



The
FOG
MACHINE



A NOVEL

Susan Follett

REMEMBERING
FREEDOM
SUMMER
1964

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LUCKY SKY
P R E S S

CHAPTER 4

September 1957

Old Habits

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The day the phone company came to the Evanses' house to install their first phone, C.J. made a mental note to be careful what she wished for. Her wanting a tiny show of respect and appreciation seemed to have landed her a lot more work, so much that Miz Harwell grew tired of relaying messages. Most of those now calling C.J. directly wanted occasional help with baking or cleaning before a meeting or party. But C.J. had also taken on the Thornhearts as regulars on Saturday mornings.

Reverend Thornheart was pastor of the big white church where C.J. left the bus to go to the Harwells', and master of the sprawling parsonage, with its wrap porch and dozen high-ceilinged rooms. Only when C.J. had

finished every room but the reverend's study would she knock at his door.

"Enter!"

She nodded to the reverend and pulled the feather duster from her apron pocket. She circled the room, whipping up tiny swirls of dust, then pushed the vacuum around as if trying to catch them all before they landed. She reached to unplug the vacuum.

Sweet Jesus, let him leave me be today.

"Girl, don't you want to hear my sermon?"

"I best be getting that chicken frying so y'all's dinner won't be—" He lifted his page of scribbled notes and peered at her over his bifocals. "Yessir."

"You know about those troublemakers in Little Rock?"

Brother James had told them at Training Union about the nine foolish teenagers who'd challenged segregation at Central High. He'd said he didn't know about Little Rock, but the Negroes of Poplar Springs were lucky to have a high school as fine as Booker T. Washington. White folks in Little Rock had gotten so riled up that first day that the governor called out the Arkansas National Guard. Eventually, President Eisenhower had to send in troops to protect the children. Brother James had shaken his head sadly, adding that he knew none of his Hope Baptist kids wanted to be the cause of such trouble. C.J. felt saddest for the girl, Elizabeth, who walked up to Central High all alone, and most frightened for the three boys.

But one wrong word now and the reverend would be all in a flap. No, Reverend. Yes, Reverend. Perhaps repeating the point of his question, as if she were a parrot. These were the best ways to avoid trouble. She shook her head rapidly.

"Colossians tells us what we must remember in times like these." He loved to preach on God's order. She shut her eyes, hoping to be comforted by the familiarity of the passage.

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them. Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord. Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged."

The reverend paused, to emphasize God's words for C.J. and her kind. "Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God.

"Look at me when I speak!" he yelled in the very next breath. "Why must I always have my eye upon you if I am to be certain your work will be done well?"

C.J.'s heart was in her throat. Had the man taken leave of his senses?

"Do you not hear the word of the Lord God Almighty? Do I not pay you what is right and fair? One word from me and you would have no work in this town."

"Yes, Reverend, you pay me right and fair. I will do my best to serve the Lord."

"Then get to your cooking!"

She backed away from the menacing wave of his arm. In the kitchen, her hands shook so that she needed five matches to light the burners. Drawing deep, ragged breaths, she stirred chopped onions in a skillet until they were tender, then added okra, tomatoes, and seasoning. As it all began to simmer, her shoulders dropped back down, away from her ears.

When a few drops of water flicked into the other skillet made the oil sputter, she added battered chicken pieces. Under cover of the sizzling oil, she whispered from Ephesians: "Ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven."

When everything was ready, C.J. let Miz Thornheart know, then set to work arranging each serving dish just so at the head of the table. When she was done, she took her place in the corner of the dining room to wait for further instruction.

The Thornhearts' son, Alan, and his younger sister, Charlotte, arrived first. They stood behind their chairs. C.J. still remembered the first time she'd seen Alan, playing catch with Franklin Jr. the day she started working for Miz Harwell. His hair and facial features made him seem to be the spitting image of his father. But Alan was taller and heavier, gentler and kinder. He'd looked at her with respect when she returned the ball, throwing hard and true. Something in Alan's eyes said he wondered whether, this time, his father's hatefulness would be directed at him or her.

Miz Thornheart rushed in ahead of her husband, nodding to her children. Everyone bowed their heads.

The reverend stormed into the dining room, rubbing his shin and hollering, "Again I ask, why must I always have my eye upon you?"

Too late, C.J. remembered the vacuum in the middle of the study, still plugged in. Involuntarily, her eyes met Alan's. He leaned forward, as if to come to her aid. That only heightened her fear. She shook her head, as imperceptibly as Alan had moved.

Reverend Thornheart's fingers bit into her arm as he dragged her outside. Down the winding path they went, toward the big white church. At the top of the marble steps, he let go to pull back the heavy double doors. They flew open like tiny birds. Her legs buckled. The reverend half carried her forward, dragging her knees on the floor.

"Beg the Lord Jesus to forgive you!" he bellowed as they reached the front of the church. Against the redness of his face, his pale hair glowed white as a star. As he drew back his arm to strike her, C.J.'s eyes met those of the white Jesus looking down from the stained glass window.

She flinched and closed her eyes, squeezing them shut so tightly that the face of Jesus blazed in all the colors of the stained glass. Then, feeling nothing, she dared to look up. The reverend was staring at his uplifted palm. "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me."

He was reciting 2 Corinthians. *Dear Lord, the man imagines himself to be the disciple Paul!*

She watched him pivot and leave the church. Tears stung her eyes as she heard Jesus say, in the voice of Brother James, *But many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first.* As her thoughts turned to Alan, her tears fell more freely. This kind boy had none of her blessings: a gentle teacher, the love she knew from her father, or the comfort she drew from being in her own home.

As rattled as she was, C.J. took pride in continuing at the Thornhearts'. She never told her parents about what happened. There was comfort in the regular rotation of jobs: Saturday mornings at the Thornhearts', three and a half rushed hours at the Harwells' on Monday afternoons, five hours at the Barneses' on Thursdays plus babysitting Joan and the baby now and then. Special baking and cleaning jobs fit easily enough in between. And she was glad for the extra money, until Buddy Corrigan called.

At Mr. Corrigan's meetings, one man after another rang the bell until the living room of his ranch home overflowed with noise and cigarette smoke. Some men she knew by name or dress. Mr. Jimmy Harwell, of course, and Mr. Tommy Garret, the car dealer who was always working his Buicks into the conversation. The policeman who came in his uniform and the deacon who wore the handsome suits. C.J. walked among them, shrinking from their eyes and holding herself rigid when they leaned so close their hot, sour breath crawled all over her skin.

Tonight, as she dished out desserts, mixed drinks, and poured coffee, the men seemed more rambunctious than usual. Maybe it was the holiday season. Maybe because there was a new man among them.

"Y'all hear about that new nigger Catholic school?" he said, hitching up his trousers. "And those white Yankee nuns teaching up there?"

"Yeah," said another man. "It's bad enough they got the white school. Teaching them kids to worship the Pope and all. It's Communist is what it is."

"Well, we keep an eye on things, don't we, Jimmy?" Mr. Corrigan was using his now-now-don't-you-boys-be-worrying manner.

"Damn straight, Buddy," Mr. Harwell said.

While the others laughed, Mr. Garret took to pawing at C.J. until Mr. Corrigan called him off. She thought how lucky it was that she worked here rather than Metairie. C.J.'s body had begun to fill out, but she didn't think she'd ever have the womanly shape Metairie had.

"Go on now, girl," Mr. Corrigan said. "That's all 'til it's time to clean up."

C.J. rushed to the kitchen. She liked to pull a chair over near the back door and look out at the sky. On clear winter nights like tonight, the stars

flickered softly through the bare trees. She imagined herself way up there, far away from the living room and whatever went on after she left.

“. . . to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands.”

She turned, expecting to see Mr. Corrigan with an empty dessert plate to be refilled. A shaft of moonlight fell across the floor where no one stood. Dear Lord, she'd forgotten to close the swinging door when she came in.

“One nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

She needed to shut the door now, so the voices would be muffled like always. But she could not make herself move.

“Before we get down to business,” Mr. Corrigan said, “let's recite our creed.”

The men finished with “We believe that the crowning glory of a Klansman is to serve. Not for self, but for others.”

Sweet Jesus, no matter what she'd suspected went on here, she'd never heard the word spoken. Softly, she sang: “Give to the winds thy fears. Hope and be undismayed. God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears. God shall lift up—”

“How about that nigger grocery store on Mill Road?”

The voice raged over C.J.'s song. She shivered and touched her arm, remembering the brush of a sleeve, the blue-black wool finer than any brand new Sunday-go-to-meeting suit.

“That'd do us fine,” someone else said. She pictured a hand, with a farmer's dirt-stained nails, reaching for a dessert plate. “We just need to mess the place up some when nobody's there.”

They were talking about Mr. Bishop's general store! C.J.'s family and friends and most of the members of Hope Baptist shopped there.

“Nothing much, now.” The gravelly voice was Mr. Harwell's. “Just so's our new guy here can get his feet wet. 'Course we can keep some niggers on their toes while we're at it. They'll have a mess to clean up when we're finished.”

The laughter resumed.

She had to shut the door. Mr. Bishop was a good man. He'd given her family and plenty of others items on credit during hard times. What if they hurt him? As she crossed the room, she bumped one of the kitchen chairs, toppling it over with a loud bang.

"Well, shit," Mr. Corrigan said. The laughter fizzled away. "Sounds like I need to go see to my girl."

It was too late. He would see the open door and know she'd been listening. Without righting the chair, C.J. shoved it over in front of a high cabinet, then snatched one of the plates with extra desserts and dumped it on the floor. She turned the faucet on full force, grabbed a rag, and fell to her knees. As Mr. Corrigan came in, she was busy cleaning up the mess and making as much noise as possible.

"I know you don't want any trouble." The words thundered overhead.

"No, sir. The chair . . . I slipped when I . . . I'll get this cleaned up directly." C.J.'s hands fluttered, raking a puree of brownies and sliced pound cake topped with strawberries back onto the plate. But her eyes never left his boots. Worn, with tarnished buckles, in need of a shine. The boots moved closer. Still, she did not look up.

"What goes on in my meetings is important business and not for anyone to know outside of us who's in them. Just keep your mouth shut, and everything'll be okay. You can tidy up now. We won't be needing anything more tonight."

"Yessir."

The boots walked away, leaving the swinging door swishing. Once again, the voices were low and jumbled. Or maybe they were overshadowed by the warning ringing in C.J.'s ears.