

Tangled, a Southern Gothic Yarn, Sample Chapter

CHAPTER ONE

NETTIE

IN THE BEGINNING it was dreams, only dreams. There was no communication with anyone who could explain them. Nettie would wake in the night, frightened, recognizing the souls there in the vestiges of the trances. They were naked to her – no bodies or voices, just there – a knowing of one to the other. Eventually, when she was older, competent in writing down her thoughts and the dreams, she recorded them, writing them carefully in the journals Mrs. Sophie, Will and May had given her. She would read them when she felt out of sorts, and there, in her fantasies, those phantoms in her dreams, would be the answers – resolutions she predicted months before the problems. She was told to embrace this gift and learn to banish intruders she didn't want pursuing her in the night. Her grandmother, Camille, came to her as an angel to guide her and validate her gifts.

All was well when Nettie could ground herself and feel confident in her abilities, sure of her beliefs. Even puberty didn't upset her balance. The ghosts, premonitions, and dreams continued while she maintained her resolve and embraced her gift. Just when she knew everything would be okay, there was the "episode", as her mother, DeCe, referred to it. Nettie was always confused by DeCe's labeling, because it was not *the episode*, it was one of many in a long line of episodes. DeCe was like the longest running soap opera in history—a one woman version of every villainess who ever graced the television screen. Nettie knew this even though they didn't have a television. Despite her strength and resolve, Nettie began to experience anxiety and doubt. She shelved her plans and wallowed in her insecurities, doubting she could be accepted outside her family realm—the sphere of people who knew she had no father, that her mother was a drug addicted alcoholic, prone to severe bouts of depression, and that her best friends in the world were the animals she could communicate with.

*I'm weird, Nettie told herself, but at least here they know I'm weird and accept me anyway. I have lost the gift I once cherished, and I don't know if I can get it back. I don't know what I want or what to do. Pup doesn't ask me, so, I'll stay here with him, safe.*

Nettie preferred to be out of the house in the mornings, away from the darkness and ghosts that were there. The stables were her favorite place to spend the morning, and she and Pup often went for rides, following Coyote Road to the creek. Gilly, her terrier, ran in front of them, and bounded in the tall grass beside the road, to chase a rabbit or armadillo. Pup could identify the calls of the birds, and told Nettie with precision which bird made the sound. He would go to the leather-bound bird book in the den when they returned and record notes on the birds they had seen. Nettie wondered who had taught him to do that; it was not something DeCe, her mother, or Old Nate, her grandfather would take the time to do.

A glimpse of Old Nate's gnarled hands came to Nettie's mind, a glimpse of something from the past. His hands kneaded each other, rubbing the pain and knots. She had never known her grandfather, yet twenty-one years old, Annette Roberta Randall, and she was thinking about her grandfather's gnarled hands. His memory was tangled in the image of her mother, DeCe. They were knotted together in some unknown history. Nettie saw things in thoughts, distracting her during the ride. Pup wouldn't notice. They always rode in silence unless he spotted a bird or called out to Gilly.

Nettie blamed DeCe, for these images, but, then again, she blamed her mother for everything; it was hard not to blame her. She loomed bigger than anything else in Nettie's life. She realized their dysfunctional relationship wasn't normal. Her mother had always been one step away from suicide, and Nettie was just waiting for her to breakdown. Part of her knew she would be relieved when it happened—then she would be able to breathe.

Pup drew Nettie's attention to Bianca's hoof, wondering if they should get the farrier to pay them a visit. They were in the stables caring for the horses after their ride. Nettie examined the hoof as Pup continued to brush the horses. They replenished the hay and swept the brick floor. She and Pup enjoyed the quiet time in the morning, tending to the horses while Gilly found a spot on the hay and took a nap, resting from the morning run. After the chores, they sat in the rockers on the porch outside the tack room and talked about what the back of the house had looked like before the stables had been added. Will had helped with that, as well as planned the gardens and painted the house. They admired the improvements and made promises to each other not to allow the house to deteriorate, as DeCe and Old Nate had done. Sometimes they would sit in silence, listening to a distant hawk or owl.

Nettie looked at the house: a three-story mansion, which had been built by her great grandparents. She imagined what the ranch might have looked like to her great grandmother, Roberta, when she'd arrived from New Orleans in the early 1900's. Roberta had designed the house to impress their east Texas neighbors with her new wealth. Nettie rocked, wondering if their arrogance and greed had caused their early demise, along with the alcoholism and mental illness that had plagued Old Nate and her mother. She had considered the possibility that their sins had been visited on herself and Pup.

Finished at the stables, Nettie and Pup made their way to the house, following a brick path lined with thick green ferns, variegated ginger, and philodendrons. The path was shaded by tall live oaks, which filtered the light that played on the foliage below. Nettie did not take the garden for granted: she admired the surroundings each time she walked the path. Will had planted much of the landscaping from cuttings and laid the path using old bricks from behind the toolshed. Her deceased brother had created a garden paradise from what had been litter and weeds. Nettie knew he'd done it for her and Pup.

"Let's have grilled cheese," Nettie said. "My favorite recipe is Will's, Pup. He used grated cheese, a can of drained chilies, and mayonnaise. It makes my mouth water every time I think about it."

"I like grilled cheese. Grilled cheese!" Pup said. *Nettie makes good grilled cheese, just like Will used to. I miss Will. Eating grilled cheese makes me think about him and makes me sad for Nettie. She wanted a real brother—not someone like me. I don't know how to be what Will was. I can just be her uncle—just part of an uncle. I know I'm not like most people, but they let me be here, so I will always try my best to be what they want me to be.*

Pup and Nettie were washing the lunch dishes when DeCe's bedroom door creaked opened. Her room was on the first floor, across the hall from the kitchen. She didn't go upstairs, because she was afraid—afraid of ghosts and afraid of everything. DeCe hadn't been upstairs since she was eleven years old. Nettie knew she could see the same spirits she and Pup saw, but DeCe didn't know what to do about them. She couldn't recognize her own spirit, either. She appeared in the kitchen, dressed to go out.

"I wish you wouldn't make that stuff," she said. "It smells up the whole house. Honestly, why can't you two eat peanut butter and jelly, or something?"

"I like peanut butter and jelly, peanut butter, jelly," Pup said.

“Quiet, Pup,” DeCe scowled as she rolled up the sleeves of her white, silk blouse. “I need a ride, Nettie. I have a nail appointment, and I need to stop at the church for a few minutes.”

Nettie looked at Pup, raising her eyebrows. “Requests are usually made with the word ‘please’ somewhere in the sentence,” Nettie said.

“Say ‘please’ and ‘thank you,’” Pup said.

“That’s right,” Nettie said. “It’s only polite.”

“Well, no one ever accused me of being polite. Now, can you give me a ride, or not? I’m pretty sure I can get Carlisle to come pick me up.” DeCe was getting irritated. “I certainly don’t intend to stand around here and listen to you two critique my manners. What will it be, Nettie? You, or Carlisle?” DeCe stood looking at Nettie with her hands on her hips.

“I’ll take you. Let me brush my teeth and get my bag,” Nettie said. “You want to go, Pup?”

“Yes, please, and thank you. I want to go! I want to go!”