

THE GIRL
and the
GOLDEN LEAF

A Novel

JUNE N. FOSTER



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Illustrated by Robert G. Porter

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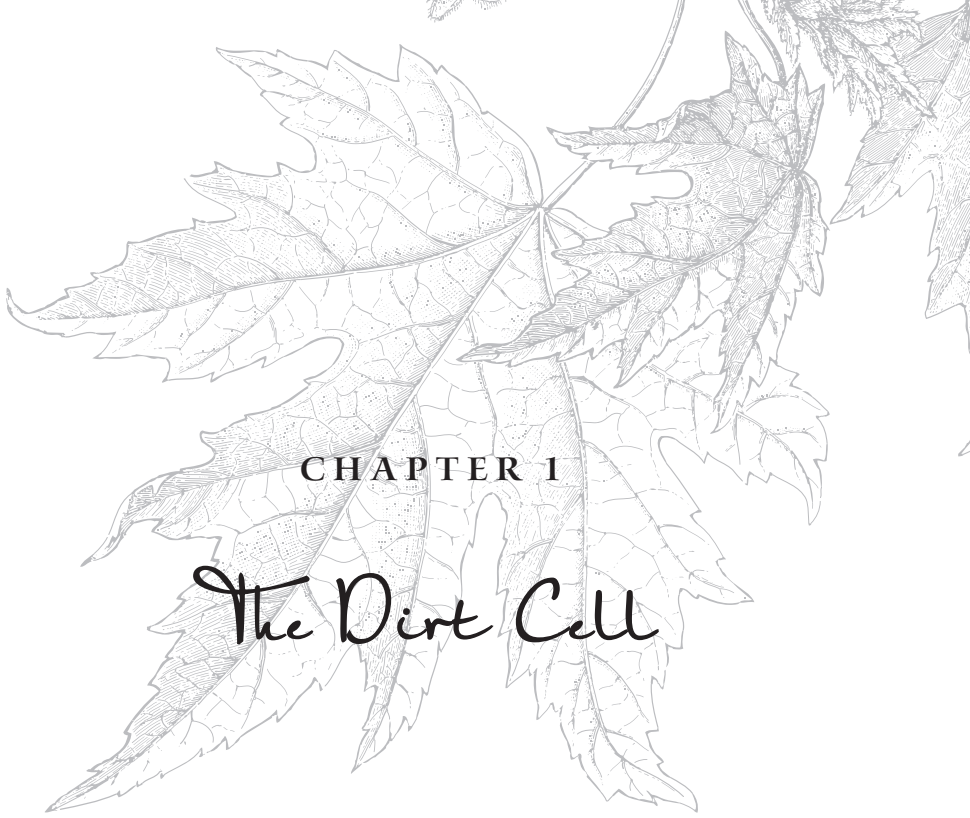
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DEDICATION

To our blessed children around the world who are hungry, frightened, oppressed, abandoned, or brutalized: may you find peace, love, hope, prosperity, and happiness.

And to my precious papa, Timothy L. Foster, who will forever and always be in my heart, thoughts, and prayers.





CHAPTER 1

The Dirt Cell

Present Day

I slowly regained consciousness realizing two things: My head was throbbing in pain, and I smelled dirt. As I cautiously opened my eyes, I saw nothing but dark gloom, but I could hear moaning. I sat up slowly, trying to focus, with nothing much to see. The agony in my skull nearly made me pass out again, so I propped myself into a sitting position with my back against a wall. It was a rough wall, like it was made of uneven wood. I could just barely see the outlines of several bodies; whether they were dead or not was impossible to tell, but at least one was groaning.

Come on, Tia: focus.

The pain seemed to slowly drain out of my head, but it only made me realize how much I hurt everywhere else. I allowed my

fingers to gingerly touch my throbbing scalp, and I discovered a thick patch of crusted blood at the hairline.

As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, my nose took in the stench: body odor, human waste, decay, vomit, and maybe decomposition. I shuddered as I tried to recall how and why I got here.

I hoped Finn was okay. He was not only my twin brother, he was my closest friend. Wherever he was, I prayed he was okay. As I lay on the dirt floor, I closed my eyes and tried to control a wave of nausea. The faces of my family came easily. Our time together felt like a distant dream, a time gone by, never to be experienced again. My thoughts drifted to a particular thunderstorm that caught Finn and me by surprise as we kayaked down the New River.

I wrapped my hand around my golden leaf pendant and replayed the day in my head. If I tried hard enough, I was convinced I could smell the spicy, resinous scent of the pine trees whispering overhead.



Last Year

I felt less in control than usual, as the unpredictable winds wreaked havoc on the rapids.

I got this!

I had been down the gorge a thousand times, even though the Class III whitewater felt like a Class VI: much more jarring. I looked up briefly and gasped, seeing the coal-black clouds and

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feeling the streamlined winds that whipped mercilessly across the bow of my kayak.

Earlier that morning, the sweet kisses of the sun had danced upon the lush autumn foliage blanketing the steep mountains on both sides of the New River. The storm caught us by surprise, and to be honest, I felt powerless as the lightning bolts hit their mark just a few feet away on the shore. Torrential rain pounded upon my helmet like a relentless woodpecker desperately drumming for hibernating ants. I could see Finn shouting at me, but the thunder was deafening as it bounced off the canyon walls.

“Get in front of me! I can’t see you; get in front of me!” Finn shouted.

This time, I heard him.

I mustered my strength to try and pass him, but the gale whipped me toward the most dangerous part of the rapids. I held on by the skin of my teeth.

Finn was quartering the water as best he could, but a squall took control, lifting his kayak and capsizing him under the unstable eddy.

I pictured him gasping for air and trying to recover his kayak.

“Finn; *Finn!*” I screamed, my voice probably lost in the howling wind and roar of water. I’m not even sure I heard it.

For a fleeting moment, I imagined a world without my twin brother. We had turned sixteen a few months earlier, and I couldn’t think of him not being there.

And then, as soon as it came, the thought was gone. I saw the top of Finn’s helmet bobbing on the surface several yards away.

I careened through the rapids, avoiding the dangerous eddy. “Finn, pull out ahead!”

He raised his head and wearily looked my way, and we managed to navigate to a makeshift takeout.

Out of breath and visibly dazed, Finn pulled his kayak out of the rushing water; he removed his helmet and life jacket, and tucked them into the cockpit.

I followed as the rain continued to pour down, a crash of thunder rolling around us.

“Let’s go to Tackett’s Cave!” I yelled, and he nodded.

Lifting our kayaks above our heads, we navigated through the dense trees, uphill on the slippery ground. After a half a mile, it leveled out a bit, and we entered the cave, setting down the kayaks and collapsing on the ground, exhausted and sopping wet.

The cave was relatively deep, and wide enough to hold at least thirty people. There were old drawings of running deer, fire, and stick people wearing feathers carved into the rock near the back. We were never sure if the carvings were authentic Indian markings from a time gone by or carved as a joke by some drunken teenagers. Either way, I felt comfortable.

I turned to Finn. “What the hell were you thinking going straight down the meat grinder in this storm?”

“Guess I lost track of where I was. I was trying to keep an eye on you,” he said.

“Well, you scared the crap out of me. Don’t ever do that again.” *I don’t know what I’d do without you*, I almost said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Finn said, smirking.

We spent a few minutes in silence. I was still a little out of

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breath from the rapids, the scare in the water, and hiking up the hill to the cave.

I watched Finn as he squeezed the rainwater from his long hair; it was incredible how much we look alike. Even as babies, it was difficult to tell us apart. We were Irish through and through, and shared the same blue eyes with little speckles of green, and long strawberry blonde hair with loose, unmanageable curls. While he was as tall as a light pole, I somehow got the short end of the stick, coming in just shy of five feet, four inches.

Teagan and Fionn were our given names, but ever since we were young'uns, our folks simply called us Tia and Finn. Well, that is, until we got caught red-handed in the middle of some sort of mischief. In those moments, Teagan and Fionn were highly exaggerated and fully pronounced, and in those moments, we would burn the wind and scatter like buckshot.

He was a big guy for his age, and his rippled physique were the subject of dreamy looks from hopeful girls in their class and the envy of rival boys. Me, on the other hand, well, I was on the “lean side,” as Papa used to say. To be painfully honest, my physique failed to attract much attention in general from the boys in town, who were undoubtedly looking for a softer place to lie.

Finn had always been animated and high-spirited. I usually envied his tenacity and self-confidence, though his reckless actions resulted in many broken bones along the way, starting with shattering his left ankle at the age of four when he'd tried to mimic the way his hero, Tarzan, swung from the trees.

“What?” he said.



It was my turn to smirk. “I was just wondering what’s up with you and Miss Tinker Bell.”

“Molly. Molly Tinder, not Tinker Bell!” he said, his face turning red. “Wish you’d stop calling her that.”

“Well, she’s such a tiny little thing. I get confused,” I said, smiling. “Really, though, is it serious, or what?”

“No. Not really. We have fun,” Finn said with a grin. “What about you? Sean’s had a crush on you forever, says you’re as cute as a button. Why don’t y’all go out sometime?”

“Cause he’s a creep.” Truth was, Sean wasn’t really a creep, just not my type. Whatever that was.

“Well, there are other guys out there who aren’t creeps. It’s like you’re avoidin’ life. There’s more than just headin’ home after school, writin’ in that journal, and keepin’ your head buried in books.”

“If you recall, we just went down the river; if that isn’t getting out, I don’t know what is.” I paused. “Honestly, ever since you and Miss Tinker—I mean Molly—hooked up ... Well, you and me used to hang out all the time, until lately, anyway.”

Finn sighed. “You’ve got friends, Tia. You may not do much with them, but maybe you should start. I think it would be good for you to hang out with someone other than me. I mean, I know how awesome I am, but ...”

I punched him in the arm. “I just don’t feel comfortable with them. I have nothing to say, and we have nothing in common. All they want to do is talk about boys or clothes, or fix their hair, or do their nails. And spending time with guys; well, boys are boys. It’s boring.”

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“Okay, thanks for the compliment, but I get it. They’re shallow and you’re ... what’s the word? Multidimensional. You may not find friends that are exactly to your likin’, but it’s better than nothin’. Like I said, I think you’d have fun; take a chance sometime. You’ve just been mopin’ about since Mama and Papa died.”

I shot him a look. What was I supposed to do? I missed them. Trying to make friends seemed like a sad, thin replacement. I’d always been shy and much preferred the solitude of the forest. I’d rather sit on a stump and watch a squirrel than talk about clothes or which boy had a better butt. Truth is, I’d rather be hanging out with family.

But there was less family now.

Feeling self-conscious and a little hurt, I changed the subject. “I’m cold and kind of hungry.”

Finn looked at his watch. “Once the rain lets up, how about we mosey up to the ol’ cabin and break out the nuts and raisins? That’ll hold us till we get home.”

“Sure, sounds good.”

Just then, my stomach let out a loud growl—*eeewwwwwrrrrrrlllll*—that made us both burst into laughter.



I led us through the thickets. We hadn’t been inside the old house since Mama and Papa had died five months earlier, but we’d visit the graves on the outskirts of the property every month. The land and cabin still belonged to our family, but there hadn’t been any reason to go inside. Not anymore.

The cabin was tucked in the middle of the dense forest and surrounded by a cluster of trees. Young saplings and fallen leaves had overtaken the once-worn paths; only by accident would someone ever happen upon it. Great-Grandpa Thomas had built it many years ago, and while it didn't have electricity, Papa had rigged up the plumbing so Mama could draw water from the well directly into the sinks and tub.

We set our kayaks down and walked up to the rickety porch made of old railroad ties. The house itself was built out of pine logs and plywood. Every now and again, Papa would replace the old logs and boards with new ones, clambering up onto the roof to patch any holes and reinforce soft spots.

I ran the palm of my hand down one of the saturated black and gray planks. The months of neglect had taken a heavier toll than I expected.

"We could fix it up, me and you. One day, I want to move back here."

Finn smiled and nodded.

"Hey, Tia! There's the ol' tub." He laughed and pointed to the old-fashioned tin container propped along the far end of the porch.

I thought about Mama gently scrubbing my shoulders with a soft cloth. I loved that feeling. It was like the softest massage ever. Sometimes Mama would put dish soap in the water to make it extra bubbly, and that made it seem even more luxurious.

I twisted the front door's worn wooden handle, pushing it open to expose the darkened room beyond. I normally loved the way the cabin smelled: a deep piney scent from the logs mixed

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with the aroma of supper coming from the big cooking pot in the fireplace, which spit and hissed among the flames.

But now the cabin just smelled damp and stale, unused and unloved.

“Thought this place was bigger,” Finn muttered to himself as he walked around the living room, taking it all in. “Look! Mama’s rocking chair is still here. It’s worn and faded, but still sturdy.”

I made my way to the back bedroom, where the kids used to sleep. The bunk beds were in the trailer home, where we now lived with our younger brothers. All that remained in the bedroom were some scrap pieces of paper, an empty closet, and one old white tube sock with blue stitching around the top.

“I miss them so much,” I said, hanging onto the doorframe as if my legs might buckle at any moment. “Mama read to us in here every night.”

“Yeah, those were great times,” Finn said.

Then he headed back through the living room.

I joined Finn beside the fireplace, where he unearthed a plastic bag filled with nuts and raisins. I took a handful, and we sat in silence, munching on the snacks.

We were at school when our parents had been heading to Mannington for the day. Bright yellow, diamond-shaped road signs that read “FALLING ROCK” peppered the sides of the narrow and twisting roads along the Appalachian Mountain Range, but the hundreds of times we’d been down that route, I had never seen a falling rock. On that particular day, a boulder barreled down the side of the mountain and crashed into the car, killing Mama and Papa.

Finn and I would be turning sixteen in a few months, and our



brothers, Wes and Paddy, were even younger. I guess there's never a good age to receive bad news, but fifteen, eleven, and eight are, well, particularly hard.

I knew something was wrong when the county sheriff had shown up in my classroom and escorted me to the principal's office. The worst I thought was maybe Paddy had gotten into trouble, talking back or writing notes.

My heart sank when I saw Father Harold, Papa's older brother, sitting on the long couch between Wes and Paddy. Like most days, Uncle Harold was wearing his short-sleeve black clerical shirt with the white Roman collar, black slacks, and heavy black shoes. When he saw me, he immediately came over, held me tight, and kissed my forehead. His light blue eyes were puffy and bloodshot. Then he led me to a chair next to Finn, who looked like a ghost.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, Tia," Father Harold said.



After we'd left school, Father Harold took us to a dinged and worn old trailer parked behind the church rectory.

"This is your home now, at least for a little while," he said.

The trailer was long and narrow, complete with electricity, running water, two bedrooms, a small, discolored kitchenette, and a sitting area covered in dark brown carpet that would always look dirty, no matter how often I vacuumed it.

The bathroom had a tiny shower with a sliding door and a toilet that squatted close to the ground. The whole place was dirty and dusty, having sat idle for many years.

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We cleaned for two solid days; after that, it smelled strongly of Pine-Sol but was finally livable. It still didn't feel like home, but at least every nook and corner reminded me of Mama and Papa.

While the boys were out for lunch, I sat at the kitchenette table and slowly peeled back the lid of a box labeled "FRAGILE." My hands shook as I pulled out two delicate teacups: Mama's treasured items, having been passed down from one generation to the next.

I held the teacups close to my chest before placing them down with care. Then I pulled out my journal and, without forethought or hesitation, began to scribble:

*You can't take it with you
echoes in my ear.
You can't take it with you,
so why hold the cup so dear?
My Mama left me on a cloudy afternoon.
No warning, no whistle, gone too soon.
Here, my dear, teacups for you.
Cherish them deeply; they were meant for us two.
Please, I cannot; I cannot bear the pain.
I want to hold my mama, her tiny, tiny frame.
Teacups and stuff hold no value.
You can't take it with you, only feels shallow.
Mama, I miss you; it's hard to get up.
My heart is broken; please share my cup.*



Finn's voice startled me back to the present.

"We used to cook squirrel and rabbit in this fireplace," he said.

"Do you remember that?"

"Yeah. Of course I remember."

"I've still got that ol' shotgun Papa gave me when I was eight," he said.

I looked around and smiled, thinking about how the family would gather every evening after dinner to tell stories, sometimes even sing and dance. I stared down at the old plywood floor. "I got so many splinters from this floor."

"Yeah, we should have worn shoes. Bottoms of my feet are as soft as a baby's butt these days."

"Finn, were we really *this* poor? This desperate? Why didn't we care?"

Finn's eyebrows shot up and his eyes widened. "Sissy, we're *still* this poor and desperate. Difference is we can turn on the light to see how poor we are." He then lifted both arms and flexed his well-toned muscles. "Don't worry, we'll rebuild it and make it good as new."

"Real funny, but seriously, it's like there's a hole in my heart, and I can't patch it up. It's like we shouldn't be here. It just doesn't feel right anymore."

I could usually push my feelings back to the deepest part of my heart and bury them, but on that day, in that moment, there were too many memories to ignore. They rushed upon me like a tidal wave crashing against a rocky shore.

I stood up, wiped my cheeks, and tried to smile.

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“I’m going on a walk; I’ll be back soon,” I said, heading out the front door before he could protest.

The scent of the damp pine trees was intoxicating. I tilted my head back and felt the warmth of the sun caress my face. I closed my eyes, longing to touch Mama’s soft cheek and see Papa’s gentle smile.

I walked down a familiar path to a fork in the road that had made Papa’s eyes light up every time they crossed it. Papa had known that the hills contained special mementoes dropped by soldiers during the Civil War days, and “by gosh and by golly,” he’d always been determined to find something. When Mama brought home a used metal detector from the church flea market, it’d been an exciting day for everyone.

He loved sweeping that machine back and forth across the hard-packed dirt until it found its mark. He would shout “Wahoo!” every time the machine began bleating its tinny-sounding beeps, signaling a find. When that happened, Papa would kneel down on the ground and pull out the soup spoon from his pants pocket. His ritual was to make a large circle around the target with the end of his spoon, and then, ever so carefully, he’d start scraping the dirt from left to right, layer by layer. He was as giddy as a schoolboy.

One time after thirty minutes of painstaking skimming along that fork in the road, Papa’s spoon had met an object that gave off the smallest of “tings.” He unearthed a cap box, canteen, and bayonet from the soil. His prized find, though, had been a medical bleeder. He laughed at the contraption, finding it to be the most ridiculous gadget ever invented. It wasn’t a common bleeder,