



The
FOG
MACHINE



A NOVEL

Susan Follett

REMEMBERING
FREEDOM
SUMMER
1964

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LUCKY SKY
P R E S S

CHAPTER 17

Monday, July 13 *Welcome to Meridian*

Zach tugged at his shirt where it clung to his sweaty skin. The laughter of some of the younger Meridian Freedom School students wound its way around the building from the playground. He envied those on the swings, managing to get a breeze going on themselves.

It felt like a hundred degrees in the shade, but that record high thus far for 1964 had happened on June 21, the day three fellow volunteers came up missing. James Chaney was from Meridian. Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman were from New York like him. The three had left Meridian to investigate a church bombing in Neshoba County. Zach had been in Ohio then, gathered with the second group of volunteers for orientation. Bob Moses had delivered the news staring, dazed, at his feet: “They haven’t come back, and we haven’t had any word from them.”

It was July now, *twenty-three days missing*, the haunting new way of telling time. The mosquitoes were at bay, resting up for dusk. Zach had brought his Negro History class outside and gathered them under the broad leafy arms of the huge live oak, away from the other kids. Eleven to seventeen years of age, their faces were bright with desire to learn, or at least commitment to the cause, and their demeanor was at once grateful and expectant. Sometimes the hubbub and enthusiasm inside the three-story brick building, now retired as a Baptist seminary school, was too

much for him. At those times, he would quietly hum one of his favorite freedom songs—"We Shall Not Be Moved," "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round," or "We'll Never Turn Back," the ones that spoke of an unshakeable resolve that sometimes deserted him.

The kids settled themselves, facing him, on the grass that covered Mississippi red clay like a balding man's head. Boys in long pants and short-sleeve button shirts drew their knees toward their chests and leaned forward. Girls in sleeveless dresses angled their legs and tucked their skirts around them. Only he could see the boy moving up the street, striding at first, then slower and slower, as if looking for something under the tree. Finally, the boy stopped altogether, almost hidden by the tree's thick trunk.

Zach fingered the book in his hands. It presented a different history than these kids, or Zach himself, had studied in school. On a whim, he set the book aside, thinking there was plenty of time another day to talk of slave rebellions on the Amistad or Negro heroism during the Civil War.

"Can anybody name the first Negro professional basketball player?" he asked.

A few girls rolled their eyes. Most of the boys sat up a little straighter. "I heard 'bout somebody goes by the name of Wilt the Stilt," one said. "Reckon it coulda been him."

"My cousin lives in Detroit," said another. "He says Bill Russell got it all over that Wilt the Stilt."

"Bill Russell plays for the Boston Celtics," Zach said. "Anybody know the rest of their starting lineup last season?"

The faces stared.

"Ever heard of K.C. Jones?"

Head shaking.

"Sam Jones? Tom Sanders? Willie Naulls?"

More shaking.

"Can you guess what they have in common?"

"My cousin says Bill Russell ain't got nothing in common with a bunch of white guys."

“But—all five of these guys are Negroes.”

“Naw,” said shy Lynette, causing the boys to laugh. “Well, even a girl knows that.”

“It’s true. The Celtics drafted their first Negro player, Charles Cooper, while you guys were in diapers. They’re also the first NBA team to have an all-Negro starting line.” Zach picked a blade of grass. “Anybody know how Russell changed the game?”

“He’s a great rebounder.”

Heads turned toward the unfamiliar voice as the boy stepped around the tree into view. He, too, wore long pants. But his shirt was brown, with an emblem over the pocket.

“That’s right. Suddenly defense is getting as much attention as offense—”

“What about baseball?” asked the boy in the uniform.

“Same question?”

“Naw, too easy. Everybody knows Jackie Robinson changed baseball playing with the Dodgers. Who was the first Negro in the American League?”

Zach looked around.

“I reckon he’s asking you,” Theo said with a mischievous grin.

Zach nodded Theo’s way. “All right. Larry Doby.”

“Last major league team to sign a Negro player?” the boy shot back, looking Zach straight in the eye.

Zach’s pulse quickened. He wanted this for C.J. From the moment the organizers in Oxford, Ohio told him he would be teaching, not registering voters, he’d feared all his students might be like her. Accepting, always accepting. “Boston Red Sox, 1959, Pumpsie Green.”

“You ever seen the great Robinson?”

“Sure have. ’55 World Series, stealing home against the Yankees.”

“What was he like?” The boy sounded less challenging now, more genuinely curious.

“Like lightning. Made the game about speed. And big. Bigger than players who spit on him as he ran the bases, or his own teammates who

tried to keep him from playing.” Zach nodded his head. “Bigger than life, I’d say.”

“Isn’t a one of these Negro athletes a woman?” asked Rosalee, just as the boy sat down, looking eager to soak up anything Zach could offer.

Rosalee was one of the most enthusiastic of the two hundred registered students. But—that look on the boy’s face. This pretty girl with the searching eyes had caught his attention, Zach was almost certain.

“Thanks for reminding me of a woman named Althea Gibson, Rosalee.” He stressed Rosalee’s name slightly. Sure enough, the boy stared at her like a lovesick puppy.

“Women don’t play any of the sports you been talking ’bout,” Jackson protested, rubbing his hand over his closely cropped hair.

Rosalee glared at him.

“Maybe not yet,” Zach said. “But Miss Gibson played—”

“Now you talking ’bout a white woman,” Jackson said. “Calling her Miz.”

“It’s the respectful way to refer to a lady if you don’t know her well, or she’s older than you.”

“You seen her—this Miz Gibson?” Rosalee asked.

“Not playing tennis. But there was a big parade in her honor, in New York City in 1957, when she won women’s singles *and* doubles at Wimbledon.”

The exchange wound down as the sun dipped lower in the sky. Zach sent the kids to gather their things and head home or to the community center. As he swept the classroom, he sensed someone watching and turned.

“I ain’t much for school,” said the boy in the brown work shirt. “Probably move up north after a friend of mine, soon as I save me some money.”

“Well, I’m glad to see you here,” Zach said, suddenly aware he was feeling more than an automatic response to try to enlist another student.

“Yeah, well, I usually got work.”

“Oh?” He forced himself to stand still, even as his mind danced. This boy might want to be pulled, but he couldn’t be pushed.

“My sister’s husband got me on with the city, picking up garbage.”

Zach grabbed for anything that might keep the conversation going. “You know a lot about sports.”

“Got that from my daddy. He just knew ’bout the Negro Leagues, though.”

“She’s pretty, isn’t she?” Zach went out on a limb. “Rosalee, I mean.”

The boy looked at his feet and did a funny, somehow familiar thing with his mouth. “Yeah.”

“Smart, too. I’m thinking she’d be impressed by someone who excelled in the material from class.”

“Not me then.” Disappointment sounded clearly in his voice.

Perhaps the very same whim that had led Zach to set down his history book and turn the afternoon’s lesson to sports now told him to dispense with formalities such as registration. “You know, I might be able to help.”

“Don’t see how.”

“I could lend you a book or two. Work with you—”

“Like I said, my job.”

“Whenever you could come, just like today. It could be right after work, or on your day off. If class is already over, I could spend some time with you.”

The boy’s eyes darted in the direction of the big oak. “Rosalee.” He said the word as gently as if he held a flower in his hands. “You know that Rosalee pretty well?”

“I think I’ve got an idea what’s important to her.”

“Okay, I reckon. Yeah, let’s try.”

“Good. My name’s Zach.”

“I’m Charles.”

The boy drew himself up to his full height, such that Zach saw only the emerald green of C.J.’s eyes, the ones he wanted to drown in. He looked away, chastising himself for being just another stupid white person who thought all Negroes looked alike and, most of all, for being unable to stop thinking about her.