



Also by H.C. Bentley

Available directly from the author and on all major eBook retailers

Small Town Hearts

Her Last Love

When Love Comes Home

City Boy, Southern Girl

To Love Again

The Bedfords

From This Moment

Take Me Home

Feel The Heat

Smoky Mountain Christmas

Stay With Me

The Kincaids

Capturing Jayde

Stand Alones

Running For Him

Copyright

Mississippi Heat © 2023 H.C. Bentley

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be scanned, copied, reproduced, or distributed in any manner for any reason without written permission from the author. To do so would be in violation of the author's rights under copyright law. Please do not encourage piracy, and only purchase authorized books.

Cover design by H.C. Bentley

Cover photos provided by DepositPhotos

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and/or incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance of people (living or dead), places, events, names, or companies is a coincidence.

This is the work of a human author. There was no use of AI in the creation of this work and, as such, the author grants no permissions for the use of AI in regards to this work.

Dedication

For my dad, who used to tell me that some of his best times were spent on a family member's farm in rural Mississippi.

Love and miss you, Dad. I hope your version of Heaven is even better than those carefree days you loved.

Part 1

“So it's true, when all is said and done, grief is the price we pay for love.”

~ E.A. Bucchianeri

Prologue

In a clearing nestled in the woods in rural Mississippi, the ominous sound of a shovel scraping dirt filled the air.

"They don't learn." A man, sweating and covered in dust, grunted as he jabbed the spade back into the earth. "I try to teach them, to prepare them, and they just don't learn." Gripping the wooden handle, he sent dirt flying as he swung the shovel to the side. "Every time it's the same. Whine, cry, beg, plead. But they still don't learn a damn thing."

He climbed out of the hole, one not very deep despite his efforts, and, with all of his anger behind the motion, stabbed the shovel into the ground so it stood on its own. He stood, his hands braced on his hips, and took in his surroundings while he caught his breath. Noticing the rapid rate the sun was sinking beyond the horizon, he looked down at the body lying on a dry patch of grass at his feet.

She was young, maybe sixteen, and pretty. Or, at least, she had been. Three days of captivity had her dishwater blonde hair, still in its haphazard ponytail, matted with dirt and sweat. Her skin held a fine coat of dust, from the top of her head to the tips of her bare toes. The clothes she wore, a t-shirt and running shorts, were no longer pristine. Her face, once fresh with minimal make-up, showed signs of her distress and fear in the tear tracks through the dirt on her cheeks. Her mouth still held the strip of fabric between her teeth, the gag still knotted below her ponytail. Lengths of rope still bound her wrists and ankles. And the jagged purple and red line, encircling her throat, stood out in stark contrast to her pale skin.

The line she'd earned when she'd proven there was no point in trying to teach her any further, forcing him to end it all.

Now she just lay-bound, still, with blank eyes staring—her body waiting for him to finish his plans for her.

"Things could've been different if you had just listened." He shook his head with a sigh, leaned down, and grabbed her by her ankles. Her cooling skin didn't phase him as he dragged her to the hole and rolled her into it. "But you're just like the rest. Selfish and useless."

He made quick work of filling the hole, carelessly leaving the poor girl in an unmarked grave in the middle of nowhere. After all, she'd failed him, leaving him with nothing but a lingering sense of disappointment. Once he'd finished his task, he returned the shovel to the ramshackle shed and checked his watch.

"Just in time," he murmured with satisfaction before catching sight of his hands.

The wide-palmed hands were dirty, covered in sweat and dirt. Their long fingers were tipped in neatly rounded nails, each now caked with dirt underneath them. Earth had also settled into the lines of his knuckles, between his fingers.

The sight of it disgusted him. He considered himself a fastidious man, one who needed to be clean at all times.

His father had been a farmer and had often come home after a day of work covered in dirt and smelling of sweat and livestock. The older man had often joked that it was the smell of hard work and dedication.

The son just thought it was disgusting and beneath him. And from a young age, he had vowed never to work in a job that had him coming home filthy and stinking.

Desperate to be clean again, especially before going home, he snatched up the jug of water he kept tucked into the corner of the shed. He set it at his feet as he pulled a short pocketknife from his trousers, using its tip to clean the dirt from under his nails. Then, carefully so as not to splash water on his clothes, he ran water over each of his hands, rubbed them together to loosen the grime before rinsing them again. He watched the water droplets fly as he shook his hands dry before placing the jug back in the shed. As he was reaching for the door, he looked down and noticed the dirt smudging his pants legs.

“Damn it.” Stepping back, he searched the small space for anything resembling a clean rag. Spotting one, he made quick work of dusting as much of the dirt from his pants as possible before finally closing up the shed and heading back to his house.

It was a bit of a hike, but then again, he couldn’t have his family finding out about what he considered his mission. The duty he felt he needed to undertake. His purpose.

After all, it was none of their business.

His wife would never question him about where he’d been or what he’d been doing. After nearly ten years of marriage, she knew better. She’d become the quiet, subservient wife she should be and deferred to her husband in all matters. Just as he wanted it. But lately, he was finding her boring. Even borderline annoying. Constantly going on about things with the church or at work, rattling on about all the tedious things having to do with the kids. Doctor’s appointments, grades, play dates, parent-teacher conferences. She could, and sometimes seemed to, go on for days about those boys.

His sons-and thank God they’d had boys-would just watch him in wide-eyed silence when he got home. While he appreciated this (children should be seen and not heard, after all), he was starting to find them soft and weak. Probably due to spending much of their time in the company of their mother. She doted on them, allowed them to do things that caused their brains and bodies to become less than what they should be. Instead of putting them into sports, she encouraged things like art and books. And while he approved of educating them, he felt the boys needed to do the things that boys do. Tackling on the football field or battling it on the basketball court. At the ages of six and eight, they should be well on their way to becoming top athletes. But neither showed the slightest bit of interest in sports.

He knew he’d have to take things in hand soon, toughen those young male bodies up to be strong men. Otherwise, they were going to grow up to be pathetic, inadequate adults.

When he reached the tree line, he saw his house off in the distance. The lights were glowing in the kitchen where he knew his wife would be at work cooking dinner at the stove so it would be ready, or nearly so, when he got there. The boys would be sitting at the kitchen table, their owlish eyes darting from the homework they were completing to the door as he crossed the threshold. None of them would say a word until they gauged his mood and, even then, they were more than likely to say nothing.

As he walked, he planned his evening. A quick shower to wash off the sweat and dirt from the latest phase of his mission, followed by the cursory dinner with his family. After all, it was important to spend time with them even when their company annoyed him. Once the meal was over, he’d leave the cleanup to his wife as, to his mind, it was her job. As was the routine of getting the children bathed and ready for bed. While she did what she was supposed to, he’d retire to his study to finish some work before deciding on his next target and planning the next phase.

After all, the mission was never done. And wouldn't be, until they all learned what he was trying to teach them. No matter how long it took.

Chapter 1

Life in the South always seemed to move at a slower pace than the rest of the world. Folks took their time about things. Family meals were often hours-long events, saying your goodbyes lasted longer than an episode of most sitcoms, and Sunday drives tended to be an all-day affair.

Summers in Tatesville, Mississippi followed suit in grand southern tradition. Except it was only early May and summer was doing its best to bully its way past spring. The evenings were getting longer, the air was smelling sweeter, and the humidity was inching up to just past tolerable.

Lacey Fuller couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

She loved it here, in this little town. She especially loved it right here, on the rickety old swing hanging on the back porch of the house she'd called home her whole life. There were nights she'd sit out here all alone, a glass of sweet tea in one hand, listening to the creak of the chains as she kept the swing in motion with the gentle push of her foot. On any given night, Lacey could be found on the swing, worrying over a test, or dreaming of places she wanted to see, things she wanted to do. Because while she would always call Tatesville home, she wanted to see what all the fuss was about outside of this little farming community, wanted to experience things this tiny dot on the map couldn't offer.

This Friday night, however, she shared the swing with her best friend. They'd been through thick and thin, been each other's secret keeper and partner-in-crime for more than a dozen of their almost eighteen years. Wherever you found Lacey Fuller, chances were you saw JoEllen Harding right there with her. The two were like sisters and happily joined at the hip.

This evening was no exception. The two were sprawled out on the swing at opposite corners, each with a bare foot on the ground to keep the seat in motion. Clad in cutoff shorts and thin tees, the girls were enjoying the slight breeze and declining temperatures, gossiping as they waited for their friend.

"So, what's going on with you and Derek?" Lacey asked.

"Next to nothing."

"What? You guys were hot and heavy there for like two months. You went to prom together and now it's nothing?"

"Well, when the guy you're with starts chasing after sluts in short skirts, it kind of puts a damper on things."

"Ouch. Who?"

"Take a guess. She's blonde, a cheerleader, and mean as a snake."

"Ugh. Ashley Ballard?"

"Got it in one." Jo raised her glass in a mock salute.

"Ugh," Lacey groaned again. "Why her, though?"

"Beats the hell outta me." Jo shrugged. "So, I told him to have at it, but he wasn't going to have me and chase her, too."

"That's my bestie." Reaching out, drink in hand, Lacey clinked her glass against Jo's. "Good for you."

"Yeah, but it still sucks."

"Oh, yeah. Sucks wide. But you're better off alone than with a man whore."

"I'm not alone." Jo smirked, tossed her best friend a sassy wink. "I've got you, hot stuff."

"Uh-huh, 'cause I'm such a catch."

"Sure you are. Why do you think I've been stuck with you since kindergarten?"

"Well, if I went for girls, you'd be at the top of my list. But, alas, I'm a fan of the man."

"One particular man, you mean."

"That's supposed to be our secret."

"And it still is. I'd never spill the beans to my brother that you have a monster crush on him. Though, I don't understand why you're crushing on him because, you know, he's my brother. But to each her own, I guess."

"I'd try to explain it, but you'd probably just be weirded out."

"You're probably right." Jo sat back, her expression thoughtful. "Are you ever going to tell him?"

"Tell him what? That his little sister's best friend thinks he's hot?" It was Lacey's turn to grin when Jo choked on her drink. "Like I'd have any chance with him, anyway. He's in college, surrounded by cute college girls who are not only smart but also like to party. I'm just a high school senior that he's known since she was five years old. I mean, seriously. What would we have in common to talk about?"

"Who says you have to talk?" Jo wiggled her eyebrows.

"Still talking about your brother here."

"Oh. Yeah." Jo shivered. "Gross. Never mind."

"Although," Lacey started, her giggles muffled when Jo slapped a hand over her mouth.

"No. We are not talking about you and my brother and sex." Another shiver. "Please, we have to change the subject." She dropped her hand, pointing her finger at her friend, a signal telling her to move on to another topic.

"Ok, fine. You told Claire to come by around eight, right?" Lacey, scooping up her wavy strawberry blonde hair off her neck, glanced over at her friend as she twisted her hair into a messy bun.

"Yeah, but you know Claire's never on time for anything." Her drawl slow and husky, JoEllen shook her head before gesturing vaguely to the field behind Lacey's house. "She said if she couldn't get her daddy to drop her off, she'd just cut across like always."

Sipping her tea, Lacey just nodded. Claire's constant tardiness was a long-standing joke, one she merely shrugged off with a grin. Things were meant to move slow around here, Claire always laughed, including her.

"She'll get here when she gets here. At least by riding with us, she'll be on time for tomorrow's meet."

"True," Jo agreed. "Or she could make us all late. It's happened before."

"Also true." With a laugh, Lacey looked out over her backyard. The patch of grass was long and wide, bumping up against the farmer's field that, in her lifetime, had grown corn and beans. The narrow stretch of field separated Lacey's house from an old gravel road, one that ran up and into the woods in one direction and back into town the other. And since Claire lived towards town on that road, odds were she'd come down the skinny gravel lane whether it was in her daddy's truck or on foot.

"Speaking of the meet, you nervous?"

"No." Lacey brought her attention back to the porch swing. "Not really."

"I would be," Jo said, blowing out a breath, "if I was going up against the reigning state champ."

"It's only regionals, Jo."

"Only regionals?" Jo shook her head. "You say that like it's no big deal."

"It's not. I look at it like any other meet."

"Meanwhile, the rest of us are nervous wrecks."

"You'll be fine." Sipping her tea, Lacey used a foot to set the swing in motion. "Hey, did you hear about that girl not far from here, over in Greenburg?"

"Yeah. Kelsey Myers. She's a cross country runner. Pretty good, too, from what I hear."

"Same here." Looking down into her glass, Lacey gave a deep sigh. "It's got Dad worried."

"How so?"

"Well, don't say anything-he doesn't want to start a panic-but the way she disappeared is scary. Jo, they snagged her in the middle of a meet."

"Wait. Some psycho managed to get to a runner during a competition?"

"Yeah. Apparently, she hit a stretch of the course a good minute or so ahead of the rest of the runners. When they all crossed the finish line, they thought she'd already won before they realized she'd never made it."

"That's insane. Whoever this is had to have been watching, right?" Jo gave a full-body shiver.

"Pretty much, which means this person is a planner. And patient, since they seem to wait until just the right time to make their move. That's part of what's got my dad, and his officers, on high alert right now. Plus, there's a pattern starting to come out after this girl disappeared."

"What do you mean, a pattern?" Turning to face her friend, Jo's face held a look of concern.

"He's been talking to some of the other sheriffs in the surrounding towns and counties." Draping an elbow along the back of the swing, Lacey rested her head on her fist. "Girls our age are disappearing, Jo. All over. A couple here, another there, then nothing for a month or more. Then a couple more disappear there, then nothing. They're all athletic and pretty, most of them not much younger or older than you and me." Lacey's voice dropped to a low murmur. "And none of them have been found once they disappeared."

"None of them?" Worry now joined concern as Jo's eyebrows drew together. "How many girls are we talking about here?"

"They're not sure of an exact number. But it could be a dozen throughout this part of the state. Maybe more."

"Oh, my God."

"Yeah. It's part of the reason why Dad wants us to ride with him and Mom tomorrow. Safety in numbers and all that."

"But we're just going to the high school. It's not like this is an away meet where we don't know our way around or where most everybody is a stranger."

"I know. But he put his foot down. It was either ride with him or I don't go." Lacey shrugged. "And since I'm not missing regionals, I guess I'll sit in the back seat and be chauffeured to my meet." Rattling the ice in her glass, Lacey met her best friend's gaze. "Dad's going to give you and Claire both the lecture of the buddy system, not going anywhere alone, etc. And he's going to have extra deputies on duty during the meet. He said they'll be in plain clothes, so they don't freak anybody out, but they'll be there."

"This is kind of creeping me out, Lace." Jo stood, rubbing her arms as if she'd caught a chill, despite the warm temperatures and humidity. "I mean, I'll take the lecture-it never hurts to hear it-but the reason behind it? I feel like I'm going to be looking over my shoulder until the police figure this thing out."

"I get it, trust me."

"I know you do. But you have the bonus of having a cop for a dad."

"It's not all sunshine and roses, Jo. I hear about things like this early on, yes. But I also have to deal with my parents freaking out and doubling down on being overprotective. I'm honestly amazed they're letting me go tomorrow. Or any of us, for that matter."

"So, what do we do?" Jo asked as she dropped back down on the swing.

"Take the lecture. Or lectures, as I'm sure your parents will give you their version soon enough." Closing her eyes, Lacey thought back to all the things her father had told her. "Don't go anywhere alone and when you do go somewhere, make sure someone knows the details. Keep awareness, brush up on your self-defense." Opening her eyes again, she looked at her best friend. "And hope like hell this guy is caught soon."

* * *

The next morning, the girls woke early to go through their morning routines before heading out to the track meet. And since Claire had finally shown up, an hour late and unapologetic about it, there were three of them vying for the bathroom, the mirror, and seats at the breakfast table.

Caroline Fuller was in her element, as she always was when her daughter's friends stayed over at the house. She loved her daughter, but had always longed for more children.

"Alright, girls. Time to fuel up. It's a big day today." Setting a pitcher of juice on the table, Caroline looked at each of the girls in turn. "Nervous?"

"Not really." Lacey reached for the bowl of scrambled eggs and scooped some onto her plate.

"Speak for yourself." Claire, her sunny blonde hair in a high ponytail, poured herself some juice. "The competition today is going to be tough."

"We're ready for it," Lacey replied. "We've been working hard all season."

"So have the other teams," Jo put in dryly. "Claire's right, it's going to be a fight to place today."

"I'm sure you'll all do fine." Caroline, coffee in hand, took her seat at the table.

"Where's Dad?" Lacey asked before biting into a strip of bacon.

"He went into the station a little while ago. Said he wanted to get some things done this morning, make sure the extra security detail was ready."

"I still can't believe what's going on." Her ponytail swaying as she shook her head, Claire poked at the food on her plate. "It's crazy we have to have extra security at our own school for a track meet. And the thought of some strange guy, watching girls and waiting for a chance to snatch them? Creeps me out."

"It doesn't make the parents feel any better, believe me." Sipping her coffee, Caroline looked at each of the girls in turn. "I've been up the last several nights worrying myself sick over this whole situation. I can't imagine what the parents of those poor girls are going through." Caroline closed her eyes and gave a quick shake of her head. "I need the three of you to remember what Mitch told you all last night." When the girls murmured in agreement, Caroline nodded. "Jo, Claire, your parents are picking you up from the meet?"

"Should be." Claire nodded before looking over at Jo. "If not, Jo's mom said she'll make sure I get home."

“Yep.” Jo added her own nod, her long brown braid slipping over her shoulder. “Mom and Dad said they’re going to try to close the store a little early. If not, they’re going to send Brooks to come and get me,” Jo said, referring to her older brother. “Or us, if that’s the case.”

“Okay.” Rising from her seat, Caroline took her mug to the sink to rinse it out. “Y’all finish up there and get those dishes in the dishwasher. Mitch should be back in about...” She paused to check the watch on her wrist. “Fifteen minutes. And y’all have to be at the meet thirty minutes early so we’ll be heading out just about as soon as he gets home.” With that warning, Caroline pointed at each of them in turn before she left the kitchen.

“She’s really worried,” Lacey murmured. “I heard her down here pacing last night.”

“All our parents are.” Claire pushed away her plate, the food half-eaten. “We got the safety lecture from your dad yesterday. Then my parents called and gave me their version last night.”

“Same here,” Jo put in, pushing her own plate aside. “Telling me I’m to either ride home with them, Brooks, or your parents. It’s like I’m twelve again.”

“They just want us to be safe.”

“I get it. I really do. But I hope they catch this guy soon so we can all go back to normal.”

“Right there with ya.” Checking her own watch, Lacey stood and gathered her dishes. “C’mon. Let’s get this cleaned up and get ready to go. Coach’ll have our asses if we’re late.”

Continue reading by purchasing through one of these retailers:

H.C. Bentley Bookstore <https://payhip.com/b/t02us>

Amazon <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CRRZJBWD>

Kobo <https://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/mississippi-heat>

Barnes & Noble <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/book/1144573988>

Apple <https://books.apple.com/us/book/mississippi-heat/id6475697063>

Additional retailers may be available. Please visit [my website](#) for more options.