

The Holdouts

by

Sherry Clements



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Chapter One

Summer of Love, 1969

Mama dipped her toe out the door of the Greyhound bus like outside was a swimming pool, and she was testing the temperature. Spencer got off next, squalling and sucking his thumb. I hopped out, one, two, three; hot air rushed my skirt. A black bird caw-caw-cawing on a fence watched for a minute, but then flapped away. The afternoon had turned scorching, and the heat shimmered on the empty country highway. All the passengers gawked at us like we were putting on some kind of show for them. Mama turned her back to the windows, and Spencer begged to be picked up like he was three years old instead of six.

I checked my pocket to make sure my seashell was still there. It was the only thing I had time to grab when we were shoved out the front door, but I wouldn't have gone anywhere without it. No sir. Not even if they tortured me.

The bus driver dug out our big suitcase from the belly of the bus. "This is yours, ain't it?" He held up our suitcase. "It's the only one tied with twine."

Mama didn't answer or look up. With every mile on the bus, her bouffant hairdo had wilted. She kept poking bobby pins in it, but now it lay on her neck like a dead rat. Silent tears trickled down her face, smearing her makeup. I hadn't known what to do; I was no good with hair. So

instead I stuck out my tongue at one old woman who kept peeking at us over the top of her book. I had a talent for this sort of thing and practiced all the time. People always said my face was going to freeze that way, and I sure hoped it would.

“I didn’t have enough hair spray,” Mama had confided, and I leaned close and nodded. It was the truth. She used the last of the Aqua Net that very morning and threw the can across the room. Right before she ordered me to go to the neighbor man’s to borrow the telephone and call a cab to carry us to the bus station. *Franklin four oh three three three/ the black and white cab company* jingled through my head.

The driver still held the suitcase. And while I was trying to figure out why he didn’t just hand it to us, I couldn’t help staring at his ears. They were big and wobbly, and they danced when he talked.

“Well, little lady,” he continued yakking at Mama, “there’ll be a bus going back later this evenin’.”

“We won’t be needing it,” she mumbled.

“If you should change your mind...”

She took the suitcase from his hand, turned away. Never looked up. Spencer ran after her.

“Girl,” said the bus driver.

That would be me. “Sir?”

“How old are you?”

“I’m ten.”

He took a red bandana out of his back pocket and mopped his face.

Come to think of it, every old man I’d bothered to glance at had big ears. Most with hair sprouting out of them. I had brought up this subject once in a dinner conversation with the family. Daddy claimed that men born here in Arkansas grew ears big like that. He noted there was something in the air that made their ears keep ripening long after the rest of them had stopped. Then he wiggled his

own to prove the point. Naturally, my daddy was a liar, so who could know the real reason?

The bus driver carefully folded his bandana and stuck it back in his pocket. “You take care of that mama of yours. She looks like she could use some help.”

“Yes, sir.” I looked around for my mama who needed some help, but she had already disappeared behind the bus with Spencer and the suitcase.

“White woman shouldn’t be treated that way,” he grumbled.

He wanted to say something else, but I needed to catch up, so I escaped the driver and his large ears and the bus and its cargo of bug-eyed people.

Excerpt from Chapter One of Sherry Clements’, *The Holdouts*.