

Chapter 1

Magnolia Springs, a sleepy town of some two thousand souls, contained lush green rolling hills, pristine lakes, and deep dark woods, which made for a picturesque scene worthy of a postcard. In its heyday, Magnolia Springs attracted outsiders seeking the town's mineral water, thought to have medicinal properties. Farming and cattle ranching were the main employers in this sparsely populated area. Little had changed in this rural county since it was settled in the late 1700's, including the inhabitants, and chances were things wouldn't change for a long time to come. In Magnolia Springs time seemed to pass at its own leisure, that was part of its charm.

During his long drive to Magnolia Springs Mark remained in deep thought, as he recounted memories from his childhood. He would turn thirty soon, and for the first time in his life he recognized the value of the advice he had received from his parents and grandparents over the years. The death of his grandfather woke him up to the reality that his family would not always be there for him. The time had come for him to be more appreciative and attentive of his loved ones. Mark's visit to see his grand-

mother gave him the perfect opportunity to cast aside the worries of his everyday life and spend time with her. In part, his acceptance of her invitation came from the desire to preserve his family history through his hobby of genealogy.

His Grandmother Emily made the invitation out of her own motives too. Of course, this trip gave her the opportunity to spend time with her grandchild, but this was also a chance to get his help in sorting through a lifetime of possessions and memories. In the year since her husband's passing, she had been unable to discard anything. Now she felt the time had come to put her affairs in order. Many things had to be done and she needed help in getting them done. Never would she want to leave a mess for others to sort through after she had departed this earth.

Shortly after twelve noon, Mark pulled off the main highway onto the long gravel driveway leading to the "old homestead", as the family called it. The entrance wouldn't have been noticeable if it weren't for the two large stone columns and an old rusty iron gate. A feeling of warmth and familiarity came over Mark whenever he returned to the family homestead.

Built in 1899, Emily's home was constructed in the Victorian Queen Anne style. The house sat some two hundred feet off the main road. The large oak trees in the front yard threatened to obscure the view from the road. Yet behind the overgrowth of the towering oaks, her home remained one of the stateliest visions in the county.

Her mother added electricity, two full baths, and a modern kitchen. Emily's additions included a detached two-car garage, sitting on the left side of the home, and a sun-room on the rear of the house. She tried her best to preserve the character and beauty of the home's original design. Satisfaction filled her when she told others, to their surprise, that she was born in the house, never lived anywhere else, and would be perfectly content to die in it too.

Mark parked in front of the garage and hurriedly retrieved his two bags from the trunk. As he approached the front entrance of the house, his Grandmother Emily appeared at the front door wearing a yellow dress with a pink apron tied around her waist, leaving no doubt that she had been cooking all morning. Emily threw up her hand in acknowledgment of her expected company.

Mark paused to look at his grandmother. She appeared older than the last time he saw her. The lines of his grandmother's face had deepened and her hair had grown whiter. Even her back curved more now from old age, than he remembered. He surmised that the stress of grandfather's illness and subsequent death had taken its toll on her. Her bright blue eyes were the same, they sparkled as always, giving a hint that she still had a bit of light left in her.

Dropping his bags, he gave his grandmother a hug and a kiss on the cheek. The feel of her embrace and the smell of her cooking through the open doorway brought back fond memories.

"I'm so glad you're here. It has been too long since you last came to visit me."

"I'm sorry I didn't come see you sooner. Things have been so hectic."

"You're here now. I've got some homemade cornbread and a pot of soup on the stove ready to eat."

"I already ate Grandma."

"You know you can't resist your Grandma's cooking. You better eat while I still can cook. If you're lucky I might share some family recipes with you before you leave."

"How can I to deny you the pleasure of cooking for me," he grinned.

"After all, it's not like I get a visit from my favorite grandson every day," said Emily smiling.

"But Grandma, I'm your only grandson."

"And you are still my favorite," she laughed.

She had a dry sense of humor and nobody who knew her ever took offense.

"Don't stand there come on in. Leave your bags by the door and get them after you've eaten something."

Mark did as his grandmother suggested and left his bags by the front door. As he crossed the threshold, he felt as if he were being transported into the past. Time seemed to stop at her doorstep. He passed the staircase, which sat on the right side of the main hallway, to the end of the hall where the kitchen entrance was located. Mark could almost envision his grandfather coming down the hall to greet him.

An antique table once belonging to his great-great grandfather sat on the left hand side of the kitchen. Emily told him to have a

seat, as she headed to the stove. Two bowls were already sitting on the counter in preparation. She took down a ladle, which hung under a cabinet, and began dipping out two bowls worth of the soup. Mark noticed a plate covered with a cloth sitting on the table in front of him. He lifted the cloth to discover freshly baked cornbread. The aroma of the soup and bread filled the kitchen. Grandma Emily came back with a bowl in each hand and pulled two spoons from her apron pocket. She offered him a piece of cornbread. He took a big bite.

“Nobody makes cornbread like you.”

“It’s an old family recipe handed down from my grandmother. Now try the soup.”

He took the spoon and scooped up some of the soup.

“Now this is good soup,” he grinned with delight.

Emily poured them both a glass of fresh sweet tea over ice.

“I know how much you enjoy sweet tea, so I brewed a fresh batch right before you got here.”

“Where is Sally,” asked Mark.

Sally was Emily’s Golden Retriever, who had become Emily’s little shadow after Tim’s death.

“She is out back. How is your dog Bailey?” she asked.

“He is still chasing squirrels as usual. He was getting a little chubby, so I put him on a diet.”

“What about Laura’s dog?”

“Rosie is so hyper, but little dogs often are.”

“And how is Laura?”

“She’s doing good.”

“I don’t understand why you and Laura don’t tie the knot. It’s obvious you are crazy about her.

“We have talked about it before. We agreed that if we do get married, two kids are plenty. Well, actually she said three, but I only agreed to two.”

I would like you to give me some great grandchildren before I die.”

“Don’t talk like that. You’ll be around a lot more years. Look at your mother she lived to be ninety-one.”

“I supposed you have a point, but I figured a little guilt from me might hurry things along. At my age it is a blessing that I can still see, hear, talk, and walk.”

“I’m lucky to have you Grandma. What special plans have you made for your eighty-third birthday next Saturday?”

“I nearly forgot. It’s on May 28th. I have nothing planned. I don’t need anyone making a big fuss over me.”

“I will have to do something nice for you.”

“You already did, you came to see me.”

After they finished their meal Emily insisted on cleaning up despite her grandson’s objections. Mark picked up his bags, one in each hand, and ascended the staircase. Emily called out from the kitchen, “Your room is at the top of the stairs. It’s the first door on the left.”

When he reached the top step, he noticed both a door to his left and right. He paused and thought to himself, did she mean left at the top of the stairs as I walked up or left once I am at the top of the stairs facing the front of the house? Mark, famous for his over-thinking, over-thought this too. He had slept in every bedroom in the house over the years and his grandparents had no set guest room. He first went into the door to his right. The dim lit room felt eerie, until he found the light switch. Once illuminated, the room proved a treasure trove of antique furnishings.

The first object to capture his attention was a portrait, which hung above the fireplace mantle in a large oval frame. The black and white photograph revealed a regal couple. The gentleman’s penetrating eyes and determined face dared you to cross him. He wore a fashionable dark suit and a matching bow tie. This stranger’s face seemed familiar to Mark. The Lady, obviously his wife, seemed all too familiar herself. She wore an elegant white dress, had beautiful eyes and dark shoulder length hair. Mark surmised that this must be his great grandparent’s wedding picture.

Mark never recalled seeing a picture of his great grandfather and he had only seen photographs of his great grandmother late in her life. He questioned if his vague memories of her were real, until he saw a photograph of himself and his great grandmother the Christmas before her passing. He was only four years old when she died. As he leaned forward to get a better look at the portrait a floorboard creaked loudly. Startled, he jumped straight up in fright. When he had regained his composure, he

heard his grandmother's voice calling out to him from downstairs, "I've got some fresh towels for the upstairs bath."

He stepped back toward the door, turned off the light switch, and looked down to his grandmother, who stood at the bottom of the stairs.

"Your other left," she teased him. "When you are done in there come downstairs. I'll have dessert waiting for you."

"Thanks Grandma, you're the best."

He rushed down to take the towels and ran back up to the door opposite of the one he had just entered. This room was small yet charming. A large window, bright white walls, and pine furniture made the room light and cheerful. He set his bags on the floor and laid the towels on the dresser.

Mark took the stairs two by two like a big kid. He bounded into the kitchen, where a piece of lemon meringue pie sat on the table waiting for his arrival. "My favorite," said Mark pleasantly surprised. Emily may have been turning eighty-three the following weekend, but her memory was as sharp as ever.

Emily explained that after he finished eating, they would retire to the front porch for a little fresh air. She would then reveal to Mark what she had in store for spring cleaning. Once again, Emily insisted on cleaning the plates and forks from the pie.

"Leave them, I'll get them later," she advised Mark. "Let's go relax on the porch," she suggested.

The home's front porch ran the entire length of the house, wrapped around a turret at the right front corner, and continued down the right side of the house. A small wrought iron table and two chairs sat where the porch curved around the turret. The front porch contained a set of white wicker furniture, which included a couch, two chairs, and a table. On the side porch a swing hung from the ceiling. The intricate railing work, decorative wood brackets, and spandrels set the whole house off. They sat at the small corner table. Outside the temperature surpassed eighty degrees with a clear blue sky and a light breeze.

Emily broke the silence first, "I'd like your help clearing out the closets, the attic, the shed, and the cellar."

"No problem Grandma, I came to help. I meant to ask you about the first room I went into earlier, who is the couple in the portrait over the fireplace?"

“My parents on their wedding day in 1919. She was thirty and he was thirty-two. In fact, they held the reception in the front parlor of this house.”

“I would love to see some of your old photo albums. I haven’t seen them in years.”

“After supper we will relax in the sun room and look through them together. There may be some photo albums in the closet of the bedroom you were in earlier. It needs to be cleaned out while you are here anyway.”

“Sounds good. I will start with that closet.”

There was another long silence as if she were pondering a great many things. Finally she spoke, “There is a lot of history on this land and in this family. Things you don’t know and maybe the time has come to tell it.”

With his curiosity peaked Mark asked, “I’d love to hear it.”

“I’m going in Mark,” she said abruptly.

“Okay Grandma. I’m eager to check out that room.”

“Help yourself. I think I will take a nap before supper.”

“Call if you need anything Grandma.”

Mark went directly to the bedroom’s closet, which overflowed with boxes and Grandpa’s old clothing. Mark pulled out a worn gray fedora, which his grandfather loved to wear long after such hats were out of style. He tried it on, but to his dismay, it was too small. Boxes dangled precariously over the edge of the shelf above. Several boxes were stuffed below the hanging clothes. Mark removed all of the boxes and laid them on the floor beside him. Many of these boxes contained medical bills from his grandfather’s battle with cancer. Suddenly it occurred to Mark that his grandfather’s clothes would have to go too. A sense of sadness overcame him.

Mark looked through the hanging clothes and noticed his grandfather’s favorite blue pinstripe suit. He ran his hand down the lapel. His mind drifted away to the last time he saw his grandfather alive and coincidentally the last time he wore that very suit.

In the spring of the year before his grandfather’s passing, Mark had driven down to spend Easter weekend with his grandparents. The family tradition was to gather together to attend church for Easter Sunday service, followed by a big meal his grandmother had prepared in advance. That Sunday morning

Mark stopped by his grandfather's open bedroom door and looked in to observe Grandpa Tim tying his bright yellow necktie in front of the dresser mirror. His grandfather had on a pristine white dress shirt complete with cuffs. Grandpa was always very dapper recalled Mark. Tim noticed movement in the mirror and caught his grandson's reflection.

He finished his tie, as Mark watched, and then came over to where his grandson stood to give him a hug. Mark kissed him on the cheek.

"Son, I'm glad you are here, it means a lot when you get to be my age to be surrounded by your family. I love you son," said Tim.

"I love you too Grandpa," replied Mark.

Mark never forgot that day. Sadness came rushing back as he recalled his grandfather's passing. Mark's absence at his Grandpa Tim's deathbed weighed heavily on him. He felt guilty for not being there and he felt he had to make it up to him by helping his grandmother.

Mark began to feel drowsy and decided to take a nap too. It seemed as if he had barely laid his head down, when he awoke to the sound of movement from below and the familiar scent he enjoyed as a child. The aroma of fresh baked bread filled the bedroom. Looking over to the nightstand, he read the bright red figures of the alarm clock, which displayed 6:05 p.m. He felt groggy and regretted ever having napped. Sleeping during the daytime, when not sick, always made him feel worse. How his parents and grandparents could take naps during the day remained a mystery to him.

Rubbing his eyes, he looked up and saw his reflection in the dresser mirror. I sure do look rough, he thought. Mark slid on his shoes, stood up, and ran his hand through his hair. After a quick stop in the bathroom, he leisurely walked down the stairs.

Mark took a detour when he reached the bottom of the stairs. He slid back the heavy wooden doors to the left of the foyer and peered inside the study. Dusty and neglected, his grandmother rarely entered this room. His great grandfather's solid cherry desk sat at the far end and three of the rooms four walls had built in cherry bookcases from floor to ceiling. The mossy green front wall held two large windows which looked out onto the front porch. A neglected library ladder leaned against the far left

corner of the room. Four chairs and a couple small tables were arranged for informal conversations. On the wall adjoining the master bedroom was a large fireplace with a stone mantle. Above the mantle hung an oil painting, which he now assumed to be that of his great grandfather. Positioned near the fireplace, a large armchair and brass floor lamp seemed like one of the coziest spots in the house. He slid the doors closed and turned to the parlor across the hallway.

The old player piano was the first thing to catch his eye. He recalled playing with it as a child. Mark loved to pound on the keys to see if he could make a tune, but it always made a frightful noise instead. The pink rose patterned wallpaper, he remembered so fondly from his childhood, still clung to the walls. An elegant crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling of the parlor. A large red Victorian loveseat with two matching armchairs occupied the center of the room, while beneath the furniture resided a Persian rug with a matching color scheme. A Victorian game table sat in one corner surrounded by a set of four matching chairs. Beside the front windows were a rocking chair and a black walnut needlepoint chair, which shared a small lamp table between them.

As Mark revisited childhood memories, his grandmother called out from the kitchen, "Is that you Mark, I didn't want to wake you until the food was ready. I know how you love pot roast," she said coming down the hallway to meet him wearing a knowing grin.

"I hate you went to all this trouble," smiled Mark.

"I thought we might eat in the dining room for supper," suggested his grandmother.

"I thought you reserved that room for the holidays?" asked Mark jokingly.

"When my parents were alive, we ate supper there every night."

The dining room's red vibrant walls made it the most colorful room in the house. The antique mahogany table with seating for ten people took up the center of the room and was covered by a fancy lace tablecloth. A captain's chair, for the head of the household, sat at the end of the table. An elegant Credenza sideboard butted against the wall that adjoined the kitchen. The wall

separating the living room and dining room contained a two sided fireplace.

The china setting was blue wedge wood with English country scenery on the bottom. Mark remembered them from holidays past. The carefully arranged silverware was indeed silver. For a moment Mark wondered if a head of state was invited without his knowing.

“I see you went all out,” said Mark.

“I can fancy it up a bit, from time to time,” said Emily. “Every so often I have some friends over for dinner and a game of Rummy.”

Emily had already prepared them a spot at the end of the table. The pot roast arrived on a large serving dish with sides of potatoes, carrots, and onions. The fresh homemade rolls were in a separate bowl awaiting consumption. Mark looked at his grandmother with amazement.

“Are you for hire? I can’t pay much, but I’ve got a spare room you can use,”

“I’ll think about it,” she said laughing.

After a delicious supper, Mark carried the dishes into the kitchen, and Emily put the leftovers in the fridge.

“Mark have a seat in the sun room. I’ll be in momentarily. I need to find my pictures.”

Mark waited in the sun room, which functioned as her den. She only used her formal living room during the holidays. Emily’s sun room, originally the back porch before being enclosed, sat off her kitchen. There she enjoyed the sunshine and light without the extremes of the hot and cold weather. Wood shutters were deployed at night time for privacy.

Mark sat on the big cozy couch and sank down. No sooner had he gotten comfortable, when his grandmother reappeared with a black leather bound photo album. Unlike a lot of old, photo albums Mark had seen, it was obvious that she treated this one with great care. Emily sat on the couch beside Mark, placed the photo album on her lap, and opened it. “Go ahead have a look,” she insisted. Mark slid the album over to his lap and slowly turned through the pages.

“These are the oldest pictures I have from the early days of the family,” she explained.

The first photos he saw were from the home and property. The land on which Mark's great grandparents made their home was majestic: green rolling hills surrounded by old growth forest and fields full of wildflowers. The whole estate comprised of a little more than one square mile. Half of the property remained wooded, while the rest once served as tobacco fields and cattle grazing land. An eighty acre lake ran through the middle of the property.

"Y'all had a stable on the property?" asked Mark.

"Yes, it burned down in the 1950's. Mother never cared much about riding, so after father died she sold the horses."

"How did it burn down?" he asked.

"A bolt of lightning struck a tree beside it during a bad storm. Part of the tree fell onto the roof of the stable and caught it on fire."

"What was the large field behind the house used for?" inquired Mark.

"It was once our twelve acre garden. Now, as you can see, it's full of waist high grass and weeds."

"I didn't know y'all had a barn," said Mark pointing to a photograph.

"We tore it down a long time ago, when it became unstable."

Mark spotted a picture of a rustic cabin, "Where is this cabin?"

"The Cabin is on the far side of the lake. It was the original home for this property.

"I'd like to go see it sometime this week."

"As far as I know it is still standing, but it may not be safe to go into," she warned.

Emily turned the page. She smiled when she saw the next photograph.

"Is that you Grandma?"

"Yes, it's one of my favorite pictures of me. It was taken on Thanksgiving Day in 1941."

The next page revealed a photo of her late husband Timothy in uniform.

"My Tim looked so dashing in his military dress uniform. Did you know he was at D-Day?" asked Emily.

"Yes, I know."

Mark took great pride in the fact that his grandfather had served his country in the war. Tim served in the Navy during the war in Europe and the Pacific. The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor six months to the day they were married. He enlisted for service two days after Christmas and did not return home until the end of 1945.

“Over here is our wedding photo,” she pointed to the opposite page, “June 7, 1941.”

“You two look like movie stars in that photo.”

“I guess we were a pretty good looking couple back then. You know when you have been married for sixty-three years, you become like one living breathing person. When he died a part of me died too.”

“I thought a lot about Grandpa today, when I was going through the bedroom closet. I sure do miss him,”

“Me too,” added Emily with a lump in her throat.

Mark turned the page to find a picture of two young men.

“These are my brothers: Frank Jr. on the left and Levi on the right,” she explained.

He noticed that her brother Frank Jr. resembled his father but with darker hair, while Levi and Emily looked more like their mother, but with their father's lighter hair.

Mark flipped to the next page there were two more photos of couples, one on the left and one on the right.

“Who are the couple in the picture on the left?” asked Mark.

“Those are my maternal grandparents Charles Webster and his wife Emeline Jackson. They were married nearly forty years when a stroke left her bedridden. My grandfather bathed her, fed her, and waited on her day and night. He never left her side. When she died a few months later, he was so heartbroken that he never recovered emotionally.”

“Who are couple on the right page?” asked Mark.

“Those are my paternal grandparents, George Vandermeer and Winifred Franklin. She was a young girl from Pennsylvania and supposedly a distant relative of Ben Franklin. Her parents moved to Virginia when she was young and that is where she met George. A year later my aunt Mary was born and six years later Winifred gave birth to their second child, my father, Godfrey Franklin Vandermeer. The Vandermeer family moved from Virginia to North Carolina when my father was just a toddler.”

Mark paused, before him was a smaller copy of the photo he had seen in the upstairs bedroom. As if she knew, what he was thinking, his grandmother said, "A lovely couple they were." Then as if something were stirring deep inside her she blurted out in an uncharacteristic way, "Pictures can be deceiving!" Mark looked surprised and wondered what she meant.

"You see I have never discussed it with a soul other than my mother and my husband. The pictures say one thing, but the truth is more complicated."

"I'd like to know more?"

"I think my father got a thrill out of making money and seeing how far he could push people to get what he wanted out of them. He had some grandiose vision of himself as a self made man and a born leader. In reality he was neither. He expected perfection from others, but couldn't live up to his own standards. He managed to hide his true nature from his high society friends and business clients. To them he was intelligent, shrewd, and charming. He had them all fooled. My look at the time, I'm going to retire for the night, but you are welcome to watch television if you like."

"I can't believe you are going to keep me in suspense."

"I've got to give you something to look forward to," smiled Emily. "I'm going to tell you the history of this family as I have experienced it. Some of the information is second hand and the words may not be the exact ones spoken, but I believe the spirit of what I am going to tell you to be true and accurate. I'm sure won't be able to tell you it all at once, but you should know it all by the time you leave."