M. T. Willis

Lyda Mae Cooper

Chapter One

The Dare

 I told him no.

 But a dare is a dare.

 And when you’re new in town, and out to impress a gang of sixth graders, no nine year old boy is gonna refuse a dare. Unless, he’s facing certain death, or worse; he has to kiss a girl.

 Seeing how none of these things applied (except, if you believe in ghosts), my little brother, Austin, had no choice but to take Josh Millwood’s dare.

 “Austin Cooper,” I hollered. “You come back here!” I straddled my Purple Raptor mountain bike and mashed the handbrake ‘til my fingers went numb.

“He ain’t gonna listen to his sister, Lyda Mae,” Josh stopped beside me on his Mean Green BMX bike. He grinned so wide, I could see the wad of gum packed in his cheek.

“Man, that kid is brave!” Kurtis Satterfield hopped off his skateboard and popped it under his arm. He tossed his stringy bangs out of his eyes.

“Wait for us,” Carly Payne called. She and Jasmine Johnson rode up on their matching bikes and stopped on the other side of me.

Now, I know Austin heard me, but he didn’t even look back. He just peddled his mini mountain bike right down the middle of Spooky Street – headed for certain doom.

“Shoot,” I spat. “I should have grabbed Ole Lucky.”

Too late, I remembered that Austin’s courage was tied to that beat up cowboy hat plastered to the top of his sweaty head. I watched in horror as he sped right into the wall of fog hanging across the crumbling road. In no time, he was out of sight.

I wiped the salty sweat off my face. It was too hot to think right.

It hadn’t rained for a month. Even the sawgrass along the roadside was bent over limp. The cypress trees in the swamp ditches had shade, but they dripped with puke green moss that crawled with blood-sucking chiggers. No way I was standing there.

 Suddenly, Josh let out a whoop. “He’s really gonna do it!”

Right then, I wanted to rip the Army Brat dog tag necklace right off his neck.

 “He’s as stubborn as you are, Lyda Mae,” Carly whipped her helmet off and flipped her toast brown hair over her shoulder. “Does that come with being blonde-headed?”

 I shot her a sideways glance and pulled my ball cap further down on my head.

 Jasmine leaned over her handlebars. She held a thin brown hand up over her eyes and squinted into the fog. “I don’t see him anymore.”.

 “I guess you’re not gonna miss him when he’s gone, Lyda Mae,” Kurtis said. “See’in how you don’t like him much.”

 “Who said I don’t like him?” I shoved his skateboard with my foot.

Josh jumped in. “Why you did. You said your brother was two years younger, but five years dumber. And you wish you were an only child.”

I winced as my own words came back me from out of his mouth.

 “I like him just fine.” I folded my arms across my chest. “Besides, I was mad when I said that.”

I turned and stared Josh right in his beady brown eyes. “It’s a stupid dare - especially since you’d never do it.”

 Josh gawked.

“I have done it!” He swiped a hand across the top of his buzz cut.

 “Yea, we both did,” Kurtis said. “Last summer, long before you moved here, we went all the way up the front porch before—“

 “--before Cootie Barnes, himself, came walking out of the front door. We thought we was goners!” Josh cackled.

 “Yea, we ran out of there so fast the wind couldn’t catch us!” Kurtis said.

“But Cootie didn’t get to put the curse on us. Now, we’re here living to talk about it…” Josh winked. “I just hope Austin’s as lucky.”

Kurtis laughed and reached across me to give Josh a fist bump.

My stomach climbed to my throat.

“Whatcha gonna do, Lyda Mae?” Carly whispered.

I tried to think of a way to stop Austin that didn’t involve getting killed.

“We’ll have to go after him,” Josh pulled his bike up into a wheelie. “If we’re gonna get the proof.”

 We all looked at each other. No one wanted to go where Austin was headed: The only house on that street – the Spooker House - was a wooden two-story monster with a gaping hole where the chimney used to be. It sat all the way at the end of the road.

 “Did you say--*we*?” Jasmine chewed on the end of her black braid.

 Josh dropped his tire to the ground. Curtis popped a kick flip and ran his skateboard into my shin. I winced.

“Yep,” Josh said. “We all gotta go.”

I glanced at the battered street sign behind me. Someone had spray-painted ‘Spooky’ in drippy red letters over the street’s real name. At the top of the post sat the sun-bleached skull of a wild pig; its ten inch tusks glinted in the sunlight. It stared at me with hollowed out eyes; its jaws frozen in a mocking laugh. I shuddered.

 “Josh is right,” I suddenly realized that facing certain doom was better than being grounded for a month if Aunt Raye found out I let Austin go off alone.

 “I’ll go with you, Lyda Mae.” Carly put her helmet back and clipped the chin strap.

 I turned to Jasmine. “If don’t want to go, fine. But we’re only getting close enough to call Austin back.”

 Jasmine groaned. “He didn’t listen to you the first time, Lyda Mae.”

 I pushed off and started peddling.

“Then you can help me drag his lifeless body back! Now come on - before he disappears for good!”

Chapter Two

The Chase

 *Anyone who ever lived in that house either died,*

 *disappeared, or went plum crazy.*

 That’s what Josh said when we moved to Harley three months ago with Aunt Raye and Uncle Jeff. He knew all about the Spooker House. He also knew about Cootie Barnes, the old man with wild hair who walked around town all day sucking on cigarettes, sipping coffee and talking to the air. Josh said living in the Spooker House had turned Cootie plum crazy.

 I paused for a minute to look over my shoulder.

Josh was following me. He strained to pedal while Kurtis held onto his bike seat and hitched a ride on his skateboard.

Carly and Jasmine trailed behind us.

 When I came up to the wall of fog, I took a deep breath. I plunged straight in.

 In all my life, I never thought of looking for a way to die till now. I mean, mama sick-died. Daddy, well, he’s just a long term guest of the Morgan County Prison. Austin’s the only family I had left besides Aunt Raye and Uncle Jeff. Now, I was sure that if the Spookers didn’t get him, I was gonna kill him myself.

 The fog closed around me like a thick, wet blanket. It was like the smoke from the dog food factory, but without the putrid smell of roasted kibble. All I could hear was the deafening buzz of a million swamp frogs.

Suddenly, a rotten stench hit me in the nose. I gagged.

Josh and Kurtis pulled up next to me.

 “Gross, Lyda Mae,” Kurtis said, waving his hand in front of his face.

 “That’s not me,” I shot back.

 “Well…it aint…me…either,” Josh panted.

 The fog began to thin. I stood up and started pedaling hard.

 “Watch out,” Kurtis yelled.

 Straight ahead, a mob of black vultures hunched over a dead possum; their beaks dripping with strips of gray flesh.

I swerved hard.

I side-swiped Josh.

Kurtis let go of Josh’s bike seat and soared out of control. “Aaaaaah!” He flew off his skateboard and somersaulted into a ditch.

The buzzards hissed. They hopped to one side then stretched out their enormous black wings and took to the air. From the corner of my eye, I saw a thin gray tail disappear into the sawgrass.

I coasted past the possum carcass. It wriggled with maggots.

 “Poor thing,” Carly said as she rode up, side by side, with Jasmine.

Jasmine pinched her nose closed and looked away.

 Josh hopped off his bike and pulled Kurtis to his feet. “Well, at least it ain’t Austin they were feasting on,” he said.

 *Where is Austin?* I glided to a stop.

 There it was in front of me. The Spooker House.

 A gray hulk surrounded by knee-high weeds and dead trees with bare branches that stuck up over a tarp-covered roof. A wide porch ran all along the front and sagged at the ends in a scowl.

 I spotted Austin. He stood next to his bike near the end of the road and stared up at the house.

 “What if Cootie’s in there?” Jasmine said. “What if he catches Austin and puts the evil eye on him?”

 “Cootie He ain’t home,” Josh said. “He leaves at sun up, and comes back at sun down. He won’t be back till dark.”

 I smirked. “Yea, but what about the Spookers? They’re still in there, ain’t they?”

 Josh slowly nodded.

 I shouted to Austin again. “Get back here!”

But did he listen?

Nope. He just hopped back on his bike and kept going – right up until he hit the lip of the cracked driveway.

That’s when the curse hit him.

Chapter Three

The Curse

 **POP!**

First, Austin’s front tire blew out.

I gasped.

Then his chain fell off. His pedals spun ‘round and ‘round while he wobbled side to side, going nowhere fast. He veered off the driveway and crashed right into a huge bramble.

I held my breath.

“Help,” Austin hollered.

 Just as I put my foot on a pedal, Carly caught me by the arm.

“You’re not going up there, are you?”

I pushed her hand away.

“I can’t leave him there. He’s my brother,” I looked Carly in the eyes. “If I don’t make it back, tell Aunt Raye you can have my Ipad and my fuzzy red pillow.”

My legs felt like jelly, but I started pedaling, and Austin kept yelling.

I was almost there by the time he thrashed his way out of the bushes.

**WHAM!**

The front door of the Spooker House flew open. Cootie Barnes himself came flying down the steps. His eyes blazed with rage.

 “Get outta there!” Josh yelled.

 My foot slipped off a pedal.

“Aunt Raye’s looking for you!” I lied at the top of my voice.

 Austin glanced up at me, his face twisted in a pitiful expression. He batted at the sticker branches stuck to his legs.

 I was too late.

 Cootie ran up and grabbed Austin by the arm. Austin’s face went pale.

 *Please don’t let him get the evil eye,* I prayed.

Cootie said something to Austin that I couldn’t hear. He pointed to the house. Austin paused a moment, then shook his head.

 “Time to go home,” I gasped as I stopped at the curb.

 That’s when Cootie fixed his dull, gray eyes on me. Little bugs buzzed all around his head. There was no doubt about. Who other than a zombie would live in a house like that?

 I shifted my gaze to Austin real quick.

 “Time to go,” I spluttered.

 Cootie dropped Austin’s arm. He stomped over to the thicket and pulled the cowboy hat out of it He shoved it onto Austin’s head.

 Austin picked up his broken bicycle and limped it toward me.

 “Are you ok,” I asked when he reached me.

 Austin nodded and wiped his eyes. “Thanks anyway,” he called back to Cootie.

 I risked a glimpse. Cootie stood there, stone-eyed.

 “He wanted me to go inside,” Austin whispered as he pushed his bike up the road. “He said he would fix me up.”

 I glanced down at Austin’s bare legs. Below the hem of his shorts, his skin was covered with streaks of bright red. “Oh, I bet he did. More like fix you up for Spooker dinner. He tried get you into that old house so it could suck the life out of you.”

“I don’t know, Lyda Mae…”

I flicked him on the shoulder with my finger. “Don’t be dumb, Austin. The Spookers wrecked your bike, cut your legs, and Cootie, Servant of the Dark One, tried to lure you inside. Do you want to be a zombie like him?”

“But I didn’t touch the door, Lyda Mae.”

I grabbed Austin by the shoulders and looked him in the eyes. “Forget about it.”

Carly called out. “Uh, Lyda Mae.”

I looked in her direction. The whole gang stood there, their eyes saucer-wide.

 “Run!” Josh yelled.

 I glanced behind me. With long strides, Cootie was coming up fast. Austin and I bolted. We made it to the fog before I risked another look back.

 Cootie stopped at the dead possum. A chill ran up my spine as he took out a hunting knife, bent down, and stabbed at it. He hoisted it up on the end of the blade.

 There was no doubt about it. This was a warning. The zombie let us go – this time.