wailing.

Bud wasn't much of a repairman and frequently argued with Rhunette over maintenance issues. John watched as his father hung old newspaper on the walls to cover leaking cracks. John was too young to know that paper was neither waterproof nor stain resistant. Inadequate was the best Bud could do, or perhaps as much as he could afford. He complained to Rhunette that she didn't understand what he had been through. In his struggle for money and respect, he concluded that if it didn't involve either, it was women's work.

Everyone was dirt poor. Poverty wasn't personal. Yet for Bud, it was very personal. Overall, black people experienced especially great hardships in an attempt to live a decent life. Bud could plainly see that everyone needed to eat. They just could not pay for it. Many of his customers were black sharecroppers who had lost their cash crops in cotton to barren soil, faulty methods, erosion, boll weevils, and declining prices.

Then on October 29, 1929, "Black Tuesday" capped a momentous downturn in the New York Stock Exchange. The Stock Market Crash of 1929 brought industry and banking to a halt. Whatever had kept the slow-moving southern economy going faltered, practically shutting

down agriculture completely. The Great Depression immediately followed.

Bud stood by as families migrated away from the rural South to urban centers or northern industrial communities in search of unskilled work.[1]

In need of additional help, Bud told Rhunette if John was old enough to work that Bud would make him get a job. She was not amused.

Rhunette was not one to entertain feelings of hopelessness. Still, she struggled to maintain a positive outlook for her children, but Bud's dark moods weighed heavily upon her. His abusive behavior further provoked her misery. Often at night, when she thought everyone was asleep, John could hear his mother crying. He laid there quietly, without moving, listening with great sadness and suffering along with her. At his young age, he would have done anything if he knew what or how. In the morning, he carried her suffering with him and stuck by her side, watching for any signs that things were better. For now, hope would not be forthcoming.

With the full support of her parents, Rhunette accepted the necessity to leave Bud. She could not tolerate his fierce temper nor endure any more mistreatment. What forced her decision, however, was the fear that staying with Bud might put the children in danger. She had to make a change for herself and her children. With her father's declining health contributing to her parents' financial struggles, they collaborated like many other families and decided to relocate to the city, excluding Bud. Rhunette sent a telegram to her brother James Johnson.

To Rhunette and her children, Uncle James was more than her babies' uncle; he was a savior to them all. James

was a very tall, slender, loving man all too willing to dote over his niece and nephew. A hard-working professional, he was a gentleman married to a respectable woman. He had proven consistently to be very dependable. James knew that Bud was volatile. He also knew that one day he would have to remove Rhunette from that explosive environment. A God-fearing man, James was leery of Bud but not afraid of him. His sturdy countenance and values illogically intimidated Bud, who was largely relieved to see the family go.

James responded to the requests of his parents and Rhunette with a date to help them and the children move. He found them a new home, paid the rental down payment, and then moved everyone forty miles north to Atlanta from Griffin. John was three years old, his sister Virginia only one. They relocated from a downtrodden shack in the country to the biggest city in the Southeast. Deliverance looked like a little three-room house on West Street off Oliver Street.[2]

Shortly after moving to Atlanta, Rhunette's father Johnny fell extremely ill. The benefit of a black hospital could not reverse his condition. Before long, he passed away. Symptoms indicated he died of prostate cancer in his forties.

Were it not for Uncle James, John would have been influenced solely by two grown women and an infant sister. Sadly, his mother and grandmother continued to argue over naming rights. Rhunette and Lizzy presented John with a very strange conundrum. First, they both asked him to acknowledge them as his mother. In a confusing obligation to satisfy the women, John called his mother "Rhunette," while referring to his Grandmother

Lizzy as “Mom.” Second, with no end in sight, the time had finally come to address the name dispute.

Rhunette and Lizzy had continued to clash over his birth name. Rhunette chose the name John and her decision was final, citing that she brought him into this world and that was the name she decided he should have. Lizzy loved him so much she felt she had naming rights, too, and she favored the name William, actually “Bill” for short.

Willful as she was, Lizzy and the rest of the family remained stuck on calling John “Bill” despite Rhunette’s objections. Lizzy’s argument was that she had few pleasures in life, specifically two – her beloved grandson and a pinch of Brutton snuff. She would not be denied her desired role in John’s life. She derived great pleasure in saying, “Billy! God sure gave ’Nette that boy. But that’s ‘my’ boy!” If only to keep peace, Rhunette gave up, figuring it would do no harm.

The bond between Rhunette and John was built on continuity and trust. This mother’s love may have been short on resources, but not on purpose. She knew her son was smart and only needed encouragement and support, something that had been sadly lacking from his own father. She knew her brother James was a good influence on him. She would be quite pleased if John followed James’ example.

With a three-year-old son whose father refused to nurture him, Rhunette decided she needed to do whatever she could to help John find his place in the world. She felt that she should spend as much time with him as he wanted to spend with her. Instinctively, a mother knows what interests her child, and Rhunette knew John enjoyed

cooking. In her heart she was happy to have something to offer him besides nourishment, clothing, and shelter. Not only was she very good at cooking but she also made it look easy as she glided effortlessly around the kitchen. He watched every move she made with great curiosity. She enjoyed watching him learn with the leftover piecrust and some extra filling. He rolled out the crust and copied her to make his own sweet potato pie. “That’s quite an accomplishment,” she kept saying to herself.