

# Almost Home



A N O V E L

Valerie Fraser Luesse



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For Missey



PART 1



# The Arrival



April 3, 1944

Dear Violet,

*How's everything over in Georgia? I bet you thought you'd never hear from your big sister again! What with getting the lake ready to open and looking after all my boarders, I'm about half crazy. I told Si that if I don't soon get a minute to prop my feet up and catch my breath, he might as well run on down to Trimble's and pick me out a casket.*

*Did I tell you they've gone to selling caskets upstairs at the mercantile? They've got big yellow name tags you can tie on the handle once you make your selection. Then you just pay at the register, and that sweet little Gilbert boy that stocks the shelves will haul your purchase to the funeral parlor on a flatbed truck. It's so much more convenient than driving all the way to Childersburg when a loved one passes, but it's a little spooky to shop for your dry goods, knowing what's overhead. And anytime you cross the river bridge, you're likely to meet a casket bound for the funeral home. How about that? Before we can cross Jordan, we've got to cross the Coosa.*

*I have to tell you, sister, I've been sorely missing somebody to talk to since you and Wiley moved away to Georgia. I've got people all around me from morning till night, but now and again you just want to have a conversation with somebody that doesn't need you to fry something, iron something, or mop something up. You got anybody to talk to over in Georgia?*

*Back to my boarders. Granddaddy Talmadge must be rolling over in his grave. I can hear him now: "Yankee*

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*carpetbaggers!” I’m a little ashamed of myself for renting to them, what with his Confederate uniform still hanging in the attic, but we sorely need the money. They say this Depression’s near about over, but I reckon somebody forgot to tell Alabama.*

*My boarders seem to come and go in cycles. The ones that rented from me at the beginning of the war have all left, and I just filled up with new people. We rented the last of the upstairs rooms a couple of weeks ago, one to a perfectly horrible couple—the Clanahans from Reno, Nevada—and one to a young husband and wife from Illinois, name of Williams. I did NOT show those Reno people our old room—just put them in that drafty back bedroom and saved ours for Mr. and Mrs. Williams when they get here, which ought to be any day now. Something tells me they need it. (Little Mama’s house is talking to me again!)*

*I’m babbling on and on about nothing, but I sat down here with a purpose, Violet. What with all the comings and goings at home, I’ve decided a thing or two. I think God gives us soul mates—not many but enough to get us through. And I’m not just talking about husbands and wives. I’m talking about those one or two people we meet on life’s journey who see straight through all our nonsense and love us one hundred percent, no matter what. You’re my soul mate, sweet sister. And I never fully appreciated that till now.*

*Well, I’d best go before I have to reach for that pretty handkerchief you embroidered for me. Some days I hold to it like a lifeline. Hope y’all are still coming for the Fourth. It wouldn’t be a fish fry without my Violet.*

*Kiss the young’uns for me and give Wiley a hug.*

*Your loving sister,  
Dolly*

CHAPTER

**one**

Anna Williams leaned out the truck window and let the wind blow her damp auburn hair away from her face. She remembered her grandmother’s parting words: *I fear Alabama will suffocate you*. With each warm gust of wind, Anna felt a fresh wave of loneliness. The family she had left behind in Illinois seemed a million miles away right now. She had yet to see her new home but already missed the old one so much she could hardly bear it.

“Need to stop?” her husband asked without taking his eyes off the road.

“I’m alright.” She took a sip of the soda he had bought her at a Texaco station just outside of Birmingham. It wasn’t ice-cold anymore, but it was better than nothing. A quick glance in Jesse’s direction told her nothing had changed—not yet, anyway—but she was hoping and praying.

Jesse had what radio newsmen at the front called “the thirty-yard stare”—a vacant, somber gaze. It had settled onto his face like a heavy fog and hovered there for the past year. Even though her husband wasn’t a soldier—flatfeet and hardship had kept him out of the service—he was fighting a battle just the same.

Some men collapse under the weight of a failing farm, but

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Jesse had stood firm—sadly, for both of them, by turning to stone. Now he had decided that the only way to revive their farm was to leave it behind, at least for a while. He was driving them away from everything and everybody they loved, but Anna was determined not to cry in front of her husband. She had to believe that somewhere deep down, he still had a heart, and she didn't want to break it by letting him know just how desolate she felt.

She looked out her window and took in the countryside. Alabama was so *green*—a thousand shades of it. Everywhere you looked were towering pines, their branches thick with needles that faded from deep olive to sage to pale chartreuse at the very tips. With the truck windows down, Anna could occasionally catch the heady fragrance of honeysuckle, which draped the fence lines and mounded so heavily in spots that it threatened to take down the barbed wire and liberate the cows. The lush pastures made a thick carpet of grass that looked like emerald velvet. You couldn't look at grass like that and smell its perfume without wondering what it would be like to stop the truck, strip off your sweaty clothes, and lie down in a bed of cool, green sweetness. That had to be a sin. And it would likely stampede the livestock.

Anna thought to herself that this Southern landscape didn't so much roll as billow, like a bedsheet fluttering on a clothesline, as the mountains and foothills of Tennessee sank into flatlands around Huntsville, only to soar up again just above Birmingham. The pickup was headed down a two-lane highway that had carried the couple straight through the Magic City—that's what the radio announcers called Birmingham, though Anna had no idea why—and now she and Jesse were getting their first glimpse of rural Shelby County, where they would be living for the next couple of years.

“Help me watch for a dirt road off to the right.” Jesse was



turning off the Birmingham highway and onto a county black-top. “It’s supposed to have a sign by it that says ‘Talmadge Loop’ or something like that.”

They drove past several white clapboard churches and what Anna guessed were cotton fields. She spotted a soybean field or two—at least that much was familiar.

“There it is,” she said, pointing to a crooked wooden sign nailed to a fence post.

Jesse followed what did indeed appear to be a big loop—more a half-moon of a road, really, connected to the county highway at each end. It was sprinkled with houses, some noticeably nicer than others. Anna saw a yard full of children—colored and white—playing around a tire swing in front of a rickety little house. The walls looked as if they would collapse like a line of dominoes if you so much as leaned against them.

“I thought they didn’t believe in mixing down here,” she said absently, though she knew Jesse wouldn’t answer. Sometimes she felt as if her husband had an overwhelming need to pretend she wasn’t there.

Jesse pulled into a narrow driveway that led to a stately white two-story house surrounded by oaks and pecan trees so imposing that they had to be a hundred years old. As she stepped out of the truck and felt a breeze, Anna did her best to fluff out her skirt and loosen her sweaty blouse, which was sticking to her like wet tissue paper.

She took in her surroundings. Weathered and in need of fresh paint, the old house still had an air of grandeur about it. Both stories had deep, L-shaped porches with scrolled bannisters wrapping around the front and southern side of the house. The windows were at least six feet tall and flanked by dark green shutters.

Across the road was a long, narrow building that looked a lot like a barn, except for a gigantic side porch big enough to

hold a row of Adirondack chairs. Steps led from the porch into a hole almost as big as a football field. Nailed to one of the few pines left standing was a plywood sign that read, “Future Home, Lake Chandler.”

“What do you make of that?” Anna asked, pointing to the sign. “How do you build a lake?”

Jesse just shrugged and motioned for her to follow him to the house. He pulled the cord on a small iron bell mounted beside the front door and waited.

Standing on the porch, Anna realized that the only thing separating inside from outside was screen wire. The front door and all the windows of the house were wide open, but there were screens nailed over all the windows and a screen door at the main entrance. Anna had heard horror stories about the mosquitoes down South and prayed she could get back home without catching yellow fever.

She could hear a distant female voice singing “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition.” Jesse looked agitated, shifting his weight and running his fingers through his hair again and again. He gave the cord another yank. The singing abruptly stopped, and a woman who looked to be about fifty came hurrying through the house in a fusillade of footsteps.

“Can I help you?” she said with a smile as she reached the screen door.

“Name’s Williams,” Jesse said. “Here for our room.”

Anna knew he had never rented a room from anybody in his whole life. When they married, they were so excited about the farmhouse he had inherited from his grandparents that they spent their honeymoon there. Last night she had slept in the cab while he slept on a quilt in the truck bed. They just pulled off the road and parked till they were rested enough to keep moving.

“My land!” the woman exclaimed, opening the door and ushering them inside. “I bet y’all are burnin’ up. Come on in

here and cool off.” She led them to a worn but elegant Victorian settee in front of tall windows in an octagonal parlor, where two rotary fans aimed manufactured breezes all over the room. “Now you two just sit there and collect yourself while I go get you some tea.”

“There’s no need—” Jesse tried to stop her, but she was long gone.

Soon their host returned, carrying a tarnished silver tray with two goblets made of fine etched glass. They were filled with iced tea, each with a big wedge of lemon on top. “Here you go,” she said. “Are y’all hungry? Supper’s not till six, but I can get you a slice o’ pound cake or make you some sandwiches with the roast beef I had left over from supper last night. Would you like just a little bite o’ somethin’ to tide you over?”

“No,” Jesse said.

“Are you sure? Because it wouldn’t be a bit of trouble. I could just—”

“Ma’am, we really just want—”

“We appreciate it, we really do.” Anna interrupted her husband for fear he might be outright rude. “But we had lunch on the way down.”

“Well, alright then. You just let me know if you change your mind.”

“We will—and thank you, really. I’m Anna. This is my husband, Jesse. Could you tell us how we might meet the owner of the house and get settled?” Anna thought it best to relieve Jesse of any need for conversation. He sat slumped on the settee, cupping the tea goblet as if he needed an anchor to cling to.

The woman, who had taken a seat opposite the two of them, looked startled. “You want to meet the—oh, honey, you just did! I mean, I’m her. You’ll have to forgive my bad manners. I’ve been runnin’ around here like a chicken with its head cut off, tryin’ to get my latest boarders situated, and when y’all went

to ringin' that bell, I got so flustered I plain forgot myself. I'm Mrs. Josiah Chandler, but you can call me Dolly, and you can call my husband Si—if you ever see him, that is. He's so busy workin' on the lake, I've about forgot what he looks like.”

“It's nice to meet you,” Anna said. She smiled at her host and took a sip of tea.

Dolly was petite, with what Anna's grandmother would call a “feminine frame.” Her chestnut bob was slightly curly, with just a few streaks of gray, and that dark hair made her periwinkle eyes look all the bluer. She wore a cotton shirtwaist dress in a yellow floral print.

“I like your tea,” Anna said. “I've never had any quite this sweet.”

“All my boarders comment on my tea,” Dolly said with a smile. “The secret is lettin' the sugar melt while it's hot and then quick-chillin' it with ice. I just hope we can keep it sweet with all this rationin'. Oh, well, that's why Si keeps bees. If we run outta sugar, we'll just switch to honey. How long have y'all been on the road?”

“Two days,” Anna said.

“Mercy!” Dolly shook her head. “My back hurts just thinkin' about it.”

“Is it always this hot in April?”

“Oh, no,” Dolly said. “In fact, it can get downright chilly. I thought we were just havin' a little heat wave, but *Farmer's Almanac* is predictin' an early summer—it mighta done started. Believe you me, it's gonna get a lot worse before it gets any better. July and August are always scorchers. That's how come we're hurryin' to get the lake done. Si didn't come up with the idea till February, so that put us in a bind to get it done by summer. We always have a big fish fry on the Fourth o' July, and since ever'body on the loop and quite a few folks from church will come, Si figured that was as good a time as any to

promote our new business. He says we're entrepreneurs. I say we're poor as Job's turkey and sellin' everything but the family silver to stay afloat!"

Anna and Dolly laughed together while Jesse stared into his tea.

"What will you charge to swim?" Anna asked.

"Fifty cents, but you only have to pay once a day, and we're plannin' to stay open till five o'clock in the evenin', so you can swim till you prune up if you want to. We'll be closed on Sunday, o' course. As long as I've got my right mind, there will be no money changin' on the Sabbath Day."

"What's that building next to the hole—next to the lake, I mean?"

"Why, that's the skatin' rink," Dolly said. "It's been open for a whole year now. Got a dance floor in there too, and Ping-Pong tables down on the far end o' the porch. The concession stand's right by the front door. It costs a quarter to skate if you bring your own, fifty cents if you need to rent a pair o' ours. Ping-Pong's a dime a game, but we don't charge folks anything to dance or sit on the front porch and visit. We figure they'll end up feedin' nickels into the jukebox or buyin' a Co-Cola if they stay long enough, and we can't see any point in bein' greedy. Ever'body needs a little enjoyment right now, don't you think?"

"Yes," Anna said. "I think you're absolutely right."

"Now listen," Dolly went on, "I know you're a long way from home and prob'ly missin' your mama already. But don't you worry. You'll make it back to Illinois. Alabama's just a little stop on your journey. And there's nice people here and good churches to go to. And if you need anybody to talk to, why, I've been told I'm a pretty good listener, so you just feel free."

"Thank you, Dolly." Anna was trying hard not to blink as her eyes began to sting. It's strange, she thought. Sometimes, when you're so sad that you're barely holding yourself together,

it's the kindness of another person—a simple gesture from someone trying to bring comfort—that unleashes the tears. And she knew that Jesse, as usual, was far too preoccupied with his own frustration to notice that she too had reached a breaking point.

“If we could—if we could just get our room,” he said, standing up and holding out the tea goblet.

“Why, of course,” Dolly said politely as she took it from him. “I’ll do whatever I can to make you comfortable. You’re a guest in my home.”

“About time,” Jesse mumbled as she left the room. “Can’t she see that we just want to get this over with?”

Anna knew he was prepared to go on and on about Dolly wasting their time and meddling in their business—and she knew she couldn’t stand to listen to another word of it. But just then he turned to look at her, perched on that elegant settee, wearing the clothes she had slept in, and for once he was struck silent.

She could guess why. All these months, all this time, she had worked hard to make sure she never showed any sign of disappointment in him—not a hint of frustration, let alone anger. But what she felt now—and what she was sure he could see on her face—was an unsettling mix of fury and disgust.

For the first time since their downward spiral began, Jesse actually tried to explain himself. “Anna, all I meant was—”

“I don’t care what you meant,” she said without raising her voice. “What *she* meant, in case you missed it, is that she doesn’t have to put up with any nonsense. You saw all those caravans coming down here. Dolly’s probably got a waiting list a mile long. My father said all I have to do is make one collect phone call and he’ll send me a bus ticket home.”

Dolly came back into the parlor and could no doubt see that she had interrupted something. “Well then, let’s get y’all

settled,” she said. “Come on upstairs, and I’ll show you where everything is.”

She led them up a sweeping staircase that opened into a spacious sitting area on the second floor. Bookcases big enough for a library lined the walls. The floors were covered with tapestry rugs that looked a little threadbare. There was a settee like the one in the parlor, along with a couple of armchairs and a rocker. Between two tall windows overlooking the lake-to-be was a door that opened onto the upstairs porch. Unlike the one below, it was screened. Anna thought how lovely it would be to sit here and read a good book or embroider on a rainy afternoon. Narrow hallways led from the sitting area to what she imagined were bedrooms.

“The porch there is a nice place to pull up a rockin’ chair and have your mornin’ coffee or a glass o’ tea on a hot summer day,” Dolly said. “And it’s here for ever’body, so just make yourself at home.”

As Dolly walked them through the upstairs, Anna watched her straighten lampshades and make quick swipes with her hand to clear any dust that she spotted. “Now, the two bedrooms on the opposite side there—one belongs to a Mr. and Mrs. Hastings. Actually, Dr. and Dr. Hastings. They were both college professors up in Chicago, but I guess times are hard there too. Both of ’em lost their jobs, which is a cryin’ shame, if you ask me. They’re the nicest people—and all that knowledge just goin’ to waste. He works at the plant, and she substitute teaches over at the high school from time to time. ’Course, it won’t be long till school lets out for the summer, so I imagine we’ll be seein’ a lot more o’ her.”

Dolly let out a tired sigh as she pointed to the room in the back corner of the house. “That room there belongs to the Clanahans from Reno, Nevada. They’re out for the afternoon. Both of ’em work the early shift at the plant, so you’ll only see

'em at suppertime, and that'll be plenty. I'll confess it right now—those two try my patience and test my religion.”

“Why?” Anna asked.

“They're rude in that kinda way that makes *you* feel like the one who made the misstep—like *you're* the one with no raisin'. They're gone before Si gets up, and I've been carryin' his supper to him over at the lake so he can work late. The Clanahans have been livin' in this house for two weeks, and Si's never laid eyes on 'em. He will tonight, though. We'll see what he has to say then. In the meantime, just try not to get your feelin's hurt by whatever meanness they might decide to spew.”

Dolly led Anna and Jesse to two rooms at the front of the house. “Mr. Joe Dolphus has that small room right there. He lost his wife a year ago and moved here as much to get away from that empty house as to find work, I expect. He's just as kind and pleasant as he can be.”

She gave them a big smile as she pointed to the other door, adorned with a wreath made of corsages. Their flowers were long gone, but the ribbon and crinoline that Anna imagined had once adorned ball gowns for dances and cotillions offered a cheery welcome from the heavy old door.

“Now, this room right here—this room is yours.” Dolly opened the door to an immense bedroom. The ceiling must have been fourteen feet high. Anna loved the smell of old polished wood and the way her footsteps echoed when she walked across the floor. There was a walnut four-poster bed, a dressing table with a round mirror, a washstand, and an armoire with full-length mirrors on each of its wide double doors. A small rocking chair had been placed in front of the fireplace opposite the bed, and tall windows overlooked the lake. Best of all, the room had its own private door onto the porch. Anna wasn't sure why, but something about this grand old bedroom both excited and comforted her. For the first time in forever, she felt hopeful.



“It’s beautiful, Dolly,” she said. “It’s just beautiful.”

Her host smiled. “When me and Si first decided to take in boarders, I had a feelin’ somebody was comin’ who would need this room—this one in particular—so I’ve been savin’ it. This room belonged to me and my sister when we were growin’ up. If these walls go to talkin’, you let me know because they’ve overheard a lotta our secrets. Wouldn’t want ’em to start tellin’ on me in front o’ my comp’ny.”

“I’ll let you know if I hear anything you’d want to put a stop to,” Anna assured her.

“You do that. Oh! I almost forgot. There’s a bathroom up here, but with seven people, it can get a little crowded. We’ve still got our old bathhouse and outhouse in back. And you’re welcome to use me and Si’s downstairs bathroom, as long as the Clanahans aren’t around. Far as they know, our bathroom’s off-limits. I shudder to think what that man could do to a sink.”

Jesse finally spoke. “Is there a key to our room? We’ll want to keep it locked when we aren’t here.”

“There’s no keys to the rooms, but there’s a latch on the inside for privacy,” Dolly said. “Also, you can flip down that doorstop on the bottom—won’t nobody come in on you with that heavy ol’ thing holdin’ ’em back. And if you’re worried about your valuables, that wardrobe locks, and the only key to it’s right there in the keyhole.”

“But how can we make sure—”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Anna said. “Thank you.”

“Well, that about covers everything,” Dolly said. “Breakfast is on the table at six every mornin’, and whoever’s here at lunchtime can fix a sandwich or somethin’ outta the kitchen. Supper’s at six every night. So just remember ‘six’ and you’ll never go hungry in my house.”

“We’ll remember,” Anna said.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it then,” Dolly said. “If you need any

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help bringin' in your things, just come and get me. I'll be in the kitchen." She suddenly clapped her hands together and laughed. "I'll bet you that's what they put on my tombstone: 'Here lies Dolly Chandler. She was in the kitchen.'"

Anna laughed with Dolly, following her down the stairs of a grand old home and out to a dusty pickup that held everything she owned.