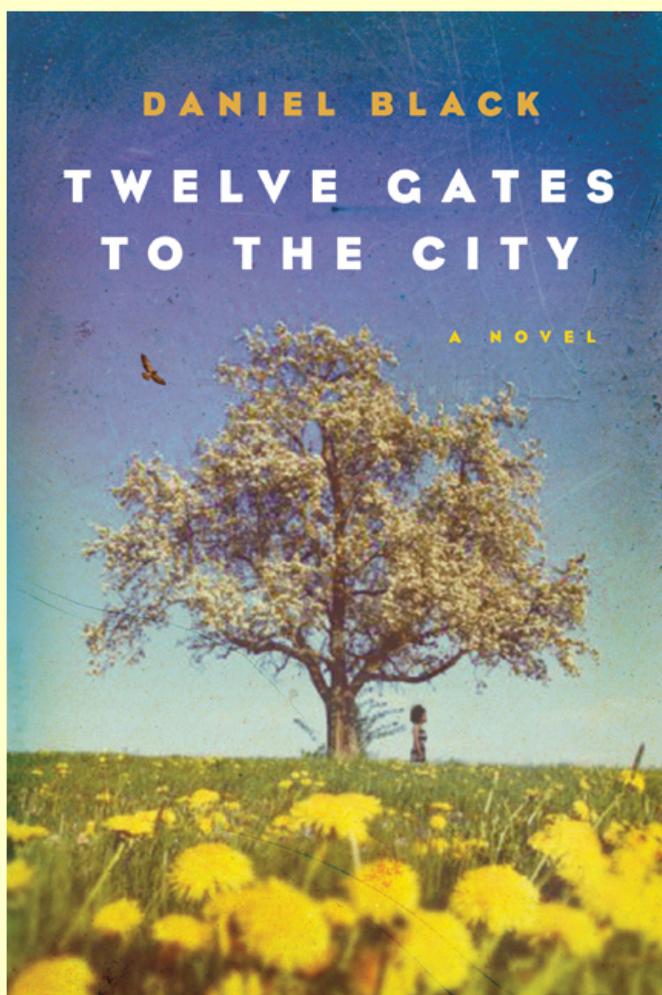


**READ IT FIRST**



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# CHAPTER I

**S**TANDING AT THE EDGE OF THE ROAD, WHERE THE brown scorched grass confronted the hot, black asphalt, TL looked around in disbelief, just as he'd done a week earlier. He didn't understand the implications of his actions, but he soon would. He'd later explain that something was tugging at his spirit, begging him, as it were, to stay. And he'd be right.

For now, he simply pondered, *What the hell was I thinking?*, as he sighed and watched the bus disappear into a distant heat wave. Across the highway, butterflies hovered peacefully and wildflowers waved, celebrating his return. TL closed his eyes, allowing the sweet fragrance to convince him he'd done the right thing, although he wasn't fully convinced.

"I don't believe this!" he murmured. "How in the world am I supposed to make this work?" A chuckle, deep in the caverns of his chest, rumbled forth as if he finally comprehended what he'd done. Momma's note lay crumbled in his right front pocket. That was the real reason he'd gotten off the bus, wasn't it? He couldn't let it go. Or let *her* go. He'd always wanted her love. Or attention. Or affirmation. At least now they could talk about it. For real. But that

would come later. For now, he had to accept that he was home—and he was home to stay.

Sweat broke free across his forehead as if he had a deadly fever. In his imagination, he saw Daddy's stern, cold eyes staring at him, pleading with him to make a decision and stick with it. That's what Daddy always said, that a man—a real, bona fide man—oughta make a decision and stand on it, regardless of what it costs.

TL lifted his bags with tremulous hands. *Who am I kidding? I can't live in Swamp Creek again! Especially not now!* He remembered that he'd lived there before, but that was a different time, he thought, a simpler context. *I was a child then!* He'd convinced himself that the community had tolerated his peculiarities precisely because he wasn't an adult. They'd dismissed all his strange, unsettling ways with the hope that time or education or God would change them, but they hadn't. He was far stranger now than then, and he wasn't convinced homefolks would appreciate what he'd become. Yet, somewhere in his heart, he knew he was supposed to be there.

It was 5:14 P.M., mid-June, 1993, with no shade in sight. The Meetin' Tree was at least two miles away, and the sun sat blazing in the heavens. It promised to bake him three shades darker by the time he arrived at the tree. There were no houses around and, this time of day, people were either lounging before noisy window fans or, like our folks, consumed with outside chores. TL's only option was to bow his head and start walking.

Engulfed in stifling heat, he couldn't tell if he was moving at all. The smoldering air suffocated him like a sauna and scorched his throat. Every tree, rock, blade of dry grass, bird looked exactly alike, as if frozen in time. After twenty minutes or so, he dropped the bags and wiped sweaty palms against his pants. Water drenched his back and gathered in pools of moisture between his thighs. The inner band of his cap was soggy, and the bottom edges of his shirt, serving as a makeshift handkerchief, were saturated with sweat. *I must be a fool*, he thought. Then, with a quick shrug, he dismissed

the notion, having decided that this was neither the time nor the place for personal reflection, so he lifted the bags and pressed on.

The blistering sun blinded him. Its unrelenting heat caused the bags to feel heavier now, as if, suddenly, they'd been filled with sand. "I can't believe I did this," he repeated. "How in the world am I going to live in Swamp Creek again?"

A faint strain from Uncle Jesse Lee's harmonica invaded his thoughts. The coarse melody, fumbling across treetops and hay fields, resurrected memories of the old man playing blues at the Meetin' Tree on Saturday evenings. Grandma called it the devil's music. Having crowned himself a virtuoso years ago, he did really bad renditions of B. B. King, Bobby "Blue" Bland, and Johnny T. Walker. Of course he couldn't sing—the community had confirmed that—but he thought he played well—which he didn't—so on Saturday evenings, he sat at the Meetin' Tree, singing loudly and playing his favorite blues tunes. Sometimes folks would stop by and listen for a spell, but most often he sat alone, playing with the same fervor either way. As children, we laughed at him, blowing a few bars, then singing a few, back and forth, until he got tired and went home. His foot kept time against the wooden church pew as his head bobbed with each downbeat. Occasionally, he'd close his eyes and melt into the music while others swayed and swooned, but that didn't happen often. Usually, as people went about their lives, Uncle Jesse Lee sat at the tree, performing for the wind and leaves, mimicking blues masters and composing songs about his own troubled existence. TL was surprised Uncle Jesse Lee was there so early. In bygone years, he hadn't arrived until evening, spending the bulk of his afternoon reading his Sunday school lesson and washing by hand his white formal church shirt. Yet he was supposed to be there. It was all part of the plan.

TL walked on. The damp shirt clung to his back while streams of living water trickled into his underwear. A '79 El Camino sped past, creating a temporary whirlwind of hot, dry air. Consumed therein, TL wondered, again, why the hell he'd gotten off that bus.

Truth was, he didn't know. Or didn't want to know. Momma would definitely ask, and his inability to answer might make him regret having stayed.

Where could he go? He couldn't go home. Not yet. How would he explain his presence, an hour after folks thought he was gone forever? He considered that perhaps everything he'd done in the past ten years was in preparation for this moment. Maybe every hurt, every longing, every heartbreak, every degree was ultimately for this life. TL frowned at the clear, blue sky, hoping for a sign, but saw only a brown chicken hawk gliding above.

Suddenly, amidst that same blank sky, where the heat waves meshed with the heavens, he beheld a city floating midair. Fearing hallucination, he blinked several times, but the image remained. Shielding his brows with his hands, he squinted harder, trying to comprehend whatever it was he was seeing. The streets of this city were paved with gold, and the architecture resembled the buildings of ancient Rome. Twelve huge gates, each guarded by two uniformed elders on either side, marked the city's entrance, and hovering slightly above each elder's head were miniature angels, forty-eight in total, fluttering, like hummingbirds, without moving. A gigantic tower stood in the middle of the city with twin bells in the top, swaying in opposite directions and emitting soprano and alto tones to the melody of "Lily in the Valley." TL had never seen anything so majestic. He would've cried if he hadn't been overwhelmed. The more he blinked, the clearer he saw this city made of gold. There were no people or life of any kind that he could discern. Only buildings and flowers too perfect to be real. Then, slowly, like a whiff of smoke, the image faded and vanished into thin air.

For a moment, TL stared into empty space, breathless. *What the hell was that?* Then, as he looked about in stark confusion, his breathing returned, sharp and labored, as if he'd run a marathon. *Am I losing my mind?* He blinked continually, like one recovering from a trance, searching desperately for clarity he couldn't find. Nothing of the sort had ever happened to him before. He didn't even believe

in stuff like that! “Is God trying to tell me something?” he mumbled, glancing once more into the heavens. Already nervous about returning home, he thought the last thing he needed was yet another conundrum.

So, unable to glean meaning from the moment, he dismissed the vision as a psychological reaction to heat and hunger, and approached the Meetin’ Tree exhausted and frustrated. Uncle Jesse Lee stopped playing.

“What’s the matter wit’ you, boy?” He held the harmonica slightly away from his mouth. He had to be at least eighty now, having buried half his children and retired when TL was a small child. “I thought you left here today?”

“I did,” TL huffed, frowning from the glare of the sun. “At least I tried to. But I didn’t get very far.”

Uncle Jesse Lee nodded. “I understand. Sometimes it takes a man a while to figure thangs out. You’ll get it.”

TL stared across the distant field. “I’m okay. Just . . . confused, I guess.”

“Naw, you ain’t confused. That ain’t the look o’ confusion.” Tobacco juice splattered onto the dusty earth. “You might be wonderin’ ’bout somethin’, but you ain’t confused. I see it in yo’ eyes. That wild look. That’s not confusion.” Uncle Jesse Lee laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Life.” He blew a blues bar on the harmonica. “Been a long time since I seen a young man stumblin’ ’round so. Sorta reminds me o’ myself when I was yo’ age.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Had a wife and five or six kids, and didn’t know how I was gon’ feed ’em. It was the dead o’ winter.”

“That’s pretty rough.”

“Naw, it wasn’t pretty rough—it was rough as hell. Cold as the dickens. But we made it.”

In TL’s silence, Uncle Jesse Lee crooned, off-key,

*Walkin' 'round the world*

Then blew notes from the harmonica in the bluesy da-da-da-da DA! rhythm.

*Tryin' to figure things out*

*Da-da-da-da DA!*

*Walkin' 'round the world*

*Da-da-da-da DA!*

*Tryin' to figure things out*

*Da-da-da-da Da!*

*Walkin' 'round the word, uhm, tryin' to figure things out,  
A man's gotta come home sometimes.*

TL nodded along awkwardly.

“You ain’t got to know everything, son. Just go where yo’ spirit leads.”

“Is that why I’m back? ’Cause my spirit led me back?”

Uncle Jesse Lee squinted. “You tell me.”

“I don’t know!”

He played another round of the same, self-composed song. “You gotta decide why you back. Don’t nobody know that but you.”

“But I don’t know!”

“Well, don’t worry. You will. When a man starts lookin’ for thangs, he starts findin’ ’em.”

A small blackbird lit on a branch directly above Uncle Jesse Lee’s head. He looked up quickly, expectant, then sighed with disappointment. “God’ll show you what He need you to know. Just pay attention. Sometimes we miss the signs ’cause we so mad at the way they come, but if you can trust Him, I promise you’ll come out better’n you went in.” Uncle Jesse Lee chuckled. “He don’t lead nowhere He don’t go first.”

“Hope you’re right.”

“You ain’t got to hope! God sent you back, didn’t He?” He spit again, in the exact same spot. “Then look for the signs. He’ll tell you what you need to know.”

Uncle Jesse Lee switched to a different tune, something a bit more jubilant. TL was thankful for the change. He couldn’t discern what Uncle Jesse Lee was implying, but he figured he’d know soon enough.

When the old man finished, TL stood to leave.

“Listen, boy. You can’t go nowhere ’less God prepare yo’ way. When you try to run from Him, you end up runnin’ straight into Him. Don’t make no difference what you think. God gon’ have His way, any way He gotta have it. You just as well stop fightin’ Him. That’s what you doin’. I see it on yo’ face.” He lifted the harmonica to play again, then paused. “You in the right place. Trust me. Everything comes back to where it started out. Everything. That’s how life works, son. A man usually ends up exactly where he started out. Ain’t that somethin’?”

TL walked away.

Uncle Jesse Lee hollered, “The signs. Look for the signs.”

TL KNEW WHERE to go. He didn’t bother knocking.

“I knew it!” David shouted and danced when he beheld TL’s sweaty face. “You just couldn’t leave, huh?”

“It’s not funny.”

TL dropped his bags and collapsed onto Ms. Swinton’s red velvet sofa. His hands still trembled.

“What happened?”

“You already know what happened.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I keep asking myself. I must be a fool.”

“Naw, you might be a lotta things, but you ain’t no fool.”

“No?”

“Nope. You’re searching for something you ain’t found yet. That’s what it looks like to me.”

TL shrugged. David went to the kitchen and returned with a frosty glass of homemade lemonade.

“Here, man. You sweatin’ like a hog.”

After three hard gulps, TL sighed and David sat in the chair directly across from him. “What am I searching for?”

“I don’t know. You gotta figure that out, I guess.”

“But that’s the problem. I can’t!”

“Well, you knew enough not to leave.”

That was true, TL thought.

“My uncle Jesse Lee said God would send me a sign.”

David smiled. “Then look for it.”

TL leaned forward. “Can I stay here overnight? I’m not ready to go home.”

“You’re already at home, little brother. This old house is as much yours as it is mine. Probably more.”

TL studied the meticulous room, with books that lined the exact edges of the snow-white shelves and red velvet furniture that looked as if no one had ever sat upon it. The oak floors glistened from the glare of the sun and the antique coffee table rested before the sofa like a mouth refusing to smile. Few had ever seen this room. Most would’ve entered through the back, if they entered at all, meeting Ms. Swinton in the kitchen for the few precious moments she spared. Only now did David and TL lounge there, claiming an inheritance neither of them fully understood, much less deserved.

“You made the right decision, little brother.”

“Did I?”

“Sure you did.”

David returned the empty glass to the kitchen and hollered from there, “You’re gonna make a hell of a teacher for these kids. Just wait and see! It’s what Momma wanted.”

TL snickered. “Yeah. Just what . . . *she* wanted.”

He wasn't ready to call Ms. Swinton *Momma*. He wanted to, deep in his heart, but his head wouldn't give him peace about it. Whenever he considered the matter, he rationalized that, yes, she'd loved him and taught him well, but he wasn't sure she'd actually *mothered* him. Wasn't that a particular kind of love? A personal, intimate, special kind of love? Didn't mothers boast to other mothers about their children, and read them bedtime stories at night, and send them care packages in college? And didn't they believe their child was the most beautiful child in the whole world? Had Ms. Swinton ever said this? Had she believed it? Had anyone?

Perhaps, he thought, this was why he'd come home—and why, now, he couldn't leave. Momma's note implied that she'd at least *wanted* to love him, once upon a time, so now, if they could heal some things, maybe he could know what motherly love felt like. Directly from a mother. TL exhaled.

"How long you gon' hide out?" David asked, taking the chair again.

"Hide out? I didn't know I was hiding out."

"Call it what you like, but sooner or later you gon' have to face your folks."

TL scoffed, "I know, I know."

"What about church in the morning? You're going, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"Then you'd better get some rest. You got a lot of explaining to do."

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