

Tatum Este'l
c/o Estel B. Murdock
162 S. 500 E. #204
Provo, Utah, 84606

copyright 13 July 2021

A Stone in My Pocket

by Tatum Este'l

Prologue

Coming into Mississippi

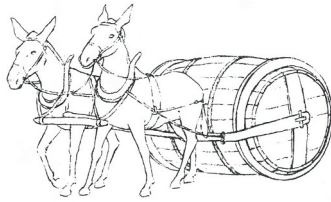
1836 - 1839

Jake Cooperage, a tall, thin fellow, wearing a ragged beaver hat, with long scraggly black hair trailing from underneath, took his rest on a tree stump by the roadside. He took off his rucksack and laid it in the high grass. His old coat and high collar would make a man think he had escaped from a wedding. He watched people and families pass by on the road for nearly an hour. Each time someone passed, he put a mark in his journal. He waved at the wagons and said, "Hydee." A few wagons were covered, some not, but they all had what possessions they couldn't put in the wagon tied or hooked to the sides. There were wagons that had pots and pans banging to the rhythm of the horses' cadence as they passed. The elm trees along the road provided good shade from the high sun, but he had no protection from the manure made by horses, cows, and oxen.

Jake had conversations with men like him who walked the road. Many had left families to spy out the country. Many were unmarried and had come to hunt or plant the cotton seed they carried in a pouch hung on their shoulder. Men on horseback rarely stopped, but they would say, "Hey," or ask if this was the way to the Mississippi. Jake would reassure them.

Others had attached a shaft on each side of a hogshead barrel, using it like a wheel, having an axle through the center of the barrel, going from top to bottom. Then the barrel would roll along on its side. They put all their worldly possessions into the barrel and, using a horse or a mule, rolled it all the way from Georgia or the Carolinas to

the Mississippi. As they passed him, they would roll over the fresh manure and flatten it like pancakes. At night, Jake took a few of those dried pancakes and built a fire.



One man on horseback looked like the famed Icabod Crane from *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* by Washington Irving. Jake lost that book when a circle of friends back home kept borrowing it from each other. The man got down from his horse and introduced himself.

“Jimmy Rickets,” he called himself. “School teacher.”

That sent chills up Jake’s spine.

“All these people headin’ fer the Mississippi have lots of children that need to be taught.”

“Yes, Sir” Jake agreed. “Readin’ and writin’ is becoming more popular.”

“There are some places that are filled with ignoramuses, so I thought I have lots of opportunities here.” Jimmy stretched and almost reached the clouds with his hands. “So, what’s yer trade?”

“A farmer like most folks. Widower also.” Jake heaved a sigh. “Wife, Jane, she didn’t bear me any children except one, and they both died in childbirth.”

“Sorry to hear it.” He took off his beaver hat and put it on his heart, bending slightly forward. “Well. I have a ways to go a’fore I come to the first settlement. I have my schedule.”

“Good to have a schedule.” Jake rose, shook Jimmy’s hand, and saw him off.



On his trek to the Mississippi, Jake counted over four thousand people. One caravan of wagons he recognized. It was a family of Pickles. They had brought their blacks with them, a cotton gin, and traveled with a few families he recognized. There were the Riggs, the Taylors, and the Cains. It seemed like an army on the move with its caissons rolling along, jingling and jangling, creaking and tromping, and singing the old songs.

“You know I'm a dreamer,
But my heart's of gold.
I had to run away high,
So I wouldn't come home low.
Just when thangs went right,
It doesn't mean they were always wrong.
Just take this song,
And you'll never feel left all alone.
Take me to yer heart,
Feel me in yer bones.
Just one more night,
And I'm coming off this long and winding road.

I'm on my way,

I'm on my way,

Home sweet home.

Tonight, tonight I'm on my way.

I'm on my way,

Home sweet home.”

“I smell cotton seed in those wagons!” he yelled to Henry Pickle.

“You old scoundrel!” Henry shouted from the front seat of the covered wagon.

“Where you been, Jake?”

“Hay, Jake,” called Mary from the back of the wagon. She was two years younger than him. She had long black hair and red ruby lips and cheeks.

“Merry Mary! How you have grown.” Jake tipped his hat. “You remain and have always been pertty.”

Jake ran to catch up to Henry, and walking alongside the wagon, swung his rucksack onto his shoulder.

“I got here a’fore you, ha ha, and I walked.”

Henry smiled at him. “You left, must have been a month or two ago, wasn’t it?”

“Yaw! I seen lots o’ beautiful places. I haven’t decided where I want to settle down. Maybe I will just foller you.”

“We’re headed fer Pontotoc. That’s where we can buy some land.” Henry let the horses follow the scented trail.

“How much are you plannin’ on spendin’, Henry? Wonderin’ what I can look forward

to.”

“I hear the northern lands are going fer as little as seventy-five cents an acre.”

“I’ll be darned if I don’t go in with you all and git a little acre fer myself. Maybe you’ll loan me one of yer blacks to help me get settled.”

“Them blacks,” Henry said with a serious look on his face, “are more expensive than the land be.”

“I reckon yer right.” Jake kicked a rock.

“And don’t worry about neighbors helpin’ neighbors. That’s what we do.”

After a while, Jake felt a gentle arm wrap itself around his right one. He looked over to see Mary walking alongside him. She smelled like flowers and her dress looked like the sky on a clear summer day. She had well set teeth when she smiled. Her round cheeks and brown eyebrows framed sparkling blue eyes.

“Haven’t seen you in a whole year, Jake.” Her gait was strong, yet with gentle footfalls.

Jake’s heart pounded. “Gosh, Mary. I done fergot you were back there. I appreciate you comin’ up here and walkin’ with me. You make a man remember how lonely he can be.”

“I guess that is a compliment. I shore wouldn’t like you to get lonely and walk all this way without me.”

“I guess a woman can get lonely too, huh?”

“She sure can.”

“Our tobacco crop failed several years in a row,” Henry said, looking at his daughter,

trying to appraise the situation down there. “You know how difficult that was back there in Virginny.”

“Yes indeed,” Jake said, taking a stalk of grass from his mouth. “I guess that’s why ever-one is comin’ to the Mississippi to grow cotton. Everyone I asked on the trail is going fer the same reason.”

Tilting his head, Jake asked, “You took any with you?”

“Took what?” Henry blinked his eyes as if he didn’t know.

“Tobaccy, knot head, tobaccy. I run out miles ago.”

“Now what do you want with that?” Mary asked, leaning her head on his shoulder.

“Why, my pipe is completely empty, and it helps my poor feet to do all this walkin’.”

“I prefer to smell the tobacco flowers than its smoke.” Mary scrunched up her nose.

“Well, the way yer daddy here cures tobaccy, it smells a whole lot like a beautiful bouquet, what I got in my hand.” He pulled out a fist full of wildflowers he had picked from the side of the road.

She accepted the flowers and put them up to her nose. “It makes a woman swoon. I will need these if you two keep smoking.” Mary smiled at the blue sky.

“Oh. Yer swoon is my invigoratin’”

“Here ya go,” Henry said. “Catch. I have a whole wagon load of the stuff.”

As Jake caught the small bag of tobacco, Mary said, “I think I’m getting tired again. I’m goin’ back into the wagon.”

“Suit yer pertty self, darlin’. I gotta take a smoke.”

Both men lit their pipes and breathed in the aromatic exhilaration and sighed.



The wagons headed for Pontotoc, a small settlement east and middle of the Mississippi Territory. There, they would find the land office. The best lands were in the central and southern areas of the territory. An acre was selling for a dollar and a quarter. This kind of business would divide the territory into the northern poor who were from Virginia, Tennessee, and the Carolinas, and the southern rich from Georgia and Alabama where their parents settled, producing plantations. Tobacco had become common, not a novelty, and therefore, wasn't selling as well. The market had leveled out. But the market for cotton had risen because of the invention of the cotton gin. England and the northern states were starting mills to produce cheap cotton cloth from American cotton, and Mississippi was found to have the ideal soil and climate suited to growing it. Henry Pickle had sold his plantation in Virginia to buy a cotton gin and have the money to travel to the Garden of Eden, as Mississippi was called.

Most of the Natchez, Choctaw, and the Chickasaw had been rounded up by government troops and sent farther west across the Mississippi. Only a quarter of the Natchez was left on their lands, but many were selling out to the white settlers. Many of the Indians blended in with the whites, changing their appearance and their names to keep their land, destroying all records proving they were natives. They were lighter complexioned and could speak Spanish or English with a Spanish accent. Many were thought to be Spaniards

as Mississippi was taken from Spain in 1795. The major migrations of Americans took place before the 1830s, but the Pickles came later, about 1836. He would find that the Indians proved to be a barrier when he went to the land office.

Pontotoc was a single dirt road with a clapboard building on the north side next to a small hotel. They were the same building, but with two different doors. A sign with a picture of a barrel swung above the east door, and a sign saying, "Rooms" swung above the other door. Across the street were a saloon and a barn where a blacksmith was hammering above the hum of wagons moving up and down the street. Oxen mooed and wagons rattled. Many wagons camped, surrounding the town, creating a tent city.

Henry and Jake spied another sign painted in small letters on the outside wall of the general store. It said, "Land Office and Postal Service."

"Well, there it is," Jake said, pointing to the words.

"Let's go in," Henry said, spitting tobacco onto the wooden sidewalk.

The hall was lined with chairs occupied by men wearing a mixture of Indian and European clothes. They talked in Spanish or broken English to people standing nearby. Several stared straight ahead. Several displayed feathers in their hats, and a couple of them still wore the leather loincloth over their trousers. They all wore beads or coins about their necks.

There was a low wall inside to the left, half-surrounding a small table supporting a lantern and a lot of papers and books. A man with a large mustache, wearing a white tunic and leather vest sat behind the desk busy writing and looking up things in his books, mumbling to himself. A long line of men waited on him.

Jake and Henry walked to the end of the line of characters from penny novels, all rascals, wearing rag-tag clothes.

Henry talked to the last man in the line, who hadn't cut his hair in years. His locks reached the fringe attached to his buckskin tunic. His wide-brimmed hat cast a shadow over his bearded face. Jake thought he might be a trapper coming down from the mountains.

"How long you been standing here?" Henry offered him a plug of tobacco.

The man took it as an act of hospitality. He chomped down on it and handed it back to Henry. "Name's Jessie, and it's been a couple hours."

"Henry. Down from the north? This is Jake, my little brother."

"Naw. Been in the Rocky Mountains among the Utes. Come back to civilization fer some land."

"You tired of trappin?" Jake asked, poking his thumbs in his belt.

"Naw. Wife's getting' tired. Wants to settle down, so I thought I'd get a plot of land fer her sake." The man looked the boys up and down. "You fellers goin' to grow cotton?"

"Yep," Henry said. "Was growin' tobaccy. That's my own there you're chewin'."

"Might good too."

The three shared tall tales and politics, seeing that Pontotoc had just become a county seat. They finally found themselves at the desk. At the end of the bickering and haggling over the land and consulting with the Indians in the entrance way, the three found they were going to be neighbors, each sharing part of a creek that flowed into the Cold Water River near Senatobia. Jake Cooperage, Henry Pickle, and James Neighbors.

The Singletons

Chapter One

Samuel Singleton stood with his hands on his hips and stared at the old Spanish mansion and the rocky landscape on which he had tried to scrape a living. It was his brother's, and it was in Georgia. The two-story house almost reminded him of an ancient Greek temple except that the wooden columns were square and the paint was peeling. It had belonged to an old Spaniard long ago before the English ran him out. Samuel turned to his sweetheart, Martha.

“Git the children into the wagon. We gotta be at the crossin’ a’fore noon. Clouds are gatherin’. At least it won’t be in the heat.”

Martha kissed him on the cheek, letting him know she supported him. “Charles! Redding! Martha! Andrew!” She took a deep breath and yelled again. “John! George! Sam!”

Children ran to the wagon, coming from all directions. Martha came from the house, carrying her Rose Ann, a rag doll she lost only yesterday. “Found it!” she smiled, dangling it in the air. Little Sam came from the outhouse, holding his pants up. “Mama, you do it.” She knelt down, buttoned his pants for him, and swatted his bottom as he ran to the wagon.

Charles and Redding mounted their horses and waited.

Samuel stepped up onto the porch and hugged his brother Henry. He almost cried. “Sorry we couldn’t stay, but you know it was gettin’ a bit too crowded around here.”

“We could a built another house, you know.”

“Yeah, well.” Samuel winked.

He hugged his sister-in-law, Mattie next. “We love you too.”

Then Martha grabbed her and hugged her. “We’ll write along the way, let you know where we are.”

“Love you too, Martha,” Mattie said, taking a slow time to let go of her.

“When we git to the Mississipp, you let us know how it comes out.”

Mattie rubbed her pregnant belly. “I will.”

All the cousins slowly showed up, coming in from doing their morning chores. Not one of them said anything. The younger ones waved as the wagon rolled away, disappearing into the pine woods.



Warm rain poured down all day, turning the dirt road into molasses, thick and soggy. Charles and Redding got the worst of it. It was dark. The horses stank. The boys dozed as they rode, following the old cow hitched to the back of the wagon. Even though they wore oiled canvas ponchos, they were cold and felt weary and depressed. It was enough leaving home and family, but the weather was not a welcoming sign. It said, turn back. Yet, they were loyal to their mom and dad. So, they trudged along behind the wagon in their sadness.

A lone whippoorwill sang a cheerful song hidden somewhere in a bush.

“That’s it!” Redding called out. “That’s the way to be. That’s a call from God hisself.”

Redding started singing a round called *Raggedy Sally*, bringing the whole family who joined in under his newly found cheerful spell.

Rags and Sally, that’s all she had;

Sally sold rags across the land.

Up the street and the down street,

Up the street and the down street;

She sang and danced as she ran,

Selling rags from hand to hand.

Rags and Sally, that's all she had;

Sally sold rags across the land.

Pretty soon, the clouds opened and everyone shouted, "Hoorah, hoorah!" pumping their fists in the air. The cow mooed.

Mama Singleton got out the fried chicken and corn fritters she had packed up in kitchen towels. Everyone was hungry; they had smelled the chicken for the last 10 miles without partaking. It was worth the wait, and they didn't mind if the chicken wasn't crunchy anymore, but it was still juicy. The children smiled, giggled, and told jokes. Afterward, they took naps, laying down on top of the trunks and boxes which were covered with blankets.



That night, Papa Singleton made a campfire surrounded with stones, and mother cooked beans and bacon in her big black pot, swinging over the fire, held up by a green branch stretched between two wooden forks. Charles and Redding fed the animals, leading them to a grassy field where they tied them to a tree. There were shining eyes watching from the dark forest glade. The full moon shone overhead through the clouds like

a bark crossing the waters. The older children told ghost stories to the little ones, then it was time to eat. Afterward, Papa got out the Good Book and read to them about Solomon. He told them how plush he lived and how wise he was, and how God spoke to him. Papa told his children that it was good to help other people, just like Solomon did, and to watch for such opportunities.

Mama tucked all the little ones into their makeshift beds. Charles and Redding slept in a pup tent, while Mama and Papa laid out under the wagon. Papa and the older children slept with a gun by their sides.



After a month of living off the land and storing deer meat in salt, along with their pork bellies, they came to the main road, heading west, and linked up with a wagon train of people coming from the Carolinas and Virginia. They pulled behind wagons of black folk. Charles and Redding went up to their owners and asked if it was okay to tag along behind them. They said yes and introduced themselves as the Pickles, and they were heading for Pontotoc at the center of the Mississippi Territory. They hoped to buy land there. Charles told Mr. Pickle that they were not going that far, but were heading up toward the Tennessee River.

“Well,” said Mr. Pickle, “we are glad to have you as neighbors as long as you like.”

Charles winked at the girls in the back of the Pickle’s wagon, and he and Redding returned to their papa to tell him who they were following.

“Tobacco farmer,” Redding said. “Could smell it a mile away.”

“Nice crop of girls he has hangin’ out that wagon,” Charles said. “Watch me. I’m gonna be sure to be his neighbor.”

“You’ll help us with the farm first, youngin’,” his papa said.

“Yes, Pa,” was all he could say, and rode to the back of the wagon with his tail between his legs.



The day came when the Singletons pulled away from the Pickles as Samuel consulted his map. They followed an Indian trail from then on, meeting many Indians whose numbers were less than a tithe of a once proud people. Most of them were dressed as white men with a few combining the English clothing with beaded vests, belts, and moccasins, and with feathers in their caps. They would see them farming or herding cows. They greeted each other with a raised hand. Several still spoke Spanish. Most spoke pigeon-English. They would trade with the Singletons, but oftentimes would go away disappointed, for the Singletons would not give them any basic necessities, horses, or the woman with the blonde hair.

Samuel wouldn't trade with money. He kept that for Long Foot to buy his land.

This was the second time Samuel had been in the Mississipp country. He had been here a couple of years before and had given a promissory note to an Indian he had become friends with. He found that he had fifty acres to sell. It was a broad swath several miles

below the Tennessee River. It was first settled by the Marshall family, but they had moved south where the land was richer and able to grow cotton. Their farm had reverted back to the Indians.

There were many rivulets flowing into the Tennessee River, and Long Foot's plot was between two of these. He was an old man and wanted the money to move to northern Mexico, the part called Texas, where his family was. He spoke English with a Spanish accent. He told of many English that left and went into Texas. They told him the future lay there. Even his family moved, but he didn't want to leave the place where he was born. But loneliness had sent its creepers into his heart and made him weep many times.

After having looked the land over, Samuel decided that people had a misconception about the place. It may have been dry in spots, but he could build ditches to water his crops from the rivulets. He told Long Foot that he would be back with his family and gave him the promissory note.



The Singleton's wagon, followed by a lone cow, eased into the widening path that became Long Foot's front yard. Samuel got down, telling everyone to stay in the wagon. Charles and Redding hopped down from their horses and rested their elbows on the rim of the wagon and started up a conversation. Samuel went up to the front door and knocked.

"Long Foot!" he yelled. "Long Foot. It's me, Samuel Singleton. I've come with my family and the money."

Samuel heard a faint voice inside, so he pushed the damp, mossy door open and entered. He went into the back room and found the old man on his bed.

“My friend, my friend,” said Long Foot as he raised his left hand in greeting.

Samuel kneeled by the bedside. “Long Foot. I’ve come with my family and the money fer the land.”

“I won’t need the money now. I’m dying. But I am hoping you can go to my daughter across the big river and give it to her. She lives directly west.” Long Foot coughed. “She lives in a village named Konki. Her name is Prairie Flower. Tell her that I want you to have the land. Give her this letter. It will explain everythang.”

Long Foot gave a letter, folded and sealed with wax, to Samuel. “You give her the money along with the letter.”

“I’m sure you will get better, Long Foot. My wife is a good nurse. You can give the letter to her yerself.”

“No, friend.” He shook his head. “I have waited a long time fer you. Now, I am tired. Please bury me by my wife out back. You’ll find a lone cross out back.”

Long Foot didn’t last the night.

Everyone left their residence in the wagon and wandered off in every direction, exploring their new home. Martha cleaned the house; Charles and Redding scouted the farm, trying to discover what they could find.

After dinner, Long Foot, having suffered Martha to feed him chicken soup, fainted. He passed away about midnight. Samuel found a box that could be used as a homemade casket in the barn behind the house. Long Foot had probably made it himself. Samuel

dug a hole beside a rotting cross and buried the old man there. The full moon shone on a family silhouetted around the grave site, black at midnight. Samuel said a prayer, and Charles and Redding filled the grave with the dirt their father had piled up. The children went back to bed, complaining about having to be “waked up” to attend a funeral. One little boy had to visit the outhouse one more time.



Redding was called in from the field. He took off his wide-brimmed hat as he entered the cabin. For a moment, the sun shone on his bright red hair, and then things went dark, and he had to squint to see his father.

“Red,” his father called him. “I want you to take these thangs,” and he handed him a leather bag and a letter, “to a village across the Mississippi. It’s called Konki, and give them to a woman called Prairie Flower. If she can write, I want her to sign this letter from me.” He gave him another letter. “It says the sale is final and describes the lay of the land with its boundaries, et cetera.”

“Yes, pa.”

“You got a question?” The sun reflected from the eyes of his father.

“Only, how do I cross the river?” Redding stared at the bag and letters.

“I’m sure there will be a ferry. I’ve been there myself. It’s due west from here.”

“Yes, Pa.”

“Right away.”

“Yes, Pa.”

“Mama has made you a sack of victuals, so get moving.”

“Will do, Pa.”

Redding took the food from his mother, kissed her, and went out to saddle Little Sister, his horse. “We gotta ride a few days again, Little Sister. I know you would like to stay here and munch on the grass, but we gotta git. Pa says so.”

Little George and Sam, both of them half his size, came up to him after he was in the saddle. “Where ya goin’, Red?”

“On a little trip across the Mississip. Gotta see a girl.” He pulled back on the reins to keep Little Sister from bounding away.

“You gonna get married?” they asked.

“Some day. Now you kids skit. Little Sister here is a rarin’ to go.”

The kids backed up and let their brother by. They watched him trot down to the trail and disappear into the dust.

“Did ya see, Sam? He was carryin’ a shotgun.”

“Yeah. It’s goin’ ta be a shotgun weddin’.”

“Yeah!”

Ma Singleton came to the door. “Come in here you two. I need yer help.”

“Yes, Ma,” they said. They went up to the porch as slowly as they could. They had been having such a nice time playing in the barn. Of course, they had originally been called to the barn to help their pa clean it up, but they had started running around and throwing things, so their pa told them to go help their ma. They had a detour when Redding got on his

horse. They both said, "I wish we had a horse."

Martha swatted the nearest one on the behind and said, "You'll grow up fast enough. You both will have horses, and you'll go off and leave me a lone widow, you will."

Chapter Two

Prairie Flower

Redding made his way due west through a wet and tangled forest. He avoided swampy ground, winding back and around many times. Little Sister would toss her head and whinny when he was going in the wrong direction. He finally let her take the lead, and she found an old Indian trail that took him to the river's bank. It took him several nights to get there, eating up all the food his ma had given him. His last camp was next to the river. He had arrived at night, and the sounds of the river were quite spooky. Owls whooed and wolves cried at the moon. He didn't sleep well. He thought he was being watched. He had to raise his head several times to see if someone was there. He held onto his shotgun almost the whole night, but the sound of the river water flowing swiftly along and the wind in the trees finally put him to sleep in the early morning.

Before sunrise, Redding stood, stretched, and looked out across a mile of water called the Mississippi. The current seemed lazy this morning, not like last night when it blew wild and windy. He thought of wading or swimming across. He wasn't sure he could make it. He didn't want to put Little Sister to the test, so he would rely on what his wise old dad had told him and use the ferry. The trail took him north of where he thought the ferry should be, but it was there, tied to the east side. The sky now was blue again.

He thought of what would happen if the ferry were tied to the west side. Perhaps he would have to use his shotgun to signal the ferry captain. He was sure he remembered his dad mentioning that to him. Maybe that was why he brought the gun in the first place.

As he approached the ferry, he could smell bacon and coffee. No doubt, the other

greasy smell would have been corn dodgers or biscuits.

“Hi!” He called out.

“Hey, boy!” A rugged man, dressed in buckskins, stood next to a campfire. Bereft of a hat, the bearded man ran his wet hands through his bushy hair. His glistening face proved wet also. He picked up a towel and dried himself. “You hungry?”

“Yes, sir.” Redding lighted off Little Sister and walked up to the man.

“Got a dollar?” The man held out a pewter plate.

What a hospitable man this is, Redding thought. “Yes, sir.”

Redding reached into his purse, took out a gold dollar, the size of a dime, and flipped it into the plate. The man took the coin and handed the plate to the boy.

“Help yerself. The biscuits will be done in a minute. Here’s a cup.” The man cocked his head. “The name’s Phil. I bet yer folks call you Red with all that fiery red hair.”

“Yep. Redding. Actually an uncle’s name.”

Redding sat on a nearby rock after filling his plate with bacon and eggs. He held out the cup and Phil filled it with hot, steaming coffee. He wasn’t used to eating with a knife. He was a bit clumsy with the eggs. His father had given him that knife on his twelfth birthday. It had become useful on the trail from Georgia. He hadn’t ever worn it until then. He was eighteen now, and a grown man. He could now wear his knife like he had seen so many other men do. His father treated him like a man, sending him out like this with the money to pay for the farm.

“So, goin’ to Texas?”

“Yep.” He didn’t want to say why, but the man asked.

“You runnin’ away from home? You don’t look the type.” Phil lit a pipe from the burning end of a straight stick.

“Out on family business.” Done with his eggs, he took a fresh biscuit and slid bacon inside and chomped down on it. “Good. Good.” He washed it down with coffee. “Hope I can find a girl that can cook as well as you.”

“So. What’s yer business?”

“Lookin’ fer a girl.” Realizing what he had said, he laughed, almost spitting his biscuit out. After swallowing, he said, “not that way. My dad’s friend has a daughter across the river. I’m supposed to tell her that her dad passed away.”

“Oh. And yer dad’s busy and can’t come hisself.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s he so busy at?”

Now Redding began to be annoyed. “Has a new farm east of here. Has to get it cleaned up and ready for the planting. You open fer business? When can I get across?”

“Hold yer horses, boy. Maybe yer dad hasn’t taught you manners.”

“Sorry. I don’t know you and yer askin’ personal questions.”

“Just conversin’, boy. Just tryin’ to be polite.”

“I’m a bit shy, ya see, and I’m anxious to get back home.”

“Okay,” Phil said. “Let me down this here coffee, and we can be on our way. You got three dollars?”

“That’s a lot.”

“If I sold my services by the pound, son, that would be only a small fee, and that’s a

big horse fer a little guy like you.”

“Yeah, but she’s sweet on me.” Redding stood next to Little Sister and held her muzzle. “Aren’t ya, Little Sister?”

Little Sister nodded her head and whinnied.

Phil rose and walked over to the dock. Redding and Little Sister followed him.

The ferry looked like a barge with water lapping over the edges. It had stanchions on both sides holding up rails made of rope. The highest rails on the ferry were two thick hawsers that ran through cast iron poles like thread through a needle, and then they were tied to two large bits on either side of the dock. The hawsers on the other end of the ferry stretched the length of the river and were tied to another dock. On each end of the ferry was a gate that Phil could let down or lift up and tie to the ferry with leather tongs.

On the ferry, Redding met another large man, wearing a sombrero. He had black hair and a large black mustache. He was dressed in white and addressed Phil in Spanish.

“Give yer three dollars to Roberto there.” Phil pointed with his thumb to the Mexican.

Redding handed over what he called the extortion money to Roberto. He said under his breath, “Highway robbery.” If he were running the ferry, he would only charge a dollar fifty.

“Good morning to you, Senor,” The Mexican said as he took the reins of the horse. “We will secure him to this pole here in the center. You stand by him and comfort him so he will stay calm.”

Redding did just that, seeing that Little Sister was a bit jittery. “Now, now, Little Sister.” He rubbed her neck, whispering sweet nothings into her ear.

The two men raised the gate, tied it, and untied the lines attached to the hawsers on

either side. Then, they started pulling on the large ropes. The ferry tipped a little but started a smooth transit across the water. Redding then realized why the men looked so thick. They had to be strong to move the ferry.

Before they reached the middle of the river, the sun popped up behind them. The dark muddy river turned into ribbons of reddish gold laid north and south. The air smelled somewhat of frogs but was refreshingly cool. The chirping of the amphibians calmed down and was replaced by the songs of birds.

When the ferry stopped, the hawsers tied up, and the gate let down, Redding asked Phil, "Do you know of an Indian village nearby? I think it's called Donkey or Konki."

Roberto untied Little Sister and escorted her off the ferry. He answered Redding's question. "You jes follow the trail. It leads right to it."

"Thank you."

Phil asked, "How long you plan staying?"

Roberto handed the reins to Redding.

"Gee, I don't know. It may be a day or two. I hope the Indians are friendly."

"They friendly enough," Roberto said. "jes be happy to see them. They will be happy to see you."

Redding mounted his horse, said, "Thank you" again, and rode off.

It was amazing that, just by crossing the river, the climate could change so quickly.

The air seemed dryer. The trees were more coniferous, and there weren't as many bushes. The ground was covered with pine needles and the air smelled medicinal. The trail was wider, enough for a wagon to pass through. Shortly, the forest thinned out into little

farms scattered around. People waved, and he waved back. Little children would come up to the split rail fences to satisfy their curiosity. In the distance, he could see a steeple and hear the sound of a blacksmith pounding on metal.



Redding sauntered into the town, assuming it was Konki, wondering how he was going to find the old man's daughter. There was the church steeple he had seen above the trees and the blacksmith's barn on one side of the road. A general store lay sprawled out on the other side with a hotel, post office, barber shop, and a bank all in one building. The rest of the town was little clapboard and plastered houses. There were no two-story homes with picket fences and well-manicured lawns. This, Redding thought, must be a typical western town. Most of the people were Mexicans or Indians. He couldn't tell the difference. Everyone was speaking Spanish. Maybe someone in the store could speak English.

He tied Little Sister up to a hitching rail in front of the store. There was a water trough there, and she took a drink.

Redding went through the swinging doors and stood there until his eyes adjusted to the dark. Over to his right was the post office, with a cast metal grate on a countertop, defining the area. There was a round slot under the grate where people could receive their mail and packages. He stepped up to the opening. There was no one there, so he put his elbow on the countertop and searched the store to see if he could spot someone he could talk to.

“One moment,” called the bald clerk with a mustache and a white apron. “I’ll be with you in a moment.”

The clerk continued talking to a woman, probably in her forties, and wrapping up things she bought. She stood at the other end of the counter he was at. It seemed to be half a block away. He watched the woman, wearing a fluffy polka-dotted dress, walk out the door with a young teenage girl.

The clerk appeared behind the metal grate and asked, “What’s the name?”

“Ah, Singleton, Redding Singleton.”

The clerk started hunting through sorted mail, but Redding interrupted him.

“Oh, I’m not here fer the mail, I just wondered if you had a listing fer a Prairie Flower.”

“We sell flower seeds over there, son.” He pointed down the aisle.

“No, no. This is an Indian. She’s supposed to live here.”

The clerk smiled, showing his large horse teeth, and chuckled. “Just joking, son. Just joking. That was her that left.”

“Thank you.” Redding hurried out the door, hoping to catch her. He looked up and down the wooden sidewalk and saw her near the end of the building, heading toward the residential area. He walked fast, but she was walking faster. He ran up behind her. She and the girl stopped and turned around, looking at him with puzzled faces.

“I’m sorry. I saw you in the store. It must be providence that I found you so quickly.”

“And you are?” the woman asked.

“My name is Redding Singleton. Yer father knows my father.”

“And I suppose you came about the farm?”

“Yes, Ma’am. How’d you know?”

“Saw you in a dream last night. You seemed to be riding on yer sister.”

“She’s like that. She sees thangs in dreams,” the girl said, holding a cloth purse with both hands against her skirt. She had on a calico dress, the same dark blue as her mother’s, but with no dots.

“My horse is called Little Sister.”

The woman handed Redding all her packages and said, “Follow me.”

“My horse!” exclaimed Redding.

“Yer horse will be all right.”

So, Redding followed the woman and her daughter, carrying their packages as a servant would.

Presently, they came to a modest little house with dry ground spotted with weeds and flowers as a front yard. The house was slabbed with plaster and the door and windows were simple wooden affairs painted green. The girl opened the door for her mother and Redding. Upon entering, his eyes had to adjust to the darkness again, so he stood there holding the packages.

“You can sit them on the table,” Prairie Flower said. “This is my daughter Margaret. You may call me Susanna. We adopted these English names to fit in around here. Most of us have English names, you see.”

Redding set the packages down, took his hat off, and looked around. On one side of the room were a kitchen with a table and chairs in the center, a Franklin Stove against the

wall next to a counter with a sink in it, and a pump sat in the corner. The left side of the room held a sofa and two straight-backed chairs, and two end tables with flowers on top. There was a door between the two rooms, which must have led to the bedrooms in the back.

“Won’t you have a seat in the parlor, Mr. Singleton?”

The women sat on the couch after Redding took a seat in the closest chair.

“I imagine you want to tell me of my father’s death?” Susanna asked.

“Yes, Ma’am.” Redding stared at her beautiful daughter who must have been twelve or thirteen.

Margaret giggled.

“Mr. Singleton. It is rude to talk to one person and stare at another.”

“Oh!” Redding jerked and focused his attention on Susanna. “Fergive me, Ma’am. Yer daughter is ...”

“Very beautiful, I know. Let’s get back to the subject, please.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Redding glanced at Margaret and noticed she was smiling, but he forced his attention toward Susanna.

“Do you have any papers with you?” She asked.

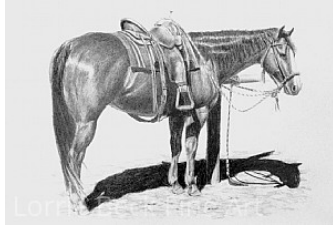
“Yes, I do, but they are in my saddlebags.”

Susanna looked perturbed as she slammed her thighs with her hands. “Well, then. Go get yer horse. You can come down the alleyway and tie him out behind.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.” He winked at Margaret as he left.

Susanna looked at her daughter and clasped her hand. Margaret looked at her mother.

“What?” the young girl asked.



Redding approached Little Sister. She glanced at him and gave out a guttural sound and nudged his chest. He scratched her behind her ears and let his hand slide down her muzzle. “Everythang’s all right, Little Sister. We’re goin’ fer a little ride.” He untied the reins from the hitching rail and hopped up onto his horse. He guided her behind the building and into the alley. As they proceeded down the alley, he counted the houses which he had done unconsciously while following Susanna a few minutes before. When he arrived at the house, he tied Little Sister to the back fence.

Redding looked into the saddle bag and was pleased to see the bag of gold coins and the letter safe and sound. He said a thank you to God under his breath and went through the back gate. Susanna met him at the door.

“There was a time when we didn’t need money,” she said, as she took the little bag from Redding, “but we live in the white man’s world now.”

“Here is the paper you are to sign.” He handed the letter to her, and she glanced at it.

“Come inside.” She held the door open for him. “It’s about lunchtime if you want somewhat to eat.”

“Sure, that will be fine.”

“You can visit with Margaret, and I’ll fix somethang.”

Redding sat down on the sofa next to Margaret. She folded her hands together and held them between her legs. They both stared at the door and windows on the opposite wall,

glancing at each other a couple of times.

If she ain't gonna say anythang, Redding thought, it might mean she is embarrassed, is afraid of boys, or perhaps she's waiting fer me to speak. I guess it's the boy's place to start.

“So, where are you from?” Redding said, trying out his reasoning.

“North Carolina originally,” she said. “They told me that’s where I was born.”

“And so yer family moved all the way out here?”

“My granddaddy’s family was from these parts, on the east side of the river.” She attempted to straighten her dress, pressing it down beside her legs.

Redding couldn’t help but stare at her big black eyes. They seemed too large for her baby face. He then gazed at her full lips and wondered what it would be like to kiss her.

“So, where are you from?” She asked, smoothing her skirt out that lay across the sofa. She almost touched his hand and moved hers away quickly.

“I was born in Tennessee. From there, we moved to Mississipp after the war with the Brits.”

The little house filled up with the smell of burnt beans and lard. Then there was also a toasted corn smell. Redding moved his hand over and touched Margaret’s dress, but Susanna came out with a tray covered with several corn tostadas smeared with refried beans, so he moved it back to his lap and grabbed his other hand. She sat the tray on the small cabinet in front of the sofa.

“I’ll get you some coffee.” Susanna left and came in with two cups of coffee setting on saucers. “Margaret, I left you some milk on the table.”

“Thanks, Mama.” she rose and said, “Excuse me.”

Susanna handed a cup of coffee to Redding, and said, “Help yerself.” She stared at him and said, “She is not a woman yet, so please be a gentleman.”

“Yes, Ma’am. My mother taught right.”

“Well, make sure you respect my daughter. I will slit yer throat without a thought.”

Redding jerked. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Redding was not used to Indian food, but he was willing to try it. When he crunched down on a tostada, he said, “Delicious. Thank you.” He washed it down with his coffee, which was flavored with cinnamon. He raised his eyebrows when he tasted it. “Really good.”

When Margaret returned with her milk, wearing a white mustache, her mother said, “Use yer napkin,” and so she grabbed one from the top of the little cabinet and patted her lips.

Redding felt the urge to run, but he tried to be brave. He had heard many stories from his grandfather about the Indians, and he knew they loved bravery, so he thought he would engage Susanna in conversation. “I’m interested in the histories of families. Margaret told me you come from North Carolina.”

Margaret ducked her head and smiled.

“And you’re wondering what we’re doing all the way out here. Well, you may not know this, but the native peoples trade with each other. There are trade routes all over the south from Texas up to Virginia through Georgia and the Carolinas. It was on one of these trading ventures that my father met my mother. He paid five horses for her and took her

back to the Mississippi with him. They enjoyed being with each other for the rest of their lives.”

“I would never have imagined.”

After lunch, Redding brought out the letter, Susanna read it and took it over to a desk where she had an ink well. She took a sharply pointed feather and signed it. Seeing that she could sign her name Redding knew Susanna was educated.

“I didn’t know Indian women got an education,” Redding said, looking over the letter.

“I resent that remark, but I’ll forgive you because of yer ignorance.”

Redding raised an eyebrow.

“I’m a school teacher,” Susanna said as politely as she could. “I encourage the men and women here to educate their children. Margaret, here, is an A student. I have even persuaded a couple of adults to take night classes.”

Margaret, clasping her hands together and setting them on her knees, asked, “Did you go to school?”

“It’s been hard for a farmer like me, but I had a good school Mar’am. With her help, I was able to graduate from the seventh grade. I can now run a business. Know how to keep the books and all that.”

Both Margaret and Susanna looked at each other and smiled. They agreed without saying anything that Redding would be a fine addition to the family.

Susanna asked, “Would you like to spend the night afore you go back to yer farm?”

Redding was a little scared, but he said, “I guess so. I’m not in any hurry, and my pa won’t expect me right away. He knows I’m not used to traveling in these parts.”



That afternoon Redding got a tour of the town after he rented a stall for Little Sister at the blacksmith's stables.

When he settled Little Sister into her stall, Redding found Margaret petting a horse in the next stall.

He walked up to her and she said, "This is my horse, Tabatha."

"Nice looking mare. How did you wind up with a horse?"

"My granddaddy gave her to me on my eighth birthday. She was only a filly then."

Redding rubbed the horse's muzzle. "Do you get to ride her very often?"

Little Sister made a guttural sound as she looked with wide eyes at Redding paying attention to another horse.

"I take her out once in a while. Mama makes me study most of the time. She says that's important."

Redding stepped back to Little Sister and petted her. "Now don't be jealous. I'm just visiting."

Little Sister shook her head and Margaret laughed. "Let's get out of here a'fore the two have a fight."

Redding kissed Little Sister between the eyes. "I'll be back, so don't worry."

"Horses," Margaret said as they walked out of the barn.

"She'll be all right. She knows I won't leave her fer good. I left her with my uncle

one time and she did fine then.”

Margaret took Redding over to the store where they bought penny candy. They peered into the many different two-gallon glass jars and decided upon candy sticks that they could suck on.

There wasn't much town to see. They visited the church where Margaret's mother also taught school during the week and sang in the choir on Sunday. They walked west until the wooden sidewalk ended, and they continued, passing house after house until they were walking in the grassy fields. Beyond that was a pinewood forest. They sat atop a gypsum outcropping.

“So, do you mind,” asked Redding, stripping a blade of grass, “if I ask where yer father is?”

“Mama said he went crazy in the war. We got our lands taken away, and he went and hid.” Margaret looked far away. “Nobody knows where he is.”

“I'm sorry.” He put the juicy part of the grass into his mouth and chewed it.

“I don't care.” Margaret pulled on a grass blade and used it as a switch to beat the other grass blades. Then she caressed them. “I have Mama, and she treats me well ... teaches me a lot of thangs.”

“Lot of thangs about yer family, I bet.”

“Some. But she teaches me literature mostly.

The love within us and the love without

Are mixed, confounded; if we are loved or love,

We scarce distinguish. So, with other power.

Being acted on and acting seem the same:

In that first onrush of life's chariot-wheels,

We know not if the forests move or we."

Margaret smiled, showing off her pride. "Elizabeth Barrett Browning."

"Don't stop," Redding said, enthralled that such verse could come out of what others would call a savage.

She leaned on her hands, pushing her young breasts forward. "Here is somethang from Longfellow.

"By the shores of Gitche Gumee,

By the shining Big-Sea-Water,

Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,

Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.

Dark behind it rose the forest,

Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,

Rose the firs with cones upon them;

Bright before it beat the water,

Beat the clear and sunny water,

Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water."

Margaret stretched her right leg down and held up her left knee with her cupped hands and grinned.

"Yer mother made you memorize these poems?" Redding grabbed another blade of grass to replace the used one.

“She makes all the students recite. That’s how we learn, and Mama has a lot of books. Didn’t you recite when you were in school?” Margaret expressed deep curiosity with her eyebrows pressing against each other.

“Well, come to think it, she wasn’t very successful with me. I did do well with ciphers and bookkeeping. Not literature. Farmers usually don’t have any time fer reading except fer the Bible. We’re all taught to read the Bible.” He looked at her earnestly. “Do you read the Bible?”

“I have read some, but I usually do that on the Sabbath.” She leaned back on her hands. “Tell me somethang of yer parents.”

“Just farmers. Dad fell in love with a farmer's daughter, and here I am.” Redding grinned.

“But where did they live? What did you do?” Margaret said, pursing her lips.

“Oh, Grandpa lived up there in North Carolina where you came from.”

“We could have been neighbors,” she said with a big smile.

“Never thought it, though I do remember them Cherokees out in the woods thereabouts.”

“We could be cousins!”

“Doubt it. Did yer folks ever live in Georgia?”

“Doubt it.” Margaret pointed her chin away and said, “Came right down to where you’re living after I was born. My Grandaddy’s place.”

“Well, I don’t remember much of anythang until Georgia. That’s where I went to school mostly, but we went up into Tennessee where we lived with an uncle.”

“That’s a lot of traveling.”

“Yeah, but you get to know the country.”

“Our people are born knowing the country. I could never get lost.”

The two sat still a bit and breathed in the fresh air coming out of the forest and smelled the pines’ slightly sharp, invigorating, minty-sweet, and tangy odor. Seeing the sun near the tips of the trees, they rose and walked back home hand in hand. They didn’t start that way, but Margaret slowly shoved her hand into his. Redding skipped a breath.

Dinner was beans and corn mixed with a red sauce made of ground chili peppers, and Susanna put that over rice. “My people,” she said, “didn’t have chili until the Spaniards came. If we made any sauce, it was made with corn meal.”

After dinner, tales were exchanged with a bit of reading from poetry books. The talk went to the *Ladies' Magazine*, *Northwood: Life North and South*, and Sarah Josepha Hale, the author.



“She’s the editor of the *Ladies' Magazine*,” Susanna said, handing a copy to Redding. “She wrote about the injustice of slavery in her book *Northwood*.” She handed a copy of the book to Redding as he tried to juggle between a magazine, a book, and a cup of coffee.

“She also believes,” Margaret added, smoothing out her dress, “that the milder sex should be as well educated as men.”

“She seems quite the rebel,” Redding said, flipping through the magazine, something he had never seen before. Books he had plenty of experience with. “Albeit, she must have a lot of enemies, or people are ignoring her altogether.”

“She also thinks that we should set aside one day a year to give thanks.” Susanna passed Redding a dish of pastries, calling them biscuits.

After tasting one, Redding commented, “My ma makes these whenever she has leftover pie dough, except they’re not shaped round like this.”

“One of the inventions mentioned in the magazine,” Margaret said.

“So. It looks like,” Redding said upon finishing one of the biscuits, “you are very influenced by this Sarah Hale.”

“Quit a bit.” Susanna smiled.

“Tell him about Bunker Hill, Mama,” Margaret suggested as he turned her head toward her mother.

“Bunker Hill.” Redding meditated a moment. “That was in the Revolution, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” remarked Susanna.

“Yes. The schoolmarm said somethang about that.”

“It was an important battle in Massachusetts,” Margaret said, as though she was quoting a book. “One of the most important, and one of the first battles in the Revolution.”

“Sarah Hale is trying to raise a monument,” Susanna said after sipping her coffee.

“Up there in Massachusetts,” Margaret said. She yawned.

“Not lady-like, Madge,” Susanna reminded her daughter.

“I greatly apologize, Mama, but I must retire.” Margaret raised both elbows and stretched.

“If that’s the way you are gonna be,” Susanna said, placing her book on the little cabinet in front of them, “we will all retire.” She rose and gestured with her palm toward Redding. “If you will follow me, you may retire in the back room.”

“Mama. That’s my room,” Margaret said, expressing her distress by putting her fists on her hips.

Redding felt a little embarrassed, but he accepted the gift of a bed to sleep on. “Thank you, Susanna,” he said and closed the door.

The bedroom was a small and simple affair. The child’s bed would fit only one person. There were windows on either side. Susanna had placed a lit candle on the chest of drawers to the right. It had a pitcher of water and a basin to wash in. There was a towel hanging on a rack on the side. A hope chest lay at the foot of the bed. Redding was tempted to rummage through the girl’s things, but he knew that if he did, his mother would know it then and there. She was magical that way.

Pulling down the covers, he noticed that the bedspread was of a rough weave, yet the material was soft. He wondered if it was made on an Indian loom. The designs were geometrical, using zig-zag lines laying above and below double horizontal lines. He couldn’t make out the smaller details in candlelight.

Undressing, he put his clothes on top of his boots next to him on the floor. After he blew out the candle, he climbed into bed and stared at the ceiling. The next thing he knew, he was waking up at the regular four o’clock in the morning, farmer’s time. He felt

something heavy on his feet and ankles. The moonlight showed the image of Margaret in the fetal position with her head on his feet. He carefully removed them from under her head so as not to wake her. She lay there in a single white gown.

He got to his feet as silently as he could and dressed. He gazed at the sleeping beauty. He determined that she was cold by her position, so he pulled the covers over her. Then thoughts came to his mind that scared him. He remembered Susanna warning that she would slit his throat if he harmed her daughter, and here she was in his bed. He trembled. Checking to see that he had the signed paper, he slipped out the window.

The moon showed brightly. He took the alleyway and wound up at the stables. Little Sister whinnied and pawed the ground. She was as anxious to leave this strange place as he was. While saddling and bridling his horse, his thoughts were on Margaret. She was a sweet girl, and he wished he could stay with her, but he had responsibilities to his family. Maybe he would come back someday. But then, there was the thought of Susanna coming at him with a knife. He mounted Little Sister and galloped out of that town.



Susanna found her daughter in her own bed fast asleep. She shook her.

“What? What?” she responded.

“What are you doing in here? You were supposed to be sleeping on the sofa. Where is Mister Singleton?”

“He must have slipped out.” Margaret yawned.

“Get out of bed. We will be late fer Church.”

Margaret had to take several breaths before she could get out of bed. She pulled her robe on and followed her mother to the kitchen and sat down in a chair. She felt completely worn out. She couldn't stop yawning.

Susanna stared at her daughter.

“What?” Margaret asked, holding her head up with her hand.

She gave Margaret a cup of hot steaming coffee. “This will wake you up.” Susanna replaced the coffee pot. “Did you? You know. You and him?”

“Mama,” she said, after taking a sip. “We didn't do anythang. I did somethang though, and it didn't work. I didn't wake up when he did. When I woke up, he was gone.”

Susanna sat down next to her daughter. “And what, pray to tell, did you do?”

“You know the story of Ruth in the Bible? Well, I tried sleeping at his feet. He didn't even notice.”

“Well, I'm glad he didn't. I'm disappointed in the boy. He has no manners.”

“But he is a nice boy. We having pancakes?”

“No. We have beans and corn to eat. I should call on the preacher to talk to you. Just because it's in the Bible you don't have to do it. All the thangs in the Bible are not commandments, you know.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

Susanna ate a bite of beans and corn on a tortilla, took a sip of coffee, and left to get dressed. “Margaret. Hurry.”

“I can't hurry this morning, Mama. I'll meet you up there.” She poked at her

breakfast, took a long gulp of the coffee, and left for her room.

“Don’t you dare skip church, or it’s yer throat I’ll be cutting.” Susanna opened the front door and looked back. Maybe her daughter would be coming out of the bedroom fully dressed.

“Mama! Don’t say such thangs.”

“I don’t mean it. Just hurry. I’ll walk ahead.” Susanna slammed the door and huffed like a bull. *Children!*

Margaret didn’t dress in her Sunday clothes. She dressed for riding. When her mother was far enough away, she ran across the street, ran through the Hollings’ yard to the back alleyway, and ran towards the stables. Tabatha was a paint, white with large brown spots all over. When she saw her mistress, she greeted her with a high-pitched whinny and head nodding. Margaret quickly saddled her and took her out the back way, walking quietly behind the church and out into the farm on the edge of town.

Susanna just happened to glance out the north window nearest her and saw a girl riding into the far distance. Her eyes were sharp and she recognized her daughter’s horse.

I’m gonna whip that girl!

Chapter Three

Back Home

After having crossed the Mississippi to the east side, Redding was four days out from Konki. He settled down to a campfire and a bed under the stars. A rabbit roasted above the flames, the smoke rose along an infinite path up through the heavens. His nightly reveries were interrupted by a snap of a twig. He grabbed the shotgun just in case. He rose to his haunches, knees bent, one on the ground, and sitting on the other heel, shotgun pointed at the origin of the sound. Another twig snapped. He put his finger on the trigger. Then he saw Margaret leading Tabatha by the reins.

Redding quickly raised the gun and stood. "Margaret! What are you doin' here?"

"You fergot me," she said innocently.

"What do you mean fergot you? I had no idea you were comin'."

"You are supposed to marry me."

"That's news to me."

They approached closer to each other with every word spoken. Redding felt her breath on his neck. Then, of a sudden, he thought of her mother coming at him with a knife and he took a step back.

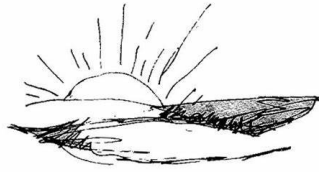
"Yer Ma's gonna kill me! You need to go home." He rested the butt of the gun on the ground.

"She's goin' to kill me too. We've got to run away together."

What a child she is, Redding thought. A peace came over him. "You can stay here fer the night. I have a rabbit here we can eat. But we're going back to yer ma in the morning."

“I won’t go back. You’re my husband. You slept with me.”

Redding’s eyebrows rose. “We’ll talk about that in the mornin’.”



The morning was chilly and a cool breeze blew across the marsh. The birds sang in the trees, heralding the sun. Redding had to remove Margaret’s arm from around his chest, and as he rose, he covered her with the quilt he had brought. She groaned as she momentarily felt the cold. She grabbed the quilt and held it against herself. Redding stoked the fire and added more wood.

Shortly, the fire was blazing. He took out a cast iron skillet and old pork belly from his saddlebags. As the bacon fried in the skillet, he went off in search of duck eggs. He came back in a hurry with two and found Margaret cuddled up to the fire with the quilt around her. Redding took a flat stick and moved the bacon over, breaking the eggs and plopping them into the sizzling fat.

“You have a spatula?” Margaret said, sniffing the air. “Did you make it?”

“With my trusty knife here.” He slapped his knife that was attached to his thigh with a leather thong.

“You’re smart.” She took in a long breath. “You goin’ to make bread?”

“Didn’t bring any flour with me.” He scooted the bacon and eggs onto a bark plate and handed it to Margaret.

“We always have bread. Why don’t you have bread?”

“My mother always makes the biscuits. I just don’t have the knack yet, and this is my first time out by my lonesome.” Redding scooped up his breakfast onto another bark plate.

“You remind me of my brother. He always cooked out of doors.” Margaret sucked up her egg and started on her bacon.

“You didn’t tell me you had a brother.” Redding made quick work of his breakfast.

“He ran off with some friends. He didn’t like us. He said Mama and I were traitors. He didn’t want to be no white man, he said.”

“I read in the papers that a lot of yer people are goin’ into Texas and becomin’ marauders and renegades.”

“President Houston will take care of them.”

“And yer brother?” Redding started cleaning things up, so he didn’t look directly at Margaret.

“He ... he will be sorry!” Margaret set her plate in the fire since she saw Redding put his in. She squatted by the fire and hugged the quilt closer to her.

“You angry with him?”

“He could have been a lot of help. Now I won’t ever see him!”

Redding thought he should leave that alone and changed the subject of the conversation.

“Better put out that fire. I’ll get the horses ready so’s we can ride out.”

“Then I can come with you?”

“I’m not goin’ to leave you alone in these woods. No tellin’ what beast is lurkin’ in them bushes.”

Margaret ran up to him and embraced him, throwing the blanket about him. She placed the side of her face on his chest and squeezed him. She held him there for a couple of minutes, not saying anything, just smelling him and smiling. Redding's face went red as he returned the hug.

As Redding got Little Sister saddled and ready to go, Margaret did the same with Tabatha.

"Come on. We got to git." They both mounted their horses, Margaret still holding the blanket around her.

The sun rose high enough to warm the hearts and skins of the two love birds, and so Margaret shed the blanket, laying it across Tabatha's shoulders.



Redding and Margaret were silent for a couple of miles as they wound around the path that led out of the swamp and into a dry forest of oak, elm, and Myrtle trees with a sprinkling of magnolia, pecan, cedar, birch, and maple. They were soon in the hill country and found the road that led to the farm. They had long conversations as they trotted along, but when Little Sister recognized the farm, she went into a gallop. Margaret and Redding laughed, and she let Tabatha gallop behind.

George and Sam met the two travelers at the gate. When they saw that one of them was a girl, George said, "I'll be flabbergasted!"

"It was a shotgun weddin' after all!" Sam yelled.

“Where’d ya find ‘er?” George asked as he followed beside Tabatha, staring up at Margaret.

Redding winked at his younger siblings. “She comes with the territory.”

The path to the barn led up to the front of the house and around. When Martha heard the boys yelling and hollering, she had to come to the front door to see.

“Redding!” she called out. “And who’s this?”

Redding and Margaret slid down from their horses. Redding embraced his ma, and she kissed his cheek.

“Been gone a long time,” she said, staring at Margaret.

“Ma, this here’s Margaret. She’s the granddaughter of Mister Long Foot. We met there in Konki.”

“Well, gosh be. Come in. I bet you’re tireder than a mother hog.” As she conducted the two into the house, she called out, “Sam! George! Take care of those horses.”

“Ah, Ma!” they said in unison. Even though they expressed their disgruntlement at having to take care of the horses, they were awed by the paint.

Redding took his saddlebags off Little Sister’s back and caressed her neck to let her know everything would be all right with the two younger ones taking care of her. He walked into the cabin with his mother and girlfriend.

Margaret took in the log cabin. It seemed to have only one room. The end of the room with the fireplace was the kitchen and parlor. The other end was a place for a table and chairs. Then she remembered a door to a back room in the middle of the rear wall. She barely remembered sleeping in there with her grandparents. The place was nostalgic. There

was an acrid smell of fats and oils mixed with the smell of old blankets that had never been washed. Added to that was the smell of old people and beef stew.

Charles, Redding's older brother, came toward the house to dip his cup into the rain barrel to quench his thirst. He and his dad had been clearing land behind the cabin for the new house. When he saw the two little ones taking horses to the barn, he went inside. His sister Martha followed him. She was the same age as Margaret. When they saw each other, they were immediate friends. They didn't stop talking until Ma Singleton interrupted. Redding had explained everything, why she had followed him home, so she had to talk to Margaret. She came over and put her arm around the girl, flinging her fingers at Martha, meaning; *go away, I'm goin' to talk to the girl now.*

Ma Singleton was straightforward. "I hear that you and Redding are plannin' to get married."

Margaret became excited, smiled, and said, "Yes, Ma'am."

"Hey, Red," Charles said, grabbing him away from Margaret's side. "We're glad you're back. Grab an ax. We need yer help. We're gonna build such a fine house."

Margaret touched Redding's back as he left.

"Come. Sit down," Ma Singleton said to Margaret. "How's yer folks?"

Martha joined her mother and the new girl. She got all the latest about what was happening.

Redding told Charles, "Just a minute. I've got the deed to the land." He took out the paper signed by Susanna and set it behind a mug on the mantle. "Dad will appreciate that little piece of paper."

“I bet he will,” said Charles. “Now we have permission to cut down all those trees.”



Charles was more stocky than Redding, and had dark brown hair that receded on both sides of his head. His face wasn't as square as Redding's.

Pa Singleton described the two story-house he was planning to build as one tree after another was felled to the earth.

“Charles,” he said, “make sure that saw is filed and sharp.”

“Yes, Pa,” Charles said.

“Now this will be the master's bedroom. The kitchen's over here.” Pa Singleton pointed to the land that was cleared off. “We'll have a stairway in the kitchen goin' up to the other bedrooms.”

“Where's the parlor goin' to be, Pa?” asked Redding as his ax cut into another tree.

“Right there in the kitchen where people can talk and warm their feet.” Pa Singleton slashed through brush with a scythe.

“That reminds me to tell you, Pa,” Redding said, lifting his ax over his shoulder. “The paper you trusted me with is on the mantle in the kitchen.”



Pa Singleton patted his wife on the bottom. “What did you do with it, Mama?”

“Do with what?” She stopped kneading to examine her husband.

“The letter, Dear.” He patted the mantle above the fireplace and moved a few knickknacks around. “The letter Redding put up here. He said it was right here.”

“Haven’t seen any letter.” She continued her bread-making.

The old man scratched his head and walked back to where Charles and Redding labored in their sweat to pull up a few stumps. It could have been a race to see who was sweating the most, the boys or the horses straining against the ropes. Charles pushed against the stumps while Redding pulled the reins of the horses.

“Redding!” Pa Singleton called. “Where’d you say you put that letter?”

“On the mantle, Pa.”

Redding stopped to talk to his pa and let Charles catch his breath. Their father approached.

“I put it behind yer cup on the mantle, Pa.” Redding wiped the sweat from his face.

“I’d hate to think,” Pa Singleton said. “It couldn’t have fallen into the ashes below. I looked.”

“You asked Ma?”

“I did.”

“I can’t think neither, Pa.”

Pa Singleton stood there with his hands on his hips, shook his head, and left. He came upon Margaret kneeling at the graves of her grandparents as he passed by. He saw her burying a piece of paper on top of her grandfather’s mound.

“Young woman!”

Startled, Margaret quickly patted more dirt onto the paper.

Pa Singleton tilted his head. “What’re you doin’? Might I see the paper, please?”

Margaret stared at the old man. Tears were streaming down her face. “It’s my granddaddy’s land. This is his writing. His hand. It belongs with him.”

“Yer folks may have strange customs, my dear, but if that’s the letter yer ma signed, I have to put it with the books.”

Margaret rose and ran away.

He kneeled and put his hand in the earth where she was digging and pulled out the letter her mother had signed. He stood and smoothed the letter against his chest and wiped the dirt off.

Pa Singleton took the letter into the cabin. “Fool girl tried to bury the deed,” he told his wife.

“She’s a strange girl fer sure.” Ma Singleton took the loaves of bread out of the fire. They were a bit singed on the edges.

“Smells good Mama.” As she sat them down on the little table, he embraced her and gave her a hug. His stomach growled.

“Round up the troops and have’em wash up. You got to stoke that stomach of yers.”

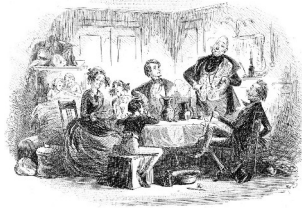
He gave her one more hug and swatted her bottom before he walked out the door. She could hear him bellowing the dinner call. The children came running, and if any approached the door unwashed she directed them to the back of the cabin.

Margaret was noticeably absent for dinner.

“I think it’s rude,” Ma Singleton said, dishing up the stew.

“Someone should go find her,” Martha said, spoon in hand. “She’s probably starvin’!”

“I think I know where she would be.” Redding rose and asked to be excused.



He strode out to the barn, and there she was, petting Tabatha and feeding her oats.

Redding walked up to her. She bowed her head and turned her back on him. He reached out and took her arms, turned her around, and lifted her chin. She was quite pliable, he thought. Not resistant at all. She put her head on his chest and wrapped her arms around him.

“What’s wrong?” Redding asked.

“I don’t belong here. No. You, yer family don’t belong here.”

“And I thought it was yer brother that was the rebel.” Redding caressed her long hair that hung down her back. He felt her spine and ribs. “You need meat on yer bones. We have plenty back there in the cabin.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“We won’t eat you, you know. My family fell in love with you the first time they saw you.” He took a deep breath. “Come to dinner. Please.”

“All right, but I’m sittin’ next to you.”

They both rubbed their hands down Tabatha’s muzzle to say good night. Then Little Sister whinnied and pawed the ground.

“Okay, Little Sister. You haven’t been fergotten.” He hugged her head and ran his hand along her neck. “Good night.”

Margaret joined the Singleton family at the dinner table. She had Redding sitting at

her left hand and Martha on her right. She ate as though she was famished and finished before Redding. Then she sat there and ate two slices of bread and butter.

“This is the best I’ve ever had, Mrs. Singleton.”

“Thank you, my dear.”

Dinner proved congenial. Everyone talked about their lives and how nice it was going to be after they got the big house built.

“And you and Redding can have this cabin,” Pa Singleton said, “until you go off on yer own.”

Margaret rose quickly, saying, “Excuse me,” and ran out of the cabin. Redding ran after her. When he caught up to her, she turned around and clutched him with her arms.

“Margaret, what’s wrong?”

“Nothin'. Nothin'. I didn't want to sit there and sob and make a fool of myself. Oh, Redding, that was the nicest thing anyone has ever done fer me.” She sobbed and wet Redding’s shirt with her tears.

“Now, now. That’s enough of that. Give me a big smile, and we’ll go in there and tell everybody yer just happy is all.”

“Not just yet.”

When they did return, everyone was just rising from the table. Margaret ran over to Pa Singleton and hugged him. “Oh, thank you. Thank you.” She kissed him on the cheek.

“You’re the most wonderful man.” Pa Singleton raised his eyebrows and smiled.

Martha pulled Margaret away from her dad and gave her a hug. “And I’ve finally got a sister! You can sleep with me tonight.”

“Okay.” Margaret glanced at Redding. “I guess I’m bein’ kidnapped.”

Redding smiled. “I’ll see you in the mornin’.”

Charles and Redding retired to the barn where they slept on the hay, but as they lay down, Redding stared out the barn door and peered at the moon and thought of Margaret. While Martha talked and talked, Margaret stared out of her window, watching the same moon and thought of Redding.

Chapter Four

Susanna

There was a knock at the door followed by a voice said in harsh tones, “Hello! Hello! Is anybody home?”

Ma Singleton opened the door and was astonished to see a woman with sharp features wearing a blue calico dress covered with mud. Her black hair was tied on top with streaks of mud decorating it.

“Where’s my daughter!” Susanna grabbed the woman’s arm. “Is she safe? Has anythang happened to her?”

“Dear woman,” Ma Singleton said softly. “Please come in.” She guided her to the fireplace in the kitchen where there was a chair at a small table. “Please have a seat. Please tell me yer story.”

Susanna was so fatigued that she let herself be guided to the hearth and a place of rest. She sat down and immediately dozed off.

Charles came in and his mother had to shush him. He froze when he saw the mangled image of a woman in the chair beside her. He motioned her to come to him. They tiptoed out onto the porch.

“Who is she?” Charles asked.

“I don’t know,” Ma Singleton said, upturning the palms of her hands. “She just showed up and was askin’ fer her daughter. I have a suspicion that it’s Margaret’s mother.”

“I’ll tell Margaret and Redding. They may want to hide in the woods until she leaves.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. Now, what did you want?”

“Pa wanted you to come and look at the plot we’ve laid out. See if the rooms are to yer likin’ in.”



When Susanna woke up her bones ached. She looked around, saw a woman working at the fireplace, and heard conversations in the next room. She looked over to see her daughter, Redding, and another girl. The conversation ceased when they were aware they were being stared at.

Margaret rose, went to her mother, and sat down beside her.

Susanna could only stare at her daughter as though she were a stranger.

“Mother? What are you doing here?” Margaret noticed a fresh cup of coffee and presuming it was for her mother, shoved it toward her. “Here’s coffee fer you if you want.”

“I’ve come here to collect you,” Susanna said, holding her fists tight, “My question is what are you doing here?”

“Mama, I’m a grown woman now, and Redding and I are ...”

“You want to call me Mother and then abandon me? Are these people better than your own flesh and blood?”

Redding walked over and stood beside his fiance, placing his hand on her shoulder.

Susanna stood. “Young man, what are yer intentions? Do you have a mind to marry this girl? This is kidnapping. You are a bunch of renegades!”

Ma Singleton turned around. “Now, there will be no such a kind of speakin’ in this here house. Remember yer a guest here. We’re a Christian family we are, and you’d best mind yer manners. You’d better drink yer coffee. You’ll feel a lot better.”

Susanna hadn’t noticed the coffee. It smelled good. She took it with both hands. She took a sip and then another and another. It warmed her soul. “I tracked you fer two weeks to this house. The horse and wagon gave up a few miles back. Had to shoot the horse. He broke his leg tryin’ to get through the mud. Well, the whole wagon’s turned on end.” Tears streamed down her anguished face.

“Mama. Are you all right?” Margaret reached over and held her mother’s hand.

“I’m all right.”

Redding spoke up. “I’ll get Charles and Pa. We’ll git yer wagon and bring it here. You don’t have a worry. We’ll take care of you.”

Susanna could only stare at Redding. She was at a loss for words. All she could say was, “Good coffee.”

While the boys were gone, she asked the question again. “Are you two getting’ married?”

“We weren’t plannin’ to right yet, Mama, but last night ...” Margaret smiled. “I became a woman.”

“Well, I wish you had waited. I brought you into this life, and I expected to bring you into womanhood too.” She sighed. “Well, at least I found you.” She squeezed her daughter’s hand.

“I won’t be comin’ home, Mama.”

“I didn’t expect you would,” Susanna said. “So, I’m staying with you folks.”

Ma Singleton raised her eyebrows. “Margaret, go tell yer pa to add another room to the house.”

“Can’t Ma. Pa’s gone.”

“Well, you know what I mean, when he comes back.”

“Okay, Ma.”

Before supper, Ma Singleton and Margaret helped Susanna wash up. Margaret washed her hair. Ma Singleton let her wear one of her dresses until they could wash the dirty one. Susanna said she would wear one of her own when the men came back with her baggage.

“That’s fine ... er, what’s yer name?” asked Ma Singleton.

“Susanna.”

“Well. You can wear this dress until tomorrah. You need a good night’s rest after supper.”

“Thank you. You are a good Christian woman.”

“Wiiill, I try to be.”

Margaret put her hand on the old woman’s shoulder. “Mama Singleton, you are a good woman. Don’t deny it.”



Rescuing Susanna’s wagon was no easy task. They found her wagon tipped over on the side of a hill with the dead horse still attached. It appeared that it wasn’t a broken leg

that killed it. The horse had been speared by a broken shaft. From what they could see of the mud, the wagon wheel slipped off the road, and the weight of the wagon upturned it. If it hadn't been for the horse being attached to the wagon, it would have rolled down the hill and perhaps killed Susanna.

The boys gathered Susanna's luggage and boxes and placed them in their own wagon. Charles found an old musket, picked it up, and wiped the mud off. "Shouldn't no gun be dirtied like this. But what can you expect from a woman?"

"She's a very educated one," Redding said, tossing the last box into their wagon.

"Educated or not, no way to treat a gun." He gave it to his pa who was already on the bench with the reins in his hands, which he transferred to his left hand as he took the musket. "Isn't that right, Pa?"

"It would take someone right distraught to throw it onto the ground, don't ya think?"

Pa Singleton said, handing the gun back to Charles as he seated himself.

"Yes, Pa," Charles agreed.

Redding hopped up into the back where he could tie things down, and they took off.

When Susanna saw her musket, she seemed ecstatic.

"Oh, you found it!" She grabbed the musket from Charles. "It belonged to my daddy."

"You should ..."

Pa Singleton didn't allow Charles to finish his thought. He had grabbed Charles' arm, but it was his stare that quieted him.



There being no place to set Susanna up in the house, they moved her into the barn where she occupied an empty horse stall. She refused to sleep in the barn, so Martha gave up her bed. That meant that, since Margaret was sleeping with Martha, they both would be in the barn, and thus Margaret would be sleeping near Redding. Susanna demanded that not be the case, but that Margaret sleeps with her. So it was until the house in the back was finished, and that took a little more than a month.

It has always been said that there can't be two women in the kitchen before one of them will be the boss of the other, but Ma Singleton was of such a mild manner and temperament that Susanna, rather than telling her what and how to do things, was enticed to play the servant and try to be helpful, so as they waited for the house to be built, they became friends and were always sharing stories.

Susanna told of her folks moving to McNairy up in Tennessee and having land there. As far as she knew the land was still in her father's name and sitting there going to waste. Later, she was going through her things in the barn and came across a paper of her father's giving him ownership of 45 acres worth thirteen hundred dollars. The first thing she did was to give the paper to Margaret. "Give this to Redding, dear. It is land you and Redding can live on."

Margaret was excited. She couldn't wait for Redding to stop work. She went into the house that was almost finished. He was actually in the room they were building for her

mother so she could stay with them.

“Redding,” she called. “Look what Mama gave us!” She handed it to Redding. He was holding nails in his lips as carpenters do. He took them out and kissed her.

“What’s this?” he asked. He put his hammer down on a little table he was using, and taking the paper in both hands, read it. It gave the exact location and plot of land that was just a few miles, maybe a hundred miles north of them in Tennessee. “What does this mean? Did your mama have it, or did my pa find it?”

“Mama gave it to me to give to you. She said we could live on it when we get married. You don’t even have to buy the land, Redding. We’re all fixed up.”

“Naw, naw. This is some kind o’ trick on your mama’s part.” Redding scratched his head and pursed his lips.

“Honest, Redding. This is no trick. It’s a gift. A weddin’ present.” She placed her hands on his chest as if she would push him over, then he put his arms around her.

“If this is a gift, my maggie pie, it is a gift from God. Not yer mother.”

Margaret loved the smell of pine on her fiance’. As he held her close, she sniffed his chest. “Mama’s not a bad mother. She can be very kind and generous like she is right now.” She placed the side of her face on his chest, shut her eyes, and sighed.

“Margaret, you and I have different views of what yer mother is about.”

Margaret said, “Ooh!” and pinched his nipple.



The house needed painting, but it was otherwise finished. It had a veranda in front with stairs in the middle to climb up to it. A red door opened to a hallway with the parlor to the left, and a stairway on the right that led to the bedrooms. In front of the stairs was a door on the right that opened to the dining room in front and the kitchen in the back. The hallway went clear through the house to the outside. In the back was the master's bedroom on the left and another door to the kitchen on the right. Susanna's room was in the attic. She utterly refused to sleep in it. She would take ownership of the cabin and live there.

"Yer movin' out, so I'm movin' in," she told Pa Singleton. "It was my daddy's. Now it's mine."

The Singletons didn't argue, agreeing that they couldn't have a better neighbor.

"Mama," asked Margaret. "What are you gonna live on?"

"I was raised a Creek long before I assumed the white man's education. And, there is a garden behind the cabin. Also, those 'possums and 'coons won't get by me." She smiled, reassuring everyone who didn't look like they were assured.

Charles and Redding moved Susanna's belongings into the old cabin, and she set up house. Charles made bookshelves to hold her books while Margaret and Martha cleaned up the place. Susanna stood around giving orders.

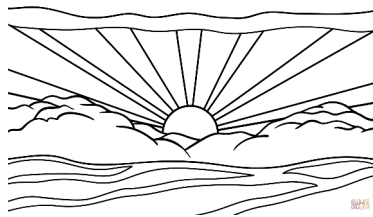


Only one thing remained. What to do about Redding and Margaret? Since there was not a preacher for a hundred miles, they were to satisfy themselves with an Indian wedding.

Pa Singleton read from the Bible, they said a prayer, and Susanna performed a simple Creek ceremony of sharing food and water, and a blanket. She had prepared corn and beans with hot chilies, and Redding and Margaret fed each other from the same spoon. Then they drank from a clay pot, having two necks where the water came out, one neck for Redding, and the other neck for Margaret. The pot had also been made by their mother for the ceremony. After that, Susanna let them embrace within a blanket borrowed from Ma Singleton. As Susanna covered them, they shared a passionate kiss.

In other tribes, the couple were naked and they consummated their marriage right then and there, being surrounded by a circle of the whole village, but not in Creek culture. If Margaret had been in traditional clothing, she would have had no clothing above the waist. Margaret whispered that to Redding, and he blushed.

The couple was ceremoniously marched up to their bedroom. They said goodnight to everyone, closed the door, took their clothes off, got in bed, and wondered what to do next. No one had ever told them. However, they continued to kiss each other passionately.



The day came that Redding and Margaret were to leave and head up to McNairy to occupy the father-in-law's farm. When they went out to load their belongings into the wagon, they found it half full already. They didn't know whether to be downhearted or angry.

Margaret stopped in the cabin. "Mama! What does this mean?"

Susanna tilted her head. “You didn’t think I would let my daughter go off with a strange man, do you?”

Margaret fumed. “He’s my husband! Not a stranger.”

“Now don’t act that way toward me, daughter of mine, or I’ll take you back home so fast!”

Margaret bowed her head in submission.

“That’s better. Now you will tell Redding that I come with the land or it’s no deal.”

When Margaret went back outside, Redding was huffing and puffing, putting the last of their things into the wagon. “Where have you been? I thought you were going to help.”

He was angry, she could tell. “Mama’s going with us. She is the only one who knows how to get there. Besides,” Margaret sighed. “She comes with the territory.”

Redding laughed, knowing he had used that phrase for something totally different. It had been used to introduce Margaret to the family. “Wiiill,” Redding said, making a sour face. “It’s not all that bad. Who knows? We may become friends someday.”

Redding hugged his ma. “Love ya ma.”

“I so love you.” She rubbed his back and kissed him on the lips.

He shook hands with his dad, and then he hugged him.

“You take care,” Pa Singleton said. “And write us ever now and then.”

“I will, Pa. I will.”

Susanna, dressed in black, was already sitting on the wagon seat. No one said anything to her as she sat in silence.

Redding hugged his brother and sister and the two little ones. “Be good boys now,

will ya?”

“We will Red. We will,” they both said. They waved even before he climbed onto the wagon.

“I’ll come for the wagon after a couple o’ weeks,” Charles said. “Let you two get settled.”

Redding lifted Margaret up onto the wagon seat and climbed up after her. “I’ll be expecting you.”

“Bye, Susanna,” called Ma Singleton as the wagon rolled away. Susanna, sitting straight and stiff like a queen, didn’t seem to hear her and didn’t acknowledge her.

Margaret leaned her head on Redding and waved to everyone. They waved back. “I just love your family.”

“They love you too, Mage. I’m sure of it.” Redding smiled and slapped the horses with the reins. “Get up!”

Susanna snickered. She was still in control.

Chapter Five

Charles, the Business Man

Charles did well in his ciphers and reading but not so well in writing. His interest was in business, but his teacher, Miss Susanna, said, “Writing is fundamental to all society. You must write letters even in business situations. The type of friends you may have depends upon your letters.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Charles said as he gathered his books and slate. “I’ll try to do better.”

“Remember, Charles,” she said, pointing with her ruler. “You need to set an example to the younger children.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

She turned to John Pickle. “You too, John.”

“Yes, Miss Susanna. I got lots of brothers and sisters here.”

School was out for the summer for the little kids and over for the big kids. They wouldn’t be coming back as they finished all their requirements and passed their tests.

Charles and John used John’s father’s wagon to take Mary Higgins home. She sat between the two boys. Her countenance shined. She smiled and turned from one boy to the other as she listened to their conversation.

“Ahh, the Summertime,” exclaimed Charles. “I don’t have too much work on the farm.” He raised his books overhead and stretched. “I have my chores, but it will be a holiday for children. We adults have to apply ourselves and learn a trade. What are you planning, John?”

“Why, goin’ fishin’, of course.”

“Don’t you have any chores?” John spoke a wise word to John, but winked at Marry.

“That’s all about managing yer blacks,” John said with an air of misplaced authority.

“I notice yer family don’t have very many.”

“My father,” Charles said, “believes his sons are just as much hired hands as the blacks. He believes in getting yer hands dirty if yer goin’ to be a man.”

“Well, ya can’t say my father isn’t a gentleman from Virginia,” John exclaimed.

“Being a gentleman is taught by mothers.” Charles looked over at Mary. “Don’t you agree, Mary?”

“Of course I do. My mama sees to that. She gets a switch after my brothers if they don’t use gentlemanly ways, bein’ polite and all that.”

John placed his arm around Mary. “You like fishin’, Mary?”

“I like you to be a gentleman, John, and remove your arm.” She unruffled her dress.

John slipped his arm off and laughed.

“What’s a girl for if you can’t be chummy with her?” John asked.

“Girls are fer marryin’, John,” Charles said. “And we Southerners, as my mother told me, are to be gentlemen. She told me that girls only want to marry gentlemen. Isn’t that so, Mary?”

“Of course, Charles. Of course. If you are a gentleman, the wife becomes a proper lady, whether she’s poor or rich. Are you goin’ to be rich, Charles?”

“See, here, Mary,” John said, raising his tenor voice a little. “I’m already rich and I can be as much a gentleman as anyone.”

Mary seemed very attentive and interested as the conversation changed to business.

She was one of the two older girls in the school, and there wasn't much choice in what boys she would choose to be with if they came calling. But this was her stop. She lived in town. Her father owned and ran the general store. She had a nice brick home with various colors in each brick with a white picket fence around it. There were two trees in her front yard. One was a magnolia, and the other, a sycamore. Her sister's name was Magnolia. She was too young for boys.

John hopped down and helped her to land safely on the sod.

"See ya Sunday at church, Mary," he said, holding her hand. Mary had to clear her throat before he let go.

"I'll see ya both," she said, looking back as she pranced away.

The boys watched as she opened the front door, turn, wave, and step in.

Charles said, "You take the reins. The girl's gone. I know you said I could drive, but your ploy was to keep my arms off Mary. Isn't that so?"

"Charles, my boy," John said as he slapped the horses, "right as rain. I can't fool you."

"So, you are going to be a planter like yer father and his father before him?" Charles asked, leaning forward to see John's face.

"I reckon so, Charles. After all, that's what most gentlemen do, isn't it?"

"Not this gentleman. I plan to serve all you planters in some way. Right now, yer father has a gin, but he doesn't lend it out to other planters or farmers."

"Yeah, it's not set up fer that." John turned his head for a look at Charles. "What're you thinkin?"

“Well, I think I will go far enough away, maybe in the next county where there is no gin and, set one up.”

“How are you goin’ to get the resources?”

“Don’t know yet, but I’ll find a way.”

There was a lull in their conversation, and then after about a hundred yards, Charles’ face lit up. “I know. I will use other people’s money.”

“How do you do plan on doin’ that?” John asked, shaking his head.

“It’s done all the time by entrepreneurs.”

“You goin’ to be an entree manure?” John laughed.

Charles couldn’t help laughing so hard his stomach hurt. “You really git me, John!” He slapped John’s knee and kept laughing.



After dinner that night, Charles lay on his bed dreaming of an old Southern Mansion with verandas and Greek columns, a brick house painted white with a hundred rooms. He would be an old man with white hair being waited on by many servants as he sat out on the front porch drinking a mint julep. Of course, in the back of his mind, he knew it was only a dream, something he would never accomplish because the labor to build that house would be put on the backs of a lot of slaves.

His dreams were interrupted by a shrill whistle from his pa. He knew that it was time for the night's song and family prayer, so he floated down the stairs on clouds of inspiration. He was going to be a big businessman someday.

After prayer, Pa Singleton pulled Charles aside and asked, "What's got you so caught up in them clouds? Is it a girl?" He asked, as though he hoped that to be the case.

"No, Pa. It's gone beyond girls and raisin' a family. I was thinkin' how I'm goin' to support a family. I can't do it farmin' like you. There's somethin' runnin' through my heart and mind that's pullin' me away from farmin', but it's all about farmin', growin' cotton."

"Cottin's fine, son," Pa Singleton said, lighting his pipe, "but ya can't be floatin' on them clouds. Ya gotta come back down to earth and put yer hands in the soil. It's where yer soul is. Beneath yer feet."

"I know that Pa. But I need to be helpin' other people's souls. I need a cotton gin."

"That will take a lot o' yars of farmin' the land, it will."

"Yes, Pa."

As Charles ascended the stairs his ma called out. "Don't ferget we need supplies tomorry."

"I won't ferget, Ma."



The Higgins General Mercantile Establishment was centered on the main block of town. It was a long thin building squeezed between other buildings as though the whole block was just one building and each store was one of its many rooms, each having a door

to the street. Lit by whale oil lamps, one had to adjust his eyes in order to see what he was buying. After blinking a couple of times as he entered the store, clinking a couple of doorbells, Charles couldn't believe what he was seeing. There was John talking with Mary behind the counter.

"Wasn't it just yesterday," Charles remarked as he sauntered up to John, "that we three were all together?"

John turned and laughed. "You never can leave me alone with Mary, can you?"

Mary smiled. "That's okay 'cause I like the both of ya." She asked Charles, "You got a list? I reckon it's that time of the month you'll be loadin' up yer wagon."

He handed her a letter-quality paper. "It won't be a long list, but you'll need help with the heavy stuff."

"Oh, I got my brother in the back," she said. "Daddy is off to the bank."

Charles was left alone with John. "Hey, John."

"Hey, you rascal," John retorted. There was always a joke just behind John's sparkling eyes.

"What's you up to?" Charles leaned on his elbow.

"Oh, just tryin' to persuade the loveliest gal in town to marry me."

"That's not what I heard. Marry seemed to be hinting, if I got the conversation right, that Mr. Higgins is in some kind of financial trouble."

"Doesn't he have enough customers?" John responded.

They both leaned their backs against the counter as they talked.

"They have enough customers," John said, chewing on a piece of straw. "Maybe too

many. They just don't have enough money to cover all the expenses. That's what Marry was saying as I walked in. Looks like they need new business practices and perhaps a good computer. I'm really good at computin' figures. Pretty fast too." Charles put his thumbs in his pants.

"The old man does all the bookkeepin'." John Pickle chewed on a pickle he had grabbed out the pickle barrel next to him. The juice from the pickle ran down his chin and dripped onto his cream-colored tunic.

"Maybe that's the problem." Charles winked.

"Have you thought any more about how you are going to obtain a gin?" John grabbed another pickle out of the barrel.

"I aim to get a job here doing the books, that is, if I can persuade old man Higgins for a start."

John squinted and looked at John. "Are you cuttin' in on my girl?"

"Oh, I wouldn't interfere with you proliferatin' yer Pickles. I'm not ready to settle down."

"I don't mind you talkin' to her, just no huggin' and no kissin'," John said nonchalantly. "I reserve that for me."

Charles raised an eyebrow. "As you wish. But remember. She likes a gentleman."

"I'll try to remember that."

Mary came up behind the counter. "Don't worry, John. My daddy will take care that."

The two boys turned around.

Marry smiled at them. "He spied out the boys who come callin'."

“Yeah,” John said. “It’s just like dads.”

“Here’s yer bill, Charles. Do you want me to wrap up that single candy stick, or do you want it right now?”

“Let me see it.”

She handed the candy stick to him. He handed it back to her.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s for the loveliest girl in town.” He grinned.

Mary laughed and blushed as she stuck it into her mouth.

“You know Charles,” she said, “I can have one of these any time I want.”

“Oh,” Charles grinned again, “but it wouldn’t be coming from me, would it?”

“Ummm!” she said as she sucked on the candy. Her eyes flirted with him. “This is almost as good as a kiss.”

“Mary!” John said, very surprised.

Mary placed her soft hand on top of John’s and smiled. “Just kidding, cute boy.”

Charles left the two lovebirds and helped Jim Higgins load the wagon. He was a stocky man like his father and the only one in the family with blonde hair and blue eyes.

“Tell me true, Jim,” Charles asked, catching his breath. “Is your dad in financial trouble?”

“Now, don’t you go spreadin’ this around. I know you to be an honest man. My dad is at the bank now asking for an extension on his loan.”

“You mind if I take a look at his books?” Charles asked, lifting the last twenty-five pounds of flour onto the wagon. “I think I have a knack for finances.”

“I guess,” Jim said, dusting his hands off, “if we put ’em back before he returns.”

But that’s not what happened. Mr. Higgins came back from the bank to find Jim and Charles looking over his ledgers. They had lost track of time.

“What are you doing’?” he asked. “Those are my books.” He grabbed the ledger from Charles. “This is my private stuff.” He turned to Jim. “What is this? I didn’t give you permission to go over my things. Go on. Get out.”

Jim and Charles stood their frozen and embarrassed.

“Father,” Jim said, bowing his head. “I was only trying to help.”

Charles stood by for moral support.

“I don’t need any help. I’ve been taking care of these books all my adult life.” He shook the ledger at him for emphasis.

Mr. Higgins turned to Charles. “And what do you mean, young Mister Singleton? I am ashamed to see a bright young fellow like you ... I thought you were honest and descent.”

Charles’ face burned. “I am sorry sir. I ...”

Mary stepped into the room. “Father, there are all kinds of discrepancies in there. I put him up to it. Were you able to extend the loan?”

“No. No, I wasn’t.” Mr. Higgins placed the ledger slowly onto the desk.

“Sir,” Charles interrupted. “I came in to buy supplies, and I was talking to Mary...”

“So, Mary!” Mr. Higgins turned to his daughter. “Are you up to spying on me now?”

“We weren’t spying, Father.”

Charles felt terrible. He tried to explain, but Mr. Higgins could only say, “Go on! Get

out!”

Charles left the office. John must have left also. He wanted to talk to him, but instead of going after him, he waited in the store for Jim and Mary. He could hear them arguing with their father for a half hour. When the conversation became quiet, Mary popped her head out and motioned Charles to come in.

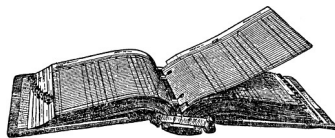
“Son,” said Mr. Higgins, who seemed to have a change of attitude. “My children seem to think you are a pretty good accountant. If that is true, tell me. What can you do to help?”

Something came over Charles. Somehow he felt older and taller. He spoke to Mr. Higgins with as much dignity as he could muster. “The first thing we can do, Sir, is go over your books with you and see if we can find any discrepancies. If we do find any, we can come up with a budget and a plan to organize your store, if you will allow, a plan that will make money instead of giving it away. I saw that you have been giving people food without collecting payment. You have a kind heart, Mr. Higgins. A kind heart.”

“So, you figured out my little code?” Mr. Higgins took his hat off and sat in his chair.

“I could see you had one, Sir,” Charles said as humbly as he could.

“I am just too soft sometimes when I see how poor some people are,” Mr. Higgins said, staring off into space.



Charles was hired as a permanent bookkeeper after he showed Mr. Higgins how to make money. He was put in charge of all money matters and became Mr. Higgins’ liaison

with the bank. After three months of good business practices, Charles was able to persuade the bank to extend Mr. Higgin's loan. It was in this situation that Charles started talking with John about how to obtain his cotton gin.

John came in during the lazy part of the afternoon to talk to Mary. He was waylaid by Charles as he came through the door.

"John," Charles said, stepping in his way. "I have a business proposition for you."

"Are we robbing a bank, Charles?" he asked, trying to peek over Charles' shoulders as if he were looking for someone. "And why would I need more money? I am fabulously wealthy already."

"The rich get richer if they are wise," Charles said with a smirk on his face.

John broke away from Charles and sauntered over to Mary, who was behind the counter busily serving Mrs. Clancy, the church's organist. Charles walked over to John and continued his conversation.

"So what's yer idea?" John asked, turning his eyes toward Mary.

"Well, if you give me your attention for a minute," Charles said, leaning his elbow against the counter, "you and I can start a corporation."

"And who puts up the money? Hum?" John raised an eyebrow.

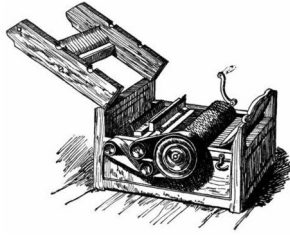
"You do, of course, but not just you. We meet with other planters in the area and see who wants the free use of a cotton gin."

"My dad has the only gin in the entire county, and the only other one we know of is down in New Orleans. That's why people are going to Memphis and shipping their cotton."

John's attention seemed to be off Mary. He looked straight into the eyes of Charles. "We

will have to send back east for this gin of yours.”

“Yeah.”



The older generation didn't listen to Charles or John, but their children did. John knew Jim Cooperage and Tom Neighbors, and Charles found Nathan Billingsworth, Sam Tate, and Jack Parsons next door in Marshall County. They each put up monies for the cotton gin and were planning on sending for one from the east, but in their second meeting, which they held in Holly Springs, Marshall County, Charles brought a newspaper with an advertisement.

“My dear friends,” Charles said as he lay the paper out on the table. “Here is the answer to our quest. A gin as close as Columbia, Tennessee, is going to be auctioned off at an estate sale, the old gentleman there having passed away.”

Everyone congratulated him on this remarkable find. They wrote out a contract, signed it, and made plans to make a trip up to Columbia.

The cotton harvest was early this year, the first week of October 1846. The only speculation was that they were going to have a hard winter. In the past, harvest wasn't over until November. After the harvest, and with their children back in school, it was with high hopes that the Singleton Cotton Society, as they called themselves, created a little caravan and traveled up General Andrew Jackson's Road to central Tennessee. There, they would find their cotton gin.

Charles Finds a Wife

Chapter One

Annie



Colonel Taylor, as people called him, kicked a clod in his cotton field. A smooth white stone popped out. It was crystalline and oval, polished by Nature. As he picked it up and examined it, he assumed that it had come from a stream bed in a distant mountain sometime in the far past. He slipped it into his trousers pocket.

“I bet I’m the first person to touch it,” he said to himself.

Annie, his oldest, ten this year, stepped up alongside him. “Whatcha got?”

“A secret,” he said, smiling. His smile sunk in on the right side. He told everyone he got his teeth knocked out by the butt of a British musket in the last war back in 1813, but his smile was warm and full of love.

He kneeled down to look his daughter in the eye. “A star fell from Heaven, an’ I put it in my pocket to make a wish.”

“What you wish fer?” asked curly, red-headed Annie. She had dimples when she smiled.

“Don’t go tellin’ my secrets now,” he said, shaking her arm. “But I got the pertiest little daughter any man could have.”

They walked back to the house hand in hand.

“Yer not tellin’ are ya, Daddy?” she asked, grabbing his pants leg and giving it a shake.

“My favorite wish is for ye to be good.”

Annie kicked the dirt with her shoe. “Ahh, Daddy. That’s nothin’ new!”

Colonel Taylor laughed.

He pulled out a pipe, stuffed it, and lit it. “Supper’s cookin’. I can smell it from here.”

“Mama’s a good cook, ain’t she?” Annie cocked her head to see his opinion.

“Are not.”

“Are too!” Annie stamped her foot.

“She’s a maaarvelous cook.” He smiled and blew out smoke rings.

Annie laughed and ran into the house.

“Mama,” she said, shaking her mother’s skirt. “Yer a maaaavelous cook.” She laughed again.

“You washed up?” was Ma Taylor’s response.

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Show me yer hands.”

Annie put her hands behind her back and frowned.

“Daughter! Go wash them hands ‘r I’ll pop ya with my dish towel.”

“But Mama,” Annie said, placing her hands on her hips. “Henry pushed me down. Then I ran into Daddy.”

“Go on.” Ma Taylor twirled her dish towel, getting ready to pop her one.

Henry came in looking like he hadn’t washed, changed clothes, or combed his hair in

two weeks.

“The both of ye! Out back an’ wash if’n you want any supper.”

Colonel Taylor strolled in. “Now, Mama,” he cautioned.

“I’ll pop you too,” she said, pointing one of her long fingers at him.

“Kids gotta learn slowly. Gotta be kind to ‘em.” He stood there admiring his wife.

“Maaaarvelous woman.”

“Not getting’ any more kids *this* year.” She stirred the stew vigorously with her large wooden spoon.

Baby Perry screamed from the adjacent room. “Calvin get away from that baby. Stop persterin’ ‘im.”

Calvin scurried away, went out the back door, and joined Annie and Henry. They all three returned washed up for supper. Everyone sat at their usual places, and Colonel Taylor brought Baby Perry to sit on his lap. Ma ladled out stew into each person’s dish and sat down next to the Colonel who said a prayer over the food. The kitchen fire spread a warm glow that filled the family as they chatted, each one telling about their day.

By the time Ma Taylor washed the dishes, the sun settled down on the horizon, and the Colonel collected himself with his pipe onto his favorite chair, putting his feet up on a wooden bucket turned upside down. Ma Taylor put the kids to bed and read them a story from the Bible. Annie asked what ‘begat’ means, and Ma Taylor said, “never you mind.” When the babies were sleeping, she settled herself by the Colonel in front of the fire and lit up her own pipe.



Annie had always been a trial to Ma Taylor. When she was five years old she found what she thought was a kitty. It was black with a white stripe down the back. She came into the house cuddling it and petting it.

“Mama,” she said, approaching her mother who was cooking supper at the fireplace in the kitchen. “Look at the kitty I found. I think I will give it a bath.”

Ma Taylor turned about with a large wooden spoon in hand. She raised her eyebrows. The sight of the “kitty” caught her breath. She had to do this carefully. She pressed Annie’s back with the wooden spoon and guided her out the back door.

“Let the kitty go, Annie. It needs its ma. She’ll clean it up.”

Annie carefully put the little skunk down on the ground. “Go back to yer ma, kitty.”

“Now, youngen! You is the one who needs a bath.”

Ma Taylor took the scrub tub off the back wall, set it on the ground, and said. “Git in the tub. I’ll get some water.”

She visited the well twice. The distance to it was two widths of the cabin along a stony path. Each time, she emptied the bucket on top of Annie, clothes and all, Annie vibrated her lips together to get the water off them and folded her arms to keep warm. Ma Taylor grabbed the homemade gray bar of lye soap, got it wet, and scrubbed Annie and her clothes from head to toe as Annie stood there shivering and whimpering. Then Ma Taylor stripped her girl, rinsed the clothes, hung them on the line, dunked Annie into the tub of

water, swatted her naked bottom, and said, “Now hop on inside and wait fer me by the fireplace.”

They both went inside, but Ma Taylor stopped by the chest of drawers in the hall to get a towel and another dress for Annie.

Colonel Taylor came in the front door and saw Annie warming herself by the fire stripped naked.

“Child,” he called. “Where’s yer clothes?”

“She brought a skunk in here, Colonel,” Ma Taylor said, coming in from the hall. “Can’t ye smell it? Open that door.”

“Yes, Ma,” he laughed. “Somethin’s always a happenin’, ain’t it?”

Ma Taylor nodded. “When ye got a daughter like that.”



When Ma Taylor was pregnant with Perry, she figured Annie was old enough to take care of her brothers Henry and Calvin. Babies have a sweet tooth, and Annie decided to make bread and molasses for her brothers while her ma was out back washing the clothes. She moved a chair over to the cupboard across from the fireplace and climbed up. She stood on the breadboard and opened the cabinet door, took down the crock of molasses, and set it next to her feet. After climbing back onto the chair, she took the loaf of bread out of the breadbox and found Mama’s knife in the drawer under the breadboard.

When Ma Taylor came in from the wash, she found three little babies covered in

molasses, the crock turned over and oozing molasses onto the floor, dripping through the seams of the floor, and the bread for dinner all chopped up. When she caught her breath, she cried, “Ahhh!” and grabbed each child and spanked it. Then she took them outside and dropped them into the laundry water. “Oh, God! Give me patience.” After their bath, she put them to bed where she hoped they might be safe and out of trouble.

It was like this with Annie until she was about ten years old. By then, the only trouble she got into was bringing animals into the house such as snakes, chipmunks, puppy dogs, the neighbor’s cat, and a bear chasing her. At that time, Ma Taylor, hearing the scream of her daughter, crying “Bar! Bar!” grabbed the musket from above the mantle, loaded it, opened the door, let Annie streak across the threshold, leaned the musket against the door post, aimed, and fired into the head of the bear as it leaped onto the porch.

All Colonel Taylor had to say about it was, “My my.” He sighed because it was more work for him. He had to skin, clean the animal, and smoke it.

When questioned by her mother, Annie said, “I found a little bar cub, and I was makin’ friends with it and pettin’ it an’ all when I see its ma come a runnin’, so I skeddaddled and come runnin’ home.”

They had plenty of bear ham for a long while after that. The hide brought them a few pennys, and nobody knew what happened to the cub.



The little schoolhouse was like any other, a one-room affair with a pot-bellied stove

in the middle of the room. It was a natural dividing line, cutting the classroom into quarters, one for first to third grade, one for fourth and fifth grades, one for sixth and seventh grade, and one for eighth grade which was for especially bright students, but since there were none, it became the lunchroom.

Johnny had come to school one day and sat in the back of the eighth-grade section as though he already knew he was a bright student. He was tall, wore overalls, and had buck teeth and freckles with a flop of red hair hanging over his forehead. All the class turned their heads to see who it was coming in, and they all giggled. Miss Meriwether slammed her ruler down hard onto her desk with a loud pop! The students jumped and turned back to face her.

“Now children, let’s be polite,” she said in her polite voice to give them an example. “All the class stand and greet Johnny Dodson, as I have instructed before.”

The class all stood, turned around, and said in unison, “Hello, Johnny. Welcome to our school. We are delighted to have you.”

A lot of the boys had emphasized the “hell” in hello and chuckled.

Johnny blushed.

Annie noticed Miss Meriwether went back to Johnnie and talked to him for a long time. She couldn’t keep her mind on her assignment and kept looking back over her shoulder at the new boy.

Annie was in the fourth grade, and Johnny was working to complete the sixth. At lunch, she sat by him. Annie was always the champion of the stray and outcast. She was the rescuer of puppies and kittens, even if they were black with a white stripe down their back. But if the truth were told, she was attracted to him because of his age. To her, he was a

grown man of thirteen.

“Don’t you pay no mind to the others,” she said, all bright eyes and smiles.

“Double negative, Annie,” said Miss Meriwether.

“Yes, Ma’am,” she replied. She turned back to Johnny. “Miss Meriwether is the flower of all teachers we’ve ever had.”

“The only one we’ve ever had,” commented blonde Harriett. She turned to Johnny. “That’s Annie yer talkin’ to.”

“That’s Harriett that’s talkin’ at us.”

“Talking to us,” said Miss Meriwether without looking up from her work.

“Yes, Ma’am,” replied Annie.

“Hello, Harriett,” Johnny said. He turned to Annie. “Hello, Annie.” Johnny peered at Annie’s lunch basket. “Say. You have fried chicken. I only have Johnny cakes.”

Annie laughed. “Johnny!” She laughed again. “Johnny cakes!” Laughing, she added, “Yer a cake.”

He ignored the joke. “You wanna trade?”

“You can have my leg.” Annie stuck out her leg and laughed again.

“Annie,” Miss Meriwether called.

“Yes, Ma’am.” She covered her mouth to stop from giggling. Tears started flowing as she gave Johnny her fried chicken leg, retrieving her own leg. “Sorry. I do get riddled sometimes.”

“Rattled,” said Miss Meriwether.

“Okay! Rattled!” Annie fumed.

Johnny handed her one of his corn cakes and chomped down on the drumstick she had given him. “Looks like I can’t get rid of corn meal, girl. This is covered with it.”

“That’s my mama’s specialty.”

That started a long and healthy friendship with Johnny, but Miss Meriwether was getting on her nerves, especially when, after school, she got swatted with a switch a few times for mouthing off to the teacher.



Annie walked home that day on clouds of glory. It was her dream to marry Johnny and live in a brick house surrounded by a white picket fence with lilac bushes. She loved lilacs. Johnny would leave on a buggy every day and oversee the plantation on the outskirts of town. She would be rich, and there would be plenty of black folks to work the fields. She couldn’t find a single girl who didn’t have the same dream, except for Harriet, who wanted to be a school teacher like Miss Meriwether.

It wasn’t long before the rest of the class learned that Johnny was quite educated and studying law. He was especially proficient with the Law of Moses, on how you should treat your neighbor, for the Bible is the book by which he learned to read.



Annie had never before seen Johnny until he showed up at the school and was surprised when he came to Church with his family. She guessed that his family had just moved into town. His father and mother were just as tall as him and were not dressed as though they had money, but comely, nonetheless. He had two little sisters, twins with blonde hair, about six years of age in white dresses. They sat across the aisle and two rows back from Annie's family, so when Ma Taylor found that Annie turned around to stare at Johnny, she slammed her hand down on her leg. That made her turn around and stare straight ahead.

Whenever they sang, Annie tuned in on Johnny's voice. It went between tenor and bass as though he had no control over which it should be. He was going through the change.

After church, she caught up with Johnny, and he introduced his family to her. Her dad was already talking to his dad, whom she found out was a carpenter and cabinet maker. She didn't know how it happened, but Johnny's family was invited to dinner. Annie's pride was exalted to heights it had never seen before, and looking down upon the two families united in friendship was breathtaking, like climbing a mountain and looking down into the valley.

Surely, this would insure Annie and Johnny's friendship forever.

At dinner, Annie couldn't stop talking. She was a little chatterbox. The twins didn't talk at all. The boys were too busy eating to talk, and the parents were so busy getting to know each other that they didn't pay attention to the children.

After dinner was over, Annie seemed to have run out of things to say. Maybe she didn't want to say goodnight, as if, when he went off into the darkness, that would be the end of Johnny, and she would never see him again. So, she stood at the door like a doorman

and watched everyone file by. When Johnny said goodnight, she just smiled at him and closed the door.

“Annie!” Ma Taylor held her fists against her hips. “I’m ashamed of you. Talk, talk, talk, talk! That’s not bein’ po-light. An’ ye wouldn’t even say goodbye.”

“Don’t want to, Ma. My little heart’ll burst,” she said with her hands behind her back just in case her mama was thinking of whapping her behind.

“You wash the dishes ta night. That’ll teach ya.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Washing the dishes didn’t bring Annie down from the clouds. She smiled, thinking of Johnny, all the way ‘till she was done. Then she floated off to bed and to sleep.



When people said anything about Annie, they always referred to Johnny and Annie. They sat together in school and at church. They were seen together at all the town picnics, at the store buying penny candy, and walking hand in hand down the roads and in the center of town.

That summer at the 4th of July Picnic, Annie found a new emotion. It was due to Mary who was rich and pretty. Annie was just a plain Jane. When Annie first saw her, she became afraid that Johnny would like Mary better.

In the summertime, picnics were spread on blankets or sheets bedecking the whole

city park near the church, turning it into a checkerboard. Everyone sat on the ground, with the woman holding a parasol unless they were not married and had a boyfriend to hold it. Fried chicken was the main dish along with various home-canned pickles and pies. The older girls would dress up with lace about their shoulders and bonnets displaying flowers and bows on their heads of rolled and curled hair. Children like Annie wore their Sunday best, which couldn't compare with the ruffles and petticoats of Mary's dress.

People looked down on Annie when she wanted to play with the little black girls. The black mammies were there to serve the white folk, and the black children were to stay on the side of the park next to the street. Sometimes Annie, Johnny, and a few others would run through the picnic, playing tag, and when a couple of the black children joined in, there was an icy calm that settled over the park. The mammies were scolded along with the children. Annie frowned, folded her arms, and stamped her foot. That brought a swat on the behind from Ma Taylor.

"Annie, ye know better!" she said. "When 're ye gonna learn white folks don't associate with black folks? That means you."

"Yes, Mama."

Annie and Johnny ran through the bushes and trees surrounding the park, yelling, screaming, and laughing when Johnny bumped into Mary and knocked her down. Johnny offered his hand and lifted her to her feet.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "Are you injured?"

Mary brushed her dress. She smiled and said, "I'm still in one piece. I think." She laughed. "I was chasing a squirrel. I guess he's gone now."

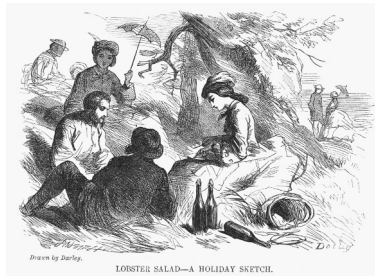
Johnny couldn't take his eyes off of her as she smiled at him.

"Come on Johnny," Annie said, crossing her arms. "There are other squirrels you can play with."

"Well, I have to go. You sure you're all right?"

"Yes. You go on." Her smile showed her pearl-like teeth.

As Annie and Johnny left, Annie tugged on Johnny's arm as he looked back to see Mary one more time. After that encounter, Johnny wasn't fun to play with, so Annie rejoined her family. She felt jealousy for the first time.



After Mary was sent abroad to a finishing school, Johnny and Annie's relationship went back to normal, friend playing with a friend. There was a definite lack of boy and girl recognition. They were just friends. As she grew a couple of years older, Annie's vision of the future changed. Other possibilities came to mind. Maybe she should hold off thinking about marriage and family. She had enough family at home.

In a couple of years, Annie and Johnny grew into the names of Anne and John. They studied together every afternoon and talked a lot, and discussing things with John, she thought she would give him up, but then Mary, the beautiful Mary, returned, and a light came into John. He was gay and merry and smiled at Anne every time they met. She thought it might be for her, but it was Christmas time, and why not be merry? He had been

melancholy for ages after Mary left. Anne thought maybe he had forgotten Mary and was just glad to be with her instead. But that was before she heard a rumor that Mary had returned for the holiday.

They were through with their studies for the day, and John helped Anne with her coat.

“I’ll walk you home,” he said, putting his coat on. “It’s a blizzard out there. I don’t want you to get lost.”

“Oh, I won’t get lost.”

He took her arm. “Just the same...”

Leaving the comfort of the school building, they were met with the winter blast. The cold wind-blown snow cut their faces.

“Will you be at the School Christmas Party?” Anne yelled.

“A dozen horses couldn’t keep me away.”

They stomped through the piling snow. John dropped her at her door and said good night.

Anne went in and slammed the door behind her with the help of the wind.

“Maybe it’s better you stay home tonight,” Ma Taylor said as Annie removed her coat.

“Oh, Mama! Everyone will be there. John will take care of me like he’s always done.”

“Just the same, I’m worried.” She took down the can of coffee beans from the shelf near the fireplace. “You want coffee to fortify ye? I’m havin’ some, and yer pa will want some when he comes in.”

“Just give me a bowl of yer stew. That will do it.”

Henry, Calvin, and Perry played with their lead soldiers on the floor next to Baby Tabitha's crib, and standing in the crib, holding onto the side, she stared at them with fascination.

The Colonel came in the back door, stomping his feet and shaking the snow off his hat and coat. "All the creatures are fed, bedded down, and shut in." He walked down the hall to the kitchen where everyone waited for him. "That stew and coffee smells so good, it's like a rope pullin' me in."

After supper John knocked at the door, and Anne donned her coat and bonnet. Ma Taylor put a scarf over her head and tied it. "This'll keep ya warm."

John knocked again.

"I'm coming." She let a blast of air come in as she opened the door.

Ma Taylor slammed the door behind her.



When Anne and John arrived at the party, Anne received a shock. John went off on his own. She thought perhaps he went to get her mulled cider, so she stood by the door and waited. After a few other students came in, she decided to go further in. Then she saw John and Mary talking. He had handed Mary the cider that was meant for her. That light Anne had noticed in John was for Mary. He seemed excited to talk to her, and she reciprocated. Anne folded her arms and stewed. She felt sick to her stomach.

Another friend, blonde Harriet, came over to her and started talking. "Aren't they the

couple!” she said. “Everyone’s been talking about them. They’re expected to get married, you know.”

“Anne Taylor,” Harriet said, seeing Anne’s face turn red. “I didn’t know you felt that way about John.”

“I don’t feel that way about him,” Anne huffed. “We’re just friends.” She looked away, pretending to place her attention on the party.

Harriet laughed. “You can’t fool me.”

Anne turned around to her friend. “Oh, Harriet. What am I going to do?”

Harriet didn’t have a suggestion except to make him jealous.

“Who around here,” Anne looked around at all the students playing games like dunking for apples, or blind man’s bluff, “could make John jealous?”

“Amos likes you,” Harriet said, lightly pointing in Amos’s direction.

“He’s chubby and wears those thick glasses, and his hair looks like he smears grease on it.”

“Well then, I don’t know.”

“Mama was right.” Anne sighed and leaned against the refreshment table. “I shouldn’t have come. I’ll go home.”

“We could play games.” Harriet poured herself a second helping of mulled cider.

“Be careful of how many cups you drink,” Anne said as she strolled off.

“I will.”

Anne walked over to John and Mary.

“You know Anne, Mary,” he said, trying to be polite.

“Yes,” Mary said, pulling on one of her long curls in front of her left ear. “A real scholar I hear.”

“Hello, Mary. Glad to see you.” Anne grabbed John’s arm. “Will you take me back home? I’m not feeling so well. “

“I’ll get your coat.”

“Thank you.” She glanced at Mary. “Sorry, I really have to go.”

“That’s all right, Anne. I understand. Sorry we can’t be friends.” She took Anne’s hand. “I guess we are in love with the same man. But really, darling. John thinks of you only as a sister, someone to take care of. He doesn’t love you as he loves me.”

Anne jerked her hand away, and Mary simply smiled and chuckled.

John came with Anne’s coat. As they walked away from Mary, she said, “Honestly, John. I don’t understand what you see in her.”

“She’s a nice girl if you could get to know her.”

“All the boys think so.”

“Come on. I’ll get you home.”

As they opened the door, Anne said, “Never mind. I’ll walk myself home.”

“Don’t be a child, Anne. You are my friend, and you always will be.” He ushered her out into the snow. “Come on.”



Anne soaked her pillow that night with her tears, but the next morning, it seemed as though she had grown a couple of inches. She felt that during the night someone had come

and comforted her and given her peace.

At breakfast, she asked her mother, “Mama, did you come to my bed last night?”

“No dear, why do you ask?” She piled a few corn cakes onto Anne’s plate, pouring molasses on top.

“Oh, nothing. It must have been a dream.” Anne ate silently wondering what the future would hold.

Chapter Two

Anne takes a trip

Ma Taylor noticed that Anne was slow in doing her chores. She watched her feeding the chickens, broadcasting seed around the chicken coop, just moping along as though she had all the care in the world. Anne stopped sometimes and sighed. It was the end of Spring and the end of school. She had finally graduated, and perhaps she wasn't taking it too well. It might be that she needed sulfur and molasses, but Ma Taylor had another thought. She was pining for John. He had just married his sweetheart Mary Whitaker, and it splintered Anne's heart. She had lost her focus in life.

After a week of this, Ma Taylor had enough. She caught Anne leaning on the broom instead of sweeping the porch and steps. She took the broom from her and began swatting her behind with it. She chased her into the cotton field and into the arms of her pa.

"Now ye got animation in ya!" Ma Taylor exclaimed, shaking the broom at Anne.

"Now what's all this?" the colonel asked, petting Anne's head.

"I just gave her a change in activity, from mopin' about to runnin'." Ma Taylor smiled and pinched her daughter's ear. "I love my girly, but she's gotta come alive."

Anne looked up into her pa's face. "How can I come alive when my life is gone and taken up with another body?"

"Ahh," Colonel Taylor said, running his fingers through Ann's auburn hair. "You need to ferget John. Git yer focus on somethin' else. Whip up an interest in other things. Not somethin' frivolous, but somethin' ta build yer character. Now take this here cotton fer an instant. We gotta get it to the Mississip an' down to New Orleans, to the market down there,

or to Mobile in Alabama, one way or ta other.”

“What about our buyer in town, Pa?” Anne asked.

“Up and died.”

“Well that’s no good,” replied Ma Taylor, leaning on the broom.

“And the business is in probate, bein’ contested among his sons.”

All three of them moseyed on towards the house.

“No good a’tall,” Ma Taylor muttered.

“Now, girl,” he said to Anne. “Ye git yer book learnin’ goin’ in yer head and figger out this one.”

Anne spent long into the night worrying about what they were going to do with the cotton. When she woke up in the morning, she had an idea. She went into the kitchen and confronted her mother.

“We’re goin’ to Purdy,” she announced.

“Purdy? What’s in Purdy?” Ma Taylor scooted the bacon over to the side in the cast iron skillet and plopped a couple of eggs in. They sizzled.

“I don’t know, Mama, but that’s where I need to be.” She bent over her mother’s shoulder. “Smells good.”

“Not fer you. I’ll make you some in a minute. This is fer yer pa.”

“Always is.”

“You get us some buttermilk, an’ I’ll pour batter over yer bacon, jus’ the way ye like it.”

When the colonel came in, Ma Taylor mentioned, “Missy there says we’re a goin’ ta

Purdy.” She placed his breakfast before him as he sat down at the table.

“What’s in Purdy?” he asked.

“That’s what I asked her.”

Anne came in from the spring house with the buttermilk. The boys followed her like cows following the leader from the field back to the barn.

Henry, a year younger than Anne and nearing eighteen, asked, “Where’s the breakfast?”

Tabitha came in with more eggs in the gathering bowl. “Yeah, where’s the breakfast? It’s right here.” She placed the eggs on the table, and Ma Taylor grabbed a couple for the batter.

Tabatha added, “If those chickens lay any more, we’ll have ta sell ‘em all.”

“The eggs or the chickens?” Tabitha asked.

“Nobody’s gettin’ rid of my chickens,” Colonel Taylor said, with his mouth full of egg. “Now, Annie girl. This comin’ from all that thinkin’ I asked ye to do?”

“I reckon so, Pa.”

Ma Taylor served the hotcakes as fast as she could fry them.

“I figger there’s cotton to be sold in Purdy or Memphis.” Anne grabbed the syrup bottle from Henry and poured some on her cakes and bacon.

“Don’t use it all!” Henry exclaimed.

“Plenty of sorghum in the barn if’n you want to go git it,” the colonel said as he rose from the table. “Hurry up. I need you boys in the field. Maybe after we sell the cotton, we can buy a couple of blacks to help us.”

“Need a whole field of blacks, Pa.”

“Why? So’s you can be lazy?” He rubbed Henry’s head. “Two will do.” Then he winked at Ma Taylor. “Unless we git us a couple o’ other little ones.”

“Don’t you be too sure o’ that.” She popped him with the dishrag as he left the kitchen.

He turned his head back. “That’ll only git you in that bed faster.” He laughed as he went out the door.

“Not tonight, old man!” she yelled after him.



The next day Anne and Henry put baggage and foodstuffs into the covered wagon and headed for Purdy, looking for a cotton buyer. There was a gin in Columbia, but its ownership was contested, and until that was settled, it was not running. Anne’s gut feeling was Purdy, a little more than a hundred miles west. It would take a couple of weeks to go up and over a ridge and down again. The best way was to take the Natchez Trace between here and Purdy or get onto the Tennessee River down to Mississippi and enter Jackson’s trail down to New Orleans, but Memphis was a short distance from Purdy and closer to the Mississippi River. That would be the fastest route. It was more probable to find a buyer in Purdy since it was on the way to Memphis and the river. So, they said their goodbyes amid tears and worry, for it was a gamble to go out into the wilderness.

The days and nights became a monotony. Every now and then they would say “Hydee!” to a farmer, either on the road or seeing him in his field. The horses were slow, the green forests intermingled with farmland, and the sun was hot, but the roads were not muddy this time of the year. Every night they would find a spot along the roadside, pull over, and set up camp. They usually ate corn cakes and beans with a little ham hock. Then they spread out their bedrolls in the wagon.

One night a farmer with a musket came up to their campfire. “If I may interrupt your fest,” he said, tipping his hat. “It may not be expedient for you to stay here tonight.”

Henry rose. “I beg yer pardon, sir?”

“There are two slaves escaped just this night. They would cut yer throat just to take yer boots.” Then he saw Anne. He tipped his hat. “Pardon me Ma’am.”

Anne asked, “And where would you have us stay?”

“I would appreciate yer company at my house. My boys have gone lookin’ fer those blacks, and my wife passed away some years back. I have plenty of room in the house.”

The farmer pointed to the fire. “Better put that out pretty fast. Wouldn’t want others to know yer here. There may be bullets flying.”

Henry scooted dirt into the fire and knocked the embers about with a stick.

“Mind if I ride with ye? I can show you the way.”

Henry helped Anne up and said to the farmer, “Be our guest,” waving his hand towards the wagon seat.

“Willie Snodgrass,” the farmer said as he climbed up.

“Anne Taylor.” Anne offered her hand which he took with great delicacy.

Henry untied the horses from the fence post and climbed up onto the wagon seat.

“Henry Taylor,” he said, shaking the man’s hand.

Willie settled his musket between Anne and himself. “You two newlyweds?”

Both Anne and Henry laughed. “No, sir,” he said. “We’re brother and sister. We’re on our way towards Memphis, lookin’ for a cotton buyer.” He slapped the reins against the horses’ hides and they were off.

“Cotton. There’s not enough buyers in this area. Why grow any?” He took out a rolled tobacco leaf. “This is what I grow. Plenty of people want it.” He ran it along the underside of his nose and sniffed it. “Should have lit it when there was fire goin’”

Willie looked at the two. “Now if you wanted to grow cotton, I would advise movin’ to Mississippi. They’ve got the right land for cotton.”

“My dad mentioned it one time, but he’s too settled to move anywhere.”

Under Willie’s direction and the bright moonlight, they arrived at the plantation house in no time. Anne and Henry oohed and awed when they saw such a magnificent structure.

“In the moonlight,” Anne said, “It looks like one of His father’s many mansions.”

“Thank ye kindly, Ma’am.” He waited for Henry to dismount and went around the wagon and took Anne’s hand to help her descend to the ground.

Henry tied the horses to a post with a large ring in it, and the two were ushered into the mansion built in the Virginian style. Willie had his black butler and housekeeper show them to their rooms while he put his gun back above his mantle in the sitting room.

Anne felt exhilaration at the fine interior with its pictures of what was probably family portraits hanging on the wall, especially the ones that followed her up the spiral

staircase. Her heart was beating rather fast as she viewed the excellent white walls and chandelier lit with more than a dozen candles. It was surely a preview of what was to come after death.

The overweight housekeeper, dressed in black, and wearing a white apron, opened a door and with a wave of her hand ushered Anne into a bedroom. She placed a candle in a candle holder on a chest-of-draws and then pulled down the covers on a rather large bed that could hold two or three people.

“If you need anythang, Miss,” said the housekeeper, “please pull the sash at the head of the bed.” She smiled a ghostly white-teeth smile. “Good night, Miss.”

Anne roamed the room, swinging her arms from side to side as if she were measuring. She peaked out the window to see the covered wagon being led away to the barn perhaps. She danced a pirouette, sort of, imagining she was a princess in a faraway castle.

As she was undressing, the door opened. “Henry?”

“No. It’s Willie. I thought I would just check on you to see if everything was to your satisfaction.”

“Mr. Snodgrass,” she said, turning her back to him. “I am undressed.”

“Oh, that doesn’t bother me. I raised three daughters.”

Anne shivered as Willie approached. “I could tuck you in like I did my daughter.”

Then both of them heard Henry’s voice. “Mr. Snodgrass. There is a loaded musket aimed at your head. Would you please leave my sister’s room?”

“Now that don’t seem quite neighborly, Mr. Taylor.”

Willie turned so fast and grabbed the musket from Henry that Henry was quite

astonished at having to pick himself up off the floor. He found a friendly hand extended. “I don’t hold any hard feelings, Mr. Taylor. This is my home, and I conduct myself as a gentleman. I expect you to return the favor.”

There was no animosity on Willie’s face, but his hand had a very strong grip on Henry’s. “Now you two get a good night’s rest. Breakfast is at seven.” With that, Willie left.

Henry hurried to Anne. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. He hadn’t done anything.”

“Nevertheless. I will sleep on my musket. There is a door connecting these two rooms. I will hear you if you need me again.”

“I’ll be all right, Henry. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Two minutes after Henry went to his room, Anne heard a light tap tap on her door. She was going to call Henry when both he and the housekeeper, carrying a candle approached her. Seeing it was only the housekeeper, Henry kept silent.

“I am so sorry, Missie,” the housekeeper apologized in a soft whisper. “The massah, he don’t mean no harm. He is as innocent as a little boy. He loss his wife and chil’ with the pneumonia a couple yars ago. His son takes care o’ the plantation. He don’t let the massah have any bullets. He’s juss a chil’. But like a chil’ if he gets angry, he can hurt someone. The massah, he’s gone to bed. Ol’ Jackson is comin’ round wiff your wagon if’n you wants to leave.”

“I think we’d better,” Henry said. He placed the old musket back in the corner where he found it. It wouldn’t have shot, but it did have a bayonet. “Thank you, Ma’am. Anne, get

dressed.”

“Don’t Ma’am me. They juss call me Annie.” Her eyebrows shot up. “Oh. You is Annie too.”

Anne smiled and dressed in a hurry. Annie led them down the stairs tiptoeing. They got to the door just in time for Willie to show up with a saber.

“Don’t be in despair Mary,” he shouted. “I will save you.”

Before Henry could follow Anne out the door, Willie cut his arm. The housekeeper screamed, and Old Jackson who brought the wagon grabbed Willie and took him back inside.

“Hurry on outa here,” the old man cried, slamming the door.

Anne took the reins as Henry climbed aboard and slapped the horses. They galloped away, turned at the end of the drive, and in which direction they went, neither Anne nor Henry knew. After a few minutes, when they saw they were far away from Willie’s farm, Anne brought in the reins and pulled the wagon over to the side of the road.

“How’s yer arm?” she asked.

“I feel like I’ve gone to a bloodletting at the barber shop.” He lay back, holding his arm, trying to stop the blood. He wasn’t doing a very good job.

Anne ripped a strip from the bottom of her petticoat and wrapped it tight around Henry’s arm. “That will have to do.”

“You’ll have to roll my bed out.”

“I’ll get it ready. You just rest.”

She jumped down and tied the horses to someone’s fence, went into the back of the

wagon, and rolled out their beds. She pulled Henry through the front opening and laid him down. He started shivering, so she put both blankets on top of him and used her lap for his pillow. She sang to him.

“Lullabye, lullabye, lullabye now;

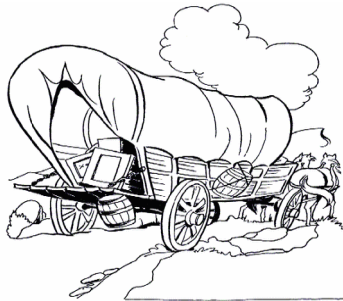
You gotta sleep and dream of me.

Lullabye, lullabye, lullabye, now;

We gonna be awake tomorrow, you’ll see.”

Anne slumped down against the side of the wagon and went to sleep.

Morning showed them the road they had already come up, but they were pointed in the opposite direction from which they had been traveling. *It’s the right direction*, Anne thought. *We’d better go home.*



The Colonel and Ma Taylor didn’t expect to see the wagon come back so soon. It had only been a week since they were gone. They either ran into a buyer on the way to Purdy or something went wrong.

“I’m sure they had an accident,” Ma Taylor exclaimed. She held onto Tabitha’s hands before she could follow the boys out onto the road.

“What happened?” cried Calvin. He didn’t see Henry.

Perry jumped onto the back of the covered wagon and poked his head in. "He's back here. He's been injured."

Ma Taylor covered her cheeks with her hands. "Oh, my boy!" It could have been Indians for all she knew. She rushed over to the wagon as it pulled up to the cabin.

Anne hopped down. "He's all right. Just a slight fever."

The back of the wagon was let down. The two boys climbed in and helped Henry out.

"I can walk," Henry said. "Let go of me."

"Mama, you need to sew up his arm. He got cut pretty bad."

Henry allowed his moaning mother to take him into the house. The Colonel followed behind, saying, "It's the war* all over again." He got the whiskey out and handed it to Henry as Ma Taylor sat him down in a chair by the fireplace.

"You know what that's for," the Colonel said, scratching his chest and head.

As Ma Taylor unwrapped the wound, Henry sprinkled the whiskey onto the cut."

"Stop wastin' good whiskey. Yer supposed to drink the damn stuff."

"Watch yer mouth, Colonel." Ma Taylor frowned at him as she got her sewing basket down from the cupboard.

Henry sat guzzling down the whiskey and gritting his teeth as his ma sewed the skin of his arm together.

"Now, youngen," Ma Taylor demanded. "You tell yer mama what happened."

Henry tried to tell the story of their trip toward Purdy, but he got halfway through and fell asleep.

* referring to the War of 1812

“Now I can sew in peace,” Ma Taylor said, smiling.



“We’re needin’ supplies,” Ma Taylor said to the Colonel. “So, I’m takin’ Annie here up to Columbia. We plan to do some tradin’.”

“Get me some tobbacy, won’tcha?”

“We won’t ferget yer smoke weed, Pa,” Anne said as she ascended the wagon.

After a couple of miles on the road, Anne just up and said, “I can’t believe such a beautiful place housed a looney.”

“Heaven must be full of looneys, Darlin’.”

“Why?”

“‘cause the Lord love ‘em.”

Anne turned a little to look away. “An’ he wanted to make love to me. Said his wife had died and he was lone...ly.”

“I guess someday soon, I ought to tell ye about the nature o’ things.” Ma Taylor put her fingertips up to her lips, letting the horses follow the well-known path up to Columbia.

“You know, between a man and a woman.”

“Henry didn’t even put up a fight.” Anne put her fists on her hips. “You know? I think there must be somethin’ missin’ in him.”

“By the cut on Henry’s arm, I would say that guy’s a mean man.”

“I don’t want to go to Purdy again, not if I have to pass by *his* farm.”

“What about our cotton, Deary?”

“I don’t know Mama, but I don’t feel to go to Purdy anymore. I think the Lord done changed his mind.”

“Or you have.”

Anne put her arm around her mama. “Don’t worry. Somethin’s bound to happen in Columbia so’s we can sell our cotton.”



Chapter Three

Anne Finds a Beau

Columbia was a pretty old town compared to most towns in West Tennessee. It had its marble courthouse and well-established merchants. It had been there more than twenty years, being established as the county seat in 1807. The general store was an actual brick building. Ma Taylor pulled up near the building, descended from her seat, and feeling the ground under her feet, stretched and yawned. Taking a deep breath, she said, “Here we are, Dear.”

Anne jumped down and put her arm into her mother’s and walked through the door. They had been here many times, but today, it smelled fresh and looked new as if this was her first time. She smiled and took a deep breath of paper smells mixed with candy, spices, meats, leather, and perfumed people.

“Mama, I just have to look around.” She left her mother’s side and followed her nose. She could also smell fruits of many kinds and grain.

“I’ll meet ye at the counter.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Through all the barrels and casks and boxes and displays on the walls, the smells and colors that tingled her senses, she was drawn like a magnet to bolts of cloth.

“Oh, my!” she exclaimed, feeling the different colored and printed fabrics. “May I look at this one?” she asked a tall, thin man with graying hair and a bold mustache behind the counter. The cloth was printed with tiny red and pink flowers with green leaves, all swimming in indigo blue.

The man took the bolt from the shelf and laid it on the cutting table, measuring out a yard of it.

“Yes, that’s just perfect.” Anne rubbed her hand across the cloth. “Nine yards, please.”

The man rolled out more cloth and cut it with giant scissors, folded it, wrapped it in paper, tied it with string, and handed it to her. “Anything else, Miss?”

“No, thank you.”

Anne took off, carrying her precious package. She looked through all the equipment for the kitchen or toilet, and then she came upon apples of different kinds, plums, cherries, carrots, yams, persimmons, and different squashes, all in open bins. There were potatoes and onions, lots of different dry beans, and then she spied the melons. Her mouth watered. She picked up a heavy green watermelon and carried it two feet when a young man intercepted her.

“May I carry this for you?” he asked. He reminded her of John when he was young.

“You sure may. It is heavy,” she said, handing it to him. “A girl needs help sometimes.” She looked for her mother, and upon seeing her at the counter, she said, “Just hand it to her.” She pointed and added, “Tell her it’s fer Anne.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Anne went off and finished her shopping in the women’s clothing section, examining all the new dresses and bonnets from the East. Her mother joined her while she waited for her order to be collected.

“Look at this. Look at this.” Ma Taylor stretched out a frilly dress. “It must’ve come

from Paris, from all the way across the ocean.”

“I like this one, Mama, and look at this bonnet.”

“Huh. What need of we of all these frills?”

“If they didn’t cost so much, Mama, I think we would go places all dressed to the hilt.”

When it was time to go, Anne was still carrying the cloth she had wanted to buy. As she arrived at the door, her mother asked, “What’s this?”

“Oh. Its cloth. It’s very beautiful. I forgot to give it to you.”

“Here.” Ma Taylor handed Anne her purse. “Go pay fer it.”

Anne ran to the counter, paid for the cloth, and ran back through the door, running right into a man walking with other gentlemen as they were talking together.

“Whoa, girl.” Charles Singleton caught her by the arms just to steady himself.

“Where you off to?”

“Oh!” Anne covered her mouth. “I’m so sorry. Is your foot okay? I think I stomped on it.”

Charles found that he was holding the girl very close. They were face-to-face. She must have been eating peppermint. Her breath smelled of it. “I think it’s doing well. How about you? Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She smiled, quite embarrassed. “I’m doin’ fine.” She hesitated. “Ugh, you can let go now. I’m really fine.”

“Oh. Forgive me.” He laughed and eased off his grip. He rubbed her arms where he had wrinkled her sleeves. “Sorry.”

Charles bent down and picked up Anne's purchase. "You dropped this."

"Oh, thank you. You are so kind."

For a moment, they stared at each other, not knowing what to say.

Ma Taylor had seen the whole thing and was sitting up on the wagon seat giggling, slapping her knee. It made her hungry, or maybe she would have felt hungry anyway.

"Anne," she called. "Throw me up that package and help me down. My stomach is growlin' and my mouth waterin' fer some food."

Charles offered. "Here. Let me help you down."

"Thank ye kindly, young man." She reached for his hands and he let her down gently.

"Listen. We were just going down to the Three Sisters roadhouse to get lunch. Would you two fair daughters of Tennessee come and join us?" Charles asked, taking his hat off, covering his heart with it, bowing a little.

"Mister," Ma Taylor said as she put her arm in his, "you're a real gentleman."

"So, Mama, I guess we're going to eat lunch?" Anne asked, taking her mother's other arm.

Charles tipped his hat to Anne. "We're glad you could join us."

"Likewise," Anne said with a little curtsy as she walked.

Strolling toward the edge of town, Charles and the Taylors introduced themselves.

"She's my oldest," said Ma Taylor. "Got Henry after her, then, Calvin, Perry, and Tabitha. And that's all I'm havin'. I'm not havin' no more. Now, the Colonel, he's famous for beatin' the British at New Orleans."

"I think that was Andrew Jackson, Mama."

“Well, he was thar. They couldn’t a done it without’im.”



At the edge of town, sat an inn for travelers. It had a small sign swinging above the entrance of three half-naked Indian girls carrying a pumpkin and baskets of beans and cobs of corn. On the front door was carved the face of a boar with tusks. As the group entered, Anne pursed her lips and frowned when she saw the boar’s head. Inside, there was a bar to the left and tables to the right. Men sitting at the bar sang a merry song about the Revolution and the damnable King George. The Maitre D’ seemed very glad to see a large group of men with two women and ushered them to a suitable table in the back.

“What is the luncheon today, George?” Charles asked, he being the oldest among them.

“We have bean and corn soup, as we have every day, with bread and cheese.”

Anne had not been around a lot of suit coats before, men dressed to go to Church, and it wasn’t even Sunday. It stifled her natural gabby self, but her mother was not bothered by it.

“What you fellers doin’ all dressed up?” she asked, smiling and folding her hands together on the table.

“We met in Holly Springs down in Mississippi,” Charles said. “We are all farmers from both sides of the border. We came together when we read in the newspaper there was a

cotton gin for sale here in Columbia.”

“Cotton gin, ye say?” Ma Taylor peered into the eyes of each of the five men.

“Yes,” said the gentleman to Charles’ right. “We have pooled our money together and formed a corporation.”

“You aim on buyin’ cotton?” Ma Taylor’s eyes widened as she stretched her neck out.

“Yes Ma’am,” another gentleman to Charles’ left answered.

Ma Taylor slammed her hand flat onto the table, making a popping sound. “Aw, ha! Well, we’re lookin’ to sell our cotton. The Sand Hill Cotton Company has gone kaput.”

“And,” said Charles, grinning, “as soon as the Sand Hill brothers sign the agreement and the sales slip, we will have us a cotton gin.”

The gentleman to the right said, “We have come here to transport the gin back to Holly Springs. Farmers can have their cotton cleaned and shipped off to New Orleans cheaper than the boat ride from Memphis.”

“Those in Memphis won’t like that,” Ma Taylor said.

“We believe in fair trade and lazy fair.”

Charles explained, “When there’s a need, anyone in this free country can compete.”

As the lunch was being served, Anne spoke. “Is your corporation closed, or can anyone join?”

“Oh,” Charles answered. “We could handle at least eight farmers, maybe nine in the corporation. We don’t want it to get too big. Not yet.” He tasted the soup with the large silver spoon that came with it. “Soup’s good.”

“Well, if I talk to my pa,” Anne said as she tasted her soup, “we might want to join in

yer venture.” She grabbed a slice of bread and tore it up, dropping each piece daintily into her bowl.

“As long as we don’t have to move ... agin!” Ma Taylor said with a nod of her head.

“Oh, we don’t plan on moving,” Charles said. “Each farmer has a farm to run. I’m free and liberal. I don’t have a farm. My brothers have seen to that. We all will just share in the profits and I will run the company there in Holly Springs.”

“Your brothers,” Anne asked. “They threw you off your own farm?” She spooned a piece of soaked bread into her mouth.

“Pa’s farm. They will inherit it. They say I travel around too much.”

“And you’re willing to settle down in that Holly Springs?” Ma Taylor asked.

“Yes, for a while.” He stirred his soup as though he weren’t hungry.

“What are you planning on doing after this venture?” Anne asked. Copying Charles, she began stirring her soup. She spied little lumps of pork in it.

“I don’t have anything in mind. It’s just that I will always be open to cotton farming on my pa’s farm. You know, if they ask me to come back.”

“Sure,” Ma Taylor said. “Family is everthang.”

After lunch, as they filed out of the restaurant, Charles and Anne couldn’t help staring at each other. That made Anne laugh. She felt a bit giddy. She grabbed his arm. “Are you staying long in town?”

“Long enough.”

“Long enough for what?”

“Long enough to ask you to the Harvest Ball they’re having in the town hall on

Saturday.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

Charles departed with the other gentleman as they approached the Taylor’s wagon. He tipped his hat and said, “I’ll come by Saturday evening.”

“I’ll be waitin’.” Anne watched the men as they walked away. She suggested that she and her mama stay in town until Saturday so she could see Charles again.

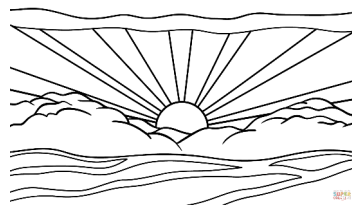
“Nothing doin’, Missy,” was her ma’s response.

“Ahh, Ma.”

“Climb onto the wagon. We gotta git that melon into the spring house.”

After Anne climbed up, her mother handed her the reins. “You git ta drive the wagon back. I may take a little snooze. My eyelids er heavy from all the eatin’.”

“Yes, Ma.”



Charles pulled up in his carriage to the farmhouse just as the Taylors were finishing their supper. The evening was cooling down, and the sun lit the remaining clouds to bright orange. Anne appeared at the door and waited for this interesting man to escort her down the stairs. She wore a full pink gown tied with a sash about her skinny waist. The tasseled ends of the sash dropped down to her knee on the left side. Her sleeves puffed out below her elbow, and about her neckline and the bottom of the skirt held massive embroidery. Her collar, thin cotton lace, culminated in a white cotton rose in the middle of her breast. Her

bonnet rose above her forehead and covered her cheeks. Behind her head was a mass of ribbons, bows, and flowers. Her lips smelled of cinnamon because she had rubbed her lips with it to turn them naturally red. She had then pinched her cheeks to bring blood to the surface for a rosy look.

On the other hand, Charles wore the latest burgundy colored tails, a white waistcoat whose collar came together down below his ribs and fastened with three black buttons. His dark tie wrapped around his throat and covered his chest. His pantaloons were baggy about the hips and tight at his ankles to match his thin pointed black boots. He bowed as he approached, taking his top hat off and swinging it through the air to arrive at his heart.

He took Anne's streamlined hand and escorted her as though she were royalty. She giggled, knowing she had borrowed her clothes from a rich aunt who lived nearby. She suspected that a farmer would not own such fine linen, so he would have had to borrow it from a friend, perhaps.

Anne's mother called out, "Anne! Yer coat!"

"I don't want to ruin this dress, Ma."

"You'll get cold." She shook the coat at her daughter.

"I'll be all right, Ma." Anne cuddled up to Charles. "I have my love to keep me warm."

The buggy was a two-seater, black as a hearse. It had steps up to the seat. She imagined he was seating her in Cinderella's golden coach. She also thought this would be a once-in-a-lifetime ball, and it would be for a farmer's daughter. Balls were usually for the rich and famous.

“You look ever so lovely, Anne,” Charles said as she rested herself in the seat.

“And you look so handsome, Charles.”

He walked around to the other side and hopped in as though he flew. He grabbed the reins, slapped the horse with them, and yelled out a whistle. The horse trotted out of the circle and onto the road. Ma Taylor and the Colonel peeked out of the window through the curtains and smiled.

The ride up to Columbia was pleasant but cold. There was a breeze that swept through Anne’s cloths. Anne wondered if she should have brought a shawl at least. She folded her arms to keep the breeze off, and Charles noticed, stopping the horse with “Whoooooa.” He reached behind the seat and brought out a blanket.

“This is what modern people use when they ride in a buggy.” He laid it across Anne’s lap, but she pulled it up to cover her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she said as Charles slapped the back of the horse. “My last beau was not a gentleman, just the boy next door, but I loved him once.”

“What happened to him?”

“He married sweet Mary, the rich farmer’s daughter. She was so pretty.”

“That must have broken your heart.”

“I found a way around it. I guess it helped me grow up a bit.”

“Sometimes I think God needs us to experience hardships so we can grow.”

“You’re a religious man?”

“My dad was. He read out of the Bible to us every night before we retired.”

Anne placed the blanket around her shoulders, but she liked to breathe the cool air,

and she filled her lungs with it.

“My daddy is religious but doesn’t attend church regularly. He encourages us to do our own reading. He says you can get closer to God that way. I think he’s just lazy. Doesn’t want to read to children.”

Charles smiled. “I guess so.”

“We relied on the circuit preacher,” he said. “He would come around about once a month, but not if it was snowing or raining. My father is a pretty good preacher himself.”

“So’s mine.” Anne turned her head to look at her escort. She imagined him to be a prince from a far country who comes to rescue her from a life of drudgery. “Most girls around here will marry farmers, I imagine.”

“Farmers need wives.”

“I guess they do.” Anne blushed.

Charles changed the subject and talked about the weather and cotton farming the rest of the way until they arrived at the City Building where the ball was given.



The City Building, made of red brick, was almost a cube, stretching out from the entrance and the hall within. A Roman portico leaned flat against the wall above the entrance and a small tower above that.

Arriving at the door, Charles helped his princess down and gave a black man, dressed

in a black coat and tie, a dime. The man climbed into the carriage and parked it for them. Another carriage drove up behind them as Charles opened one of the double doors to the building for Anne.

The hall inside was draped with dark blues and burgundy tapestry. At every gathering of the cloth were flowers and budding branches of trees. Music from a violin and piano filled the hall.

Anne looked around and found that most of the women were wearing satin gowns, and the men were in black or dark blue. She felt like she and Charles were going to stand out. Her dress was more modern. While other women's sleeves poofed out about the upper arm, hers poofed out about the lower arm as a newer style.

Dancing was done in reels where couples skipped down a gauntlet of the other dancers holding their partners' hands above the couple. Anne laughed at the thrill of the experience. Before she could catch her breath, they started a square dance with a black man calling the moves. The music of the violin began at a higher pace, and the skipping, springing to a higher step. During the intermission, everyone went to the refreshment tables, one on each side, east and west, where they could get punch, cookies, jellies, and small sandwiches.

As Charles and Ann strolled to the table at their left, Anne said, "I don't want anything to eat, just a cup of punch."

"You know that punch is spiked with whiskey, don't you?" He held her by the waist and led her to the table.

"I don't mind. I'm more tired and thirsty than anything."

After he obtained the punch and handed it to her, he said, “Shall we go outside and find a bench perhaps to sit for a while?”

The back of the building opened up to a garden with benches. It seemed that all the benches were occupied, but Charles found one surrounded by a bush on the north side of the garden, facing the city.

Anne sat down and breathed deeply. The stars in the sky formed a river of pinpoints of light, rising from the horizon. Anne sipped her cup of punch, staring at the stars and catching her breath. Charles put his arm around her and she smiled.

Anne lay her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. She felt safe and comfortable with him. She was sure he would make a fine husband, but she wasn't going to tell him. He would have to figure that out for himself.

“I don't want to dance anymore,” she said, sipping more punch. “Can we just sit here and look at the stars?”

“That's fine with me. There isn't any other girl I know I would rather be with right now.”

Anne handed the cup to him, and he sat it on the ground.

“My teacher at school knows a lot. She's an educated Indian. She told us to call her Miss Susanna. She comes from Texas. She told us that many of her people believe that the Milky Way is the river you cross when you die.”

“Funny what an injun would think.” He squeezed her shoulders. “My teacher once told me those stars are actually bigger than they look. She went on to say that the planets are worlds like ours. There might even be people on them.”

“Galileo. It was Galileo that proved that with a telescope. I read about him.”

“Yeah. In Memphis, I found this bookseller, and he had books he got from a school teacher. One of those books talked about astronomers and how they have started measuring how far away those planets are. The sky is infinitely bigger than man has ever imagined.”

“Did you buy the book?”

“Naw. It was too much for a farmer like me.”

Charles tried his best to keep her warm in the night’s cold air by wrapping both arms around her. Anne placed her head on his shoulder and clasped her hands in her lap. “That’s too bad. It sounds like it would have been nice to read.”

“Well, I had to pay the man two cents just to open the book and look at the pictures.”

Anne laughed. “Hasn’t he learned about Benjamin Franklin’s free libraries?”

“I guess not.” Charles sighed. “Maybe I’d better get you back to yer folks. They may come after me with a gun.”

“Oh, they wouldn’t do that.” She kissed him on the cheek. “But it is getting late. There’s chores to do in the morning.”

They didn’t go back through the building, but took the long way around, walking in step as Anne hugged Charles’ arm which he kept around her shoulders. He had the porter get the carriage brought over and paid him another dime.

“Thank ya, sir,” he said, tipping his top hat.

Charles helped Anne up. He went around to the other side, jumped in, gave the horse a slap of the reins, and they were off. It was a sleepy ride back home for Anne. She slept on Charles’ shoulder, holding onto his arm with one hand and the blanket with the other. When

they arrived at the farmhouse, Charles gave Anne a gentle nudge. She blinked a couple of times and seemed surprised.

“Oh, mercy,” she said, yawning. She let go of Charles’ arm and patted it. She looked up at him. “I am sorry. I’m not good company at night.” She sat up straight.

“I still enjoyed yer company,” Charles said, trying to keep the horses still. “It’s like you snore politely.”

She covered her mouth and giggled.

“Very much what I expect from a gentle woman,” he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

Charles helped Anne to the ground. She then held onto his hand with both of hers and stared into his eyes. She sighed as tears began to stream down her cheeks.

“I hope the experience wasn’t that bad.”

Anne didn’t answer. She just brought him into her arms and hugged him for a long time. She let go, held both his hands, and asked, “Will I ever see you again?”

“I’ll write.”

They stared at each other until they heard the front door open. They turned to see the Colonel descend the steps with his musket.

“I heard a fox out thar somewheres,” he said, shaking his musket in the air.

“I hope it wasn’t me,” Charles exclaimed.

“Didn’t ye hear those chickens a squabblin’?”

The Colonel looked the two up and down. “Well, I guess not, the way yer lookin’ at each other, just like that fox lookin’ at my chickens.” He approached the two. “You two go on inside. I’ll tend to that fox.”

“I have to be getting an early start in the morning,” Charles mentioned.

“You know my chores. If I don’t do ’em nobody will,” Anne said.

They couldn’t let go of each other, and Anne started tearing up again. Charles bent his head down and kissed her wet lips. She didn’t respond, just giving him a blank expression. Then he took his handkerchief and wiped her tears away.

“I’m sorry. My eyes spill over so easily,” she sobbed.

“I will write, and once I get things settled there in Holly Springs, may I call on you again?”

“Yes, you may.” Anne’s face brightened.

“Well, good night.” He let go of her hands.

“Good night.” She stepped back one step, then two, and watched him approach the carriage. “Oh, Charles!”

He turned back around and embraced her, kissing her several times, then jumped back onto his carriage, slapped the horse, and trotted off.

Anne turned toward the house and ran up the steps. Then she heard the Colonel fire his gun, and in the distance exclaim, “Got ‘im!”.

Chapter Four

The Letters, and Anne Leaving Home

The barn bore a large sign *Cooperage, Pickle, Neighbors, and Singleton*. Below that was another sign saying, *Cotton Gin*. Bales of cotton covered the yard outside where there were wagons of cotton waiting to be transported. The gin was going full swing with a chug-clang, chug-clang, chug-clang. Jim was yelling orders, and Charles was sitting quietly in his office, writing a letter to Anne. He was interrupted by the tall Henry Pickle, handing him more papers to sign.

“Here’s the invoice requesting cotton oil. I told the man the oil is a waste, but he managed to convince me that people can use it.”

“Mr. Pickle,” Charles chuckled. “Are you complaining about more revenue?”

“Not by a long shot, Charles, but it takes more money to collect the oil.” He placed the papers on the desk, covering the letter. “And here’s an inventory of the crop we’re sending to Memphis.”

“Thank you, Henry. We’ll get those wagons rolling in the morning when the drivers arrive.”

As the sun set, the machinery quieted down, and the crew left for their homes and loved ones. Charles stood at the door to the outside and peered at the rising moon. A couple of blacks who lived out back started lighting lanterns behind him. They would be cleaning up the place. He walked through the door, turned, and locked it. He would be going to an empty apartment in town. He was saving his money for a fancy brick home to fill it with Anne and their children.

The next morning when he was going through his papers, he came across the letter to Anne. It had been smudged. He wadded it up and threw it into the trashcan by his desk. He made a mental note to start the letter again later. Business went on as normal through the day, and the letter was forgotten.

When Charles arrived at his apartment that evening, he saw paper, ink, and a pen sitting on top of his desk. He then went downstairs, as it was his custom, to eat at the hotel's restaurant, and sat at his favored table. The waiter walked over to him.

"The usual steak and potatoes?" he asked.

"I heard someone caught fish today," Charles said, grinning.

"Yes sir. Its white flesh is tender and flaky." The waiter raised his eyebrows, and his u-shaped smile made him look like a clown.

"And whatever additions the house has."

"Yes sir."

"Oh, and Walter, would you send the Maitre D' to my table?"

"Yes sir. Right away."

The Maitre D', instead of coming, called the porter to Charles' table.

A slim, well-dressed black boy approached him. "Yes, sir?"

Charles pushed his chair back a little. "Are you the porter that placed the writing material in my room? It hasn't been there before."

"We apologize, sir. We usually arrange things for the comfort of our tenants, but someone forgot. The mistake has now been corrected." After saying that, he left.

Charles scratched his head. "I just wanted to say thank you."

The boy turned around and bowed then left.

Charles sat there waiting for his fried fish and wondering what to say to Anne.

After eating, he went back to his room, thinking that the whole scenario was organized by God to help him remember to write that letter. As soon as he entered the room, he sat down and wrote a few lines.

He let that dry until the morning, and when he awoke, he folded the letter, took a red wax stick, held it up to the flame of a candle, and let it drip on the back to seal it. The hotel left a sealing ring to put their logo onto the wax. He hesitated, but then, since he didn't have one of his own yet, he used it to make the impression into the wet wax.

Taking the pen, he dipped it into the ink well and addressed the letter:

“Anne Taylor, Taylor Farm

Maury, Tennessee

US of A”

After breakfast, Charles gave the letter to the man at the desk where the postman would pick it up, and the postage would be put on Charles' bill.

Another shipment of cotton left Holly Springs for Memphis, and the men running the cotton gin drank a toast to their business.

“Here's to cotton, gentlemen.” Henry Pickle lifted his glass of homemade bourbon.

“To cotton,” the others cheered.

After the party dispersed, Henry walked Charles to his hotel.



Every morning found Anne in melancholia. She didn't focus on anything she did. She fed the chickens and the cows just out of habit. She didn't sing, as she used to when milking the cows. There was no joy in helping the boys clean the barn. It was a dirty job anyway, but when they tried to converse with her, all they got was grunts like a sick sow.

At noon the mailman dropped by. He handed the mail to Ma Taylor. She gave him a bag of cherry-filled cookies for his kids, but she knew all of them wouldn't arrive at his house.

Anne came running from the kitchen to the door. "Mama! Oh, Mama? Is there a letter yet fer me?"

Ma Taylor looked at each one. "Thar's a letter from my sister, Sabrina. Here's another one from Aunt Nancy. She's on yer father's side. And by Golly ..."

She didn't get to finish before Anne grabbed the letter from her hand and ran away with it to her favorite tree. She snuggled down in its roots and tore the letter open. It read:

"To My darling Anne,

The days are long and torturous without you by my side. We have plenty of cotton from the surrounding plantations to keep us busy. Last night I thought I was having dinner with you and your folks until I woke up. My bedroom was as dark as was my heart, the light, of which, once lit as a bonfire, now diminished as a candle that has melted down. I promise when the harvest is over I will come and sweep you into my arms, and the candle in my heart will be lit again and aflame.

With great anticipation, Charles"

Anne was so anxious afterward that she couldn't think of anything except moving to

Holly Springs to be with her love. She couldn't do anything but go to her bedroom and mope and wet her pillow with her tears. It took several days of her mother talking to her for her to get the courage to answer Charles' letter.

One of the things her mother said to her was, "Now looky here, Francis Anne Taylor, either you straighten up or I'll kick ye out of this house!"

Anne jumped off the bed, and onto her knees, grabbing her mother's dress with both fists and asked vehemently, "Will you, Mama? Will you? If ye do, I'll run away to Holler Springs and never come back."

"If'n ye do, child, I'll grab the old Colonel and we'll move to Holler Springs, an' you'll have to suffer the likes of us all yer days."

She grabbed her mother's legs and said, "Oh, thank you. Thank you." She jumped up and ran outside.

It wasn't what her mother said, exactly, but it was the drama of the whole conversation. It boiled up the humors in Anne's blood and set her on her feet and sent her outside to do her chores. She found she could work off her anxieties a lot better than sitting in her bedroom whimpering.



Harvest was over and Charles hadn't written like he said he would. He returned to his bachelor ways and didn't mind living alone. He had nothing in his heart pressing him to get married. He remembered Anne with fondness, but he didn't think she, the beauty that she

was, would marry him, almost an old man of thirty. He was sure there would be other men in her life. So, he packed up his saddlebags, got on his horse, and returned to his father's farm.

Along the way to Senatobia, every night he tried laying under the stars and either felt guilty staring at those stars all alone or else he would have terrible nightmares he couldn't remember. He woke up in sweats with his blanket thrown off him. One night, his blanket caught on fire. *This has to stop*, he thought. Maybe Anne was a witch and she had cast a spell on him. Even so, he had to go back to see her, but right now, he was only a few hours from his family. He would say hi to them and then hightail it back to Anne.



When he arrived, the boys George and Sam, who were now running the farm, greeted him with cheery smiles. They weren't angry with him anymore, but seemed to welcome his company. They greeted him with hands raised to the sky.

"Charles!," exclaimed George. "It's good to see ya, fella." He slapped Charles on the leg.

"Hey Ma!," cried Sam. "Charles has come home."

Charles rode around the old cabin, which had been turned into a storage building, to the new house. Ma Singleton ran from the kitchen and out the door with her arms wide open, Charles jumped down off his horse, grabbed his mother, and embraced her.

"How you doin' Ma? You look as graceful as ever."

“Don’t think you can butter me up, sonny, you being gone so long, never even writin’.”

“You can’t read anyway, Ma. What’s the use o’ that?” He looked around. “Where’s Pa?”

“Out’n the field. Where else?” She took Charles’ arm and led him into the house. “Come in and sit a spell. Pa will be in fer lunch to be sure. Ye can see him later. I gotcha now.” As they ascended the steps, she said, “You tell us all about yer business, and where’s yer wife? Haven’tsha got a wife yet?”

Charles sighed as he entered the door, remembering all his nightmares. “No Ma, I ain’t gotta wife, but I’m workin’ on it.”

Charles sat down while she worked on supper and told her all about the farmers buying a cotton gin in Columbia and being run over by a beautiful girl named Anne. Then he told her all about the cotton business and how much cotton they were selling.

“No, no, Charles. I want to know about this girl Anne. That’s what’s interesting me,” she said, waiving her long wooden spoon at him.

“Well, we boys took her and her mother to dinner once. We had a very pleasant time there, and when the weekend came, I took her to a dance put on by the city.” Charles took a sip of the lemonade she had made him.

Ma Singleton turned and pointed her wooden spoon at him. “Well? Well?”

“We had a nice dance, but she was either tired or bored with it, so we sat outside and talked about the stars. We talked a lot. It got late, and we had to go home. That was the last time I saw her.”

“Did ya kiss her?” Ma Singleton’s eyes squinted and stared hard at him.

“What?”

“Did ya kiss her?”

“Mama, I think that is a bit personal.”

Ma Singleton raised her spoon as though she would hit him. “Did ya kiss her, I asked.”

Charles grabbed the back of his chair as though he were going to get up. “Yeah Ma, I kissed the gal. We love each other. I even wrote her.”

“And?”

“And I’m going back to Columbia and ask her to marry me. I can’t do anything else. She cast a spell on me and I can’t sleep. If I’m to get a good night’s sleep I have to go back and take her to Holly Springs with me or I’ll never rest.”

Ma Singleton smiled from ear to ear and chuckled. “You’ll never rest agin until they lay yer poor soul in the grave.”

She went back to the stew she was working on, and seeing him rise, she said over her shoulder, “Yer father didn’t buy enough blacks, and so this place isn’t prosperin’ like it could. He needs yer help out’n the field.”

That night, Charles took paper, pen, and ink from his saddlebags and wrote Anne again.

Unlike his neighbors, the Colonel’s cotton had waited for ages to ripen. Then it took a week going day and night to pick the cotton. They stored it in large burlap bags and filled the cotton wagon. The cotton bags were piled on top of each other and held together with

rope tied to the sides of the wagon. Charles had to sit with one of the blacks on top of the pile with the reins in his hands to drive the two mules the Colonel used for plowing.

“Pa,” Charles told his dad, “I’ll take this load back with me and send you the money. It will be in the bank in Columbia. I’m sure I can still sell it this late.”

“It’s not rotten ‘er anythang,” Pa Singleton said with a worried look on his face.

“I’m sure it’s good cotton. You have nothing to worry about.”

Charles’ tethered horse followed behind as he slapped the mules and headed back to Holly Springs.



The black didn’t say much, and Charles didn’t expect him to. He discovered that his name was Long Pole, but everyone called him Long Po, and he came from New Orleans.

“Does my pa pay you for yer work?” Charles asked.

“I gets paid two dollars a month,” the Long Po said.

“I’ll pay ya five dollars if you stay with me. My dad doesn’t need ya as much as I do.”

“That’s awful kind of ya, Massa Cha’les, but who’s gonna git this wagon and mules back home?”

Charles winked at Long Po. “Don’t you worry. Pa will send one of my brothers after it when they really need it or the mules. My worry is gittin’ this cotton to market. Pa will

understand.”

The trip back to Holly Springs was uneventful. It took less than a week to get there, and no time at all to get the cotton gin started up and ready to run his pa’s cotton through.

Charles was the only one of the owners there except for the blacks who lived in the back. The others had gone home to their families. When the cotton started rolling in, he left the foreman, Big John, in charge. Long Po helped with the unloading and unpacking.

Meanwhile, Charles enjoyed a bath at the bathhouse and went on to the hotel. As he started up the stairs, he was intercepted by one of the porters.

“Here’s a letter for you sir,” the boy said as he handed it to him on a platter. He then bowed and retreated.

“Hmmm.” It was from Anne. He slipped it into his coat pocket and ascended the stairs to his room.

After entering his apartment, he hung his coat on a wall hook, took the letter, and sat down in a comfortable lounge chair. He slid the letter beneath his nose a couple of times and smelled mint. He chuckled. She was always chewing mint. He broke the wax seal with his forefinger under the flap of the envelope. Upon unfolding it, mint leaves fell out. He laughed and then read,

“My dearest make of a man, Charles,

My days have been listless. I have wandered to every corner of the farm to find a private place to read your letters, and then I carry them in my apron pocket throughout the day so I may open them and read them again when a chanced solitude intervenes. The more I read them, the lonelier I get. My nights have become

terrifying. Each scratch from a neighboring tree upon my windowpane becomes the scrawl of a witch's hand. The shadows of the night assume the shapes of nightmares to rob me of my sleep. If you could only hold me to your bosom, I could regain my sanity.

I have threatened to leave my parents and seek your company there in Holly Springs. Have mercy on a lost and lonely girl.

Waiting to share my breath with yours,

Your loving Anne.”

He folded the letter and knocked it against his chin several times as he pondered Anne's words. “What shall I do?”



Winter snows came early that year, preventing either Anne from traveling to Holly Springs or Charles to Columbia. The mail rarely got through, and when it did, Anne would go into ecstasy. She received only two letters, one at the end of October when it started snowing, and one in April when the snow started to melt. It was startling for heavy snows to happen in the South, but word got out that it was like the Arctic up north, the ice and snow not melting until the end of May, and then it snowed again in June around the Great Lakes region.

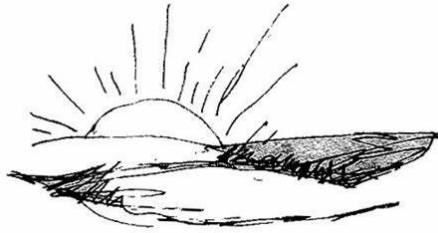
It seemed that all life was at a standstill. Indeed, the cold wintry hand reached down and took many lives. People died of the cold or starvation. Many farmhouses were covered

by snow as by a flood of ice. Only the ones that had plenty stored in their basements survived. The Taylor's farm was one of those that got snowed in.

Anne dreamed of marching south in the snow piled to her knees. She had to reach Holly Springs and Charles. She finally lay down in the snow and was about to die when she woke up freezing. She realized she had thrown her covers off. She covered herself again, wrapping the blankets around her neck and face, and sobbed, wetting her blankets with her tears.

Chapter Five

Anne Goes to Hollysprings



Spring brought melting snow. Anne woke to see the bright sun through her window. She had not seen the sun in months. She threw open the window and let the cool air freshen her lungs. The snow had receded off the house, now only up to the window seal, and water dripped from the trees. She sang a spring song to the world from her window...

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
 Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
 Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
 With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine:
 There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,
 Lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight;
 And there the snake throws her enamell'd skin,
 Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in:
 (And with the juice of this I'll streak her eyes,
 And make her full of hateful fantasies.
 Take thou some of it, and seek through this grove:)
 A sweet Athenian lady is in love

With a disdainful youth: anoint his eyes;
But do it when the next thing he espies
May be the lady: thou shalt know the man
By the Athenian garments he hath on.
Effect it with some care, that he may prove
More fond on her than she upon her love:
And look thou meet me ere the first cock crow.*

Anne had memorized that common song while in school years ago. She was surprised it came all of on it's own, but there it was, and very expressive of how she felt.

She stretched as a flowered vine catching the warm sun, opening its trumpets, and growing another foot or so. She yawned, slid her fingers through her hair, and knew this was a joyous day. She flew into the kitchen and taunted her mother.

“Today is the day I am going down to Holly Springs and be with my love.”

“Don't fergit we got work to do, yer majesty.” Ma Taylor was whipping up cakes for the skillet. “I don't want to put yer majesty out none, but now's there's a sun, we gotta do wash.”

“Oh, Ma!”

“We stink ta high Heaven. It's wash the clothes and bathe the chillen's.” She brought the skillet out of the fireplace, poured cake batter onto it, and replaced it above the fire.

“Well, we chillens are all grown. We can bathe ourselves.”

**I Know a Bank Where the Wild Thyme Blows.* Duet for soprano and alto with piano acc. w., William Shakespeare. m., Charles Edward Horn. E. Riley [1830 or 1831]. (Original Monologue Spoken by Oberon, Act 2, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – Library of Congress)

Tabitha came in rubbing her eyes. "What's we're eatin'?"

Ma Taylor flipped one of the pancakes. "Tab, you an' Anne there can gather up all the clothes and bring'em into the kitchen."

"Aw, Ma!"

"We'll have a cleanin' up party right here after breakfast."

Anne's voice could be heard from another room as she and Tabitha gathered clothes, "I guess Pa and the boys er out there findin' dead animals."

"Not too many I suspect." Ma Taylor prepared several plates of pancakes. "They made sure there was a lot a hay an' water. They been out a couple a times this win'er."

At breakfast, the Colonel asked, twitching his nose, "What'er these dirty clothes doin' here in the kitchen? Have to use more syrup ta cover the smell. Can't enjoy my breakfast."

"Don't ye worry yer heart out, er I'll have ye scrubbin' with the rest of us." Ma Taylor stuffed her mouth full of several small triangles of pancake dripping with syrup.

"Pa," spoke Calvin, "We're gonna need supplies now that the snow's clearin'."

"So's everbody else. Better wait a couple days so's the road is clear."

"Be awful muddy," Perry said, glugging down warm milk.

"Thanks fer the milk, by the way, Perry," Ma Taylor said, wiping her hand across her mouth.

"We made a nice path all the way out to the barn." Perry smiled.

"I'm goin' with ya," Anne said after swallowing.

"Not today, ye ain't," Ma Taylor said, sticking her finger in her mouth to clear out pieces of pancake.

“No one’s goin’ anywhere today, Ma,” the Colonel said. “The snow’s still a couple o’ feet high. Wait ‘till tomorrow.”

The sun beat down on the heavy snow, and it melted like a broken man, who, having been repeatedly defeated, lost all hope and sense of dignity, a character washed out and washed away. So was the snow. It had no foundation and turned into flood waters. Many farms were washed away, houses and barns, but mostly the fields where crops should have been planted, but would no more be.

The Taylors heard this as they talked to neighbors when picking up supplies at the general store in Columbia. There seemed to be a murmur and a constant hum of voices wherever they went. Everyone complaining. Some said it was a punishment from God.

Anne felt a tug at her heart. It was depressing enough, but with all the bad news that was going around, it added to the burden and heaviness in her breast. She had no joy in looking at clothes or other things women were attracted to. She lost her appetite so much that it was hard to think of what supplies she needed for the larder. She had to go over the list in her mind two or three times before she got it straight, before she could tell the clerk behind the counter. There were several things that she couldn’t get enough of, such as flour, eggs, and bacon. Even so, the wagon was piled high when she and the boys left for home.

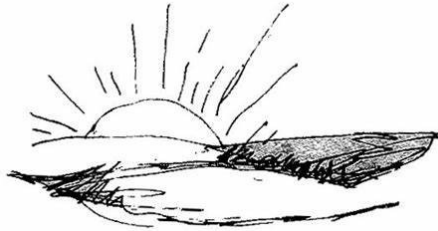
“Why didn’t he have enough flour?” Anne thought out loud.

“You forget?” Asked Calvin. “Supply wagons had a hard time this year gettin’ through.”

“Yeah,” Anne said with a sigh. “The mail sure had a hard time getting’ in.” She rested her head in her hands. “And why did God destroy so many farms?”

“It might be just a matter of,” Perry said, “havin’ yer farm on the side of a hill or in the lowlands near a river er a stream.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”



Anne was adamant. She had to go to Holly Springs.

“If the man don’t love ya enough to come up here to our beautiful state o’ Tennessee, he don’t love ya,” Ma Taylor complained as she peeled potatoes. “All them from the Mississip er all traitors, desertin’ their mother country.”

“Charles is from North Carolina.” Anne chopped the carrots for the stew savagely.

“See?” her mama said. “Same place.”

“Not no more, Ma. We succeeded from the Carolinas years ago.”

“Well, it serves’em right. All the good people er from Tennessee.”

“And where are you and Pa from? Weren’t you born in North Carolina?”

“Well, ya got to show some patriotism.”

The vegetables they cut up for the stew went into the pot. The onion had gone before with the beef chunks, smelling up the room to make anyone’s mouth water.

At dinner, Anne warned she would walk to Holly Springs if she had to.

“You’ll get stuck in the mud,” Perry said with relish, smiling greatly.

“Really, Anne,” Ma Taylor complained. She pointed a hunk of meat on her fork at

Anne. “Ye don’t think he didn’t run back to his ma and pa after the harvest was over?”

“Well, I don’t know where his ma and pa live. I could go there and git a job until he showed up fer the next harvest.”

The jury was out contemplating whether to let her go or not.

“Thar’s a coach a runnin’ down from Columbia to Holly Springs three o’clock in the afternoon on Wednesday.” He poked a potato in his bowl with his fork, not looking up.

“How do ya that know, Pa?” Anne asked. She had barely touched her stew.

“I inquired as you pups were gittin’ supplies.” He winked at Anne.

Anne rose and hugged him. “Thank you, Pa, thank you.”

“Now, none o’ this. Git the cake if yer finished.”

“Well if ya go,” Ma Taylor said, “You gotta promise to keep to yer trainin’ in the Gospel. I don’t want ya to leave yer Bible neither. We raised ya to be a good girl.” Ma Taylor couldn’t hold back the tears. “Now look what ya done.” She wiped her eyes with her Sunday napkin.

After everyone had cake, the Colonel read from the Bible to the family and then they sang a song out of their Methodist hymnal.

The day is past and gone,

The evening shades appear.

O may we all remember well

The night of death draws near.

We lay our garments by,

Upon our beds to rest;

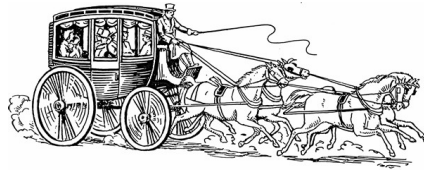
So death will soon disrobe us all

Of what is here possessed.

(Evening Song by John Leland (1792))

They had family prayer, each person taking their turn, asking for Anne's safety.

The next morning, in the cool spring air, after a lot of hugs and kisses from her family, Anne was on her way by coach to Memphis. There, she aimed to pick up another coach for Holly Springs. Besides her luggage, she brought enough fried chicken and cornbread to share with passengers all the way to Mississippi.



The next morning, Charles arrived in his one-horse carriage asking for Anne.

“She’s not here!” Ma Taylor exclaimed.

“Did she go to Columbia?” he asked politely.

“No siree,” Ma Taylor said with her fists on her hips. “She’s gone and left all o’ us ‘cause o’ you, with yer new-fangled ways. Not a letter in months.”

“The snowstorm,” he said, holding his top hat by the rim. “I’m sure the mail couldn’t get through. Here,” he said, reaching into his coat, and taking out several letters. “Can you give these to Anne? I wrote them, but couldn’t send them.”

“She won’t read them. She can’t. She’s gone off lookin’ fer you!” She grabbed her broom and pretended to sweep him away as though he were a pile of dirt. “Go on, git. Go find’er. She’s lookin’ fer ya.”

“She couldn’t take a straight course,” he said as he descended the steps.

“She went the long way around. Had to. She went by coach.”

Ma Taylor stood there looking at him with all the contempt she could muster.

“Thank you, Sister Taylor,” Charles said, almost bowing. “I think I know where I can intercept her.”

“You think ya can.” She tried to stare holes in the back of his head as he climbed onto his carriage.

Charles tipped his hat. “Thank ya, Ma’am.”

Perry came in from the back. “What’d he want, Ma?”

“Anne. He wanted Anne. Well, a lot of folks want Anne. Me included.”



The coach was crowded with six people and one riding on top with the luggage. Anne set by a gentle older woman with gray curls bouncing beneath her bonnet wrapped under her chin by a wide pink ribbon. The lady was quite heavy and brought a tight fit to all three on the seat. She was eating small muffins with dried fruit poking out of them. It may have been apples. She offered one to Anne.

“Oh, no. I have plenty of food, and I am really not hungry. I doubt if I will ever get hungry riding in a coach. It’s so bumpy.”

“Oh, you get used to it if you ride very much. I have several dress shops to attend to in neighboring towns, you know. I have to visit them as often as I can to keep the clerks in

line. You know.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know.” Anne cuddled her basket of food as if it were a baby. “I’m just a farm girl out looking for someone.”

“It’s a man. I can tell.” The woman sucked on her fingers to clean them off. “When you live as long as I have, you get smart. You can tell things about people. I watch, you know. Have since I was a little girl.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Now you look at that gent across from you.” She hugged the white crocheted bag in her lap and leaned close to Anne, lowering her voice. “His beaver* and his coat are frayed, yet they at one time were worn by a gentleman. His beard makes him look gruff, but his speech is that of a higher class. He has obviously seen hard times, thrown out by his father, or his father gambled away the family estate, you see.”

*(a top hat)

The gentleman caught the lady staring at him, so he smiled and tipped his hat, continuing his conversation with the other gentleman to his right.

“The young girl in the corner and the young boy sitting to your right have eloped. Their parents did not approve of their marriage, and they are escaping. The way she smiles at him says it all. *We got away with it.*”

The one-sided conversation continued, ad lib, it seemed for hours. Anne found that her name was Miss Hollycock, born in Charlotte, North Carolina. “I started out as a dressmaker in a little shop in the middle of town, you know. My business partner gained a bad reputation, playing with all the boys around town, you know, and ran off with the

proceeds of our business. Mrs. Abernathy, that was her name, blamed me for the ruin of it all. Can you imagine? Blamed me!”

“Yes, I can imagine,” Anne replied with a low breath.

Miss Hollycock spelled out the complete details of corruption and theft, the woman spending the money they made on parties and gifts, mostly for herself. “I had to come out west and start all over, but now that I am growing old, I have all these shops to attend to.”

A black carriage pulled up alongside. Its horse foamed at the mouth as its master continually slapped its back with the reins. It galloped as fast as its little heart could carry it. It was no match for the four heavy-footed steeds that pulled the stagecoach, although it was a racehorse.

Anne heard a familiar voice crying, “Hi! Hi! Can you stop? Can you stop?”

The stagecoach driver yelled back, “Can’t stop ‘till the next town!”

Anne heard Charles’ voice. “Anne! Anne! I’ll meet you there.”

As the stagecoach raced ahead, Anne could see Charles’ carriage drifting back down the road. She waved but doubted he could see her. Then she sobbed, covering her eyes with her dainty white kerchief. Miss Hollycock took her to her bosom and tried to comfort her.

Anne had dropped her blue cloth bag with all the chicken in it. The “gentleman” across from her was about to pick it up when he spied a chicken leg roll out at his feet. “So that is the morsel that has been spreading rumors in the air there was to be a feast.” He quickly picked it up and started gnawing on it ravenously. Looking about at the others peering at him, he picked up the bag, handed it to the girl next to him, and said, “Help yourselves.” She passed it around.

“Gentleman?” Miss Hollycock asked. “A thief and a robber!”

“It’s okay, Miss Hollycock,” Anne said, recovering from her momentary show of emotion. She sat up straight and tall, wiped her tears, and said, “There’s plenty for all.”



Chapter Six

Anne and Charles get Married

The stagecoach slowed down and rolled to a stop. "Hohenwald!" called the driver.

"Stop for twenty minutes. Conveniences out back. Food inside."

Anne stepped down from the stagecoach with the help of the gentleman that had sat across from her.

"Ma'am," he said, bowing and swinging his hat through the air in a wide arc.

"Thank you."

Miss Hollycock took Anne in tow to a dress shop nearby.

"I should stay by the stagecoach in case my dear Charles shows up," Anne, gnawing on her handkerchief, said anxiously, not wanting to upset her new friend.

Miss Hollycock started examining all the dresses in the shop. "Oh, he'll be along. He knows in his heart where to find you. Besides, he'll ask the driver and he'll send him over here." She took out one dress and asked, "How do you like this one?"

As they examined the latest fashions and looked at pictures in a catalog, Charles drove his thoroughbred into town and up to a watering trough. Spying the stagecoach, he jumped down from his carriage and ran to it and found it empty. At that moment, the driver marched out and shouted, "First call to Memphis!" His mustache covered most of his face as if to compensate for his bald head he kept under a wide-brimmed hat.

"Sir," Charles addressed the driver. "I came to collect Miss Taylor's luggage."

"Now, if I recollect," the driver said, leaning back a little as to reach back into his memory, "she's got a ticket all the way to Memphis."

“I know, sir, but she’s actually looking for me, and here I am.”

“Now, she was with Miss Hollycock, a regular passenger of mine. Now, if I’m recolectin’ right, she always visits the dress shop just a couple steps to yer right, down thar a ways.”

Charles ran to the shop, and the driver yelled after him, “She’ll have the say about the luggage.”

Charles peered through the front window into a dark room. He saw a woman’s form, but couldn’t make out who it was, so he tapped on the glass. He didn’t want to rush into a women’s store.

Anne, watchful of Charles coming after her was on the alert that he just might find her and come running in. When she heard the tap on the window, she saw the sun shining down on the very man. She dropped the catalog and ran to the door, opened it, and fell into his arms and sobbed. Then she laughed.

“How did you find me?” she asked, looking up from his embrace.

“I know these roads. I know the farmers.” He kissed her passionately.

“Come on, you two lovebirds,” Miss Hollycock said, pushing past them. “If he calls again, it will be a three day-wait. Maybe a week.”

“Come on,” Charles said. “I have my buggy. I’ll collect your stuff and we can head home to Holly Springs.”

They hurried down the wooden walk. “We can get married there,” Charles added.

Anne had the driver’s helper drop her bag onto the walk in front of the way station. “I forgot my other bag in the dress shop. I’ll go get it.”

She turned around a moment and said goodbye to Miss Hollycock who was getting into the stagecoach who said, poking her head out the window, “Goodbye dear. Look me up when you get to Holly Springs.”

“Okay, I will.” Anne then rushed back to the store.

Charles called out to Anne, “I’ll take your luggage and put it in the carriage and meet you at the shop.”

“Okay.” Anne held her bonnet as a gust of wind blew through the town.

The stagecoach leached and sped down the street.

As Charles approached his horse, Lightenin’, it grunted at him and thrust its nose at him. “Okay, ol’ boy. I’m sorry I pushed you so hard.” Lightenin’ stared at him with his big eyes open wide. “If you knew Anne the way I know Anne,” Charles said, stroking the horse’s forehead, “you would have rushed on your own to find her.”

Throwing Anne’s two suitcases into the back, he jumped up and turned the carriage around, and headed for the dress shop. She was there waiting patiently, holding her bag emptied of its chicken. Charles hopped down and assisted Anne into the carriage. As they paraded through the town, the horse trotting at its own pace, Anne meditated upon that notable phrase Charles sang from his heart, “We can be married when we get there.” She smiled as its warmth settled into her soul. She held his arm and stared at his rugged, though handsome, face.



Many nights were spent under the stars as the two love birds traveled toward Holly Springs. After several days, Anne and Charles felt as if they were already married. Yet, they enjoyed the blessings of God upon them and chose to sleep close together, but not on the same pallet. They had many conversations that brought them into a tighter spiritual union as they talked about the stars, the heavens, and having a family.

When they arrived at Holly Springs, it was midafternoon. Having not had an accident, having not run into any marauding robbers and thieves, and not becoming sick with cholera, Charles parked the carriage at the stables. A large, muscular black man, a blacksmith by trade, took hold of Lightenin' and said, rebuking Charles, "Mr. Charles, why you run Lightenin' down so? Why, you almost kilt'im."

"For the love of my life, Sam." Charles smiled, wrapping his arm around Anne, "for the love of my life."

Sam unhooked Lightenin' and carefully walked him into the barn. A couple of other men pulled the carriage in and parked it inside.

Charles and Anne strolled over to the Hotel where he got her a room for herself, but they both went up to his room, lay on the bed, and fell asleep. They were so tired, they didn't think of the gossip that might start in a little town if anyone had seen her enter his room.

As evening approached, Anne excused herself, went to her room, took a sponge bath, and changed clothes. Charles walked to the bathhouse and took an hour soaking his aches and pains away. After dressing, they met at the restaurant and feasted on steak and potatoes. Fruit cake and creamed ice were on the menu for dessert. Anne was not used to such luxury,

and she wondered how rich he was.

“Charles,” Anne asked with her elbow on the table and her fork swinging in the air, “are you going to ask your parents to come? I want to ask mine before we get married.”

“I can write to them and maybe they can come in a month or so. It takes preparation for old folks.”

“My folks can be here in a week.” She winked.

“Well, if I had my say,” he said, placing his hand on top of hers, “I think we ought to get married and invite our families afterwards.”

“Weel.” Anne rubbed her toe up his leg and sighed. “It’s been done before. I guess we can and say we didn’t.”

“We can get married by the judge tomorrah and by the preacher when our folks show up. How’s that?”

“They may like that.” Anne grinned. “But we’ll have to tell the preacher to keep our secret.”

“We don’t have to tell anyone. You can just sneak into my room every night, and we’ll pretend not to be married in daylight.”

“There will be no sneaking around on my part, Charles Singleton, or your name will be Charles Single.”

Charles tried to smile, but he ducked his head a bit as though she was going to throw something. “You are very right. If we get married, we get married. We can get a good night’s sleep tonight and go find the judge in the morning.”

“*If* we get married?” Anne patted her mouth with her napkin. Her plate was now

empty. “Now look here, Charles. I didn’t come all this way to wait one more day.” She rose. “Come on. Let’s go find the judge right now.”

Charles found himself strolling down the boulevard under a canopy of stars. They went by the courthouse, but it was closed. When they checked the sheriff’s office, it was open. They went in and found a man sitting at a desk.

“You the sheriff?” Charles asked.

“No, just the deputy.” The guy in a dark suit rose. His long black hair and mustache matched his clothes. “May I help you?”

“We just wanted to know,” Anne asked, “where we could find the judge this time of night.”

“Oh, he’s out of town. Won’t be back ‘till next week.” The deputy stretched his arms behind his head.

“Charles.” Anne grabbed Charles’ hands, and he raised them to his heart.

“We want to get married tonight,” Charles told the deputy.

“Well, the parsonage is right by the church, and I know it’s a fact that he’s home tonight. It’s just up the street there a ways.”

Anne and Charles peered into each other’s eyes. “Let’s do it, then,” Charles said softly.

The two love birds interrupted the parson at his supper, but he seemed glad to see them. “Come in. We were just eating. Come into the kitchen and pull up a chair. We have plenty.”

“Oh,” Charles explained. “We have just eaten over at the hotel.”

“Then what can I do for you two?” With a broad smile, he ushered them into the sitting room.

Charles squeezed Anne with his arm. “We want to be married.”

“Go ahead and sit down on the divan.” He motioned with his hand. “I’ll go and fetch my record book, and we can make arrangements.”

But they didn’t sit down, and Charles said, “I have a five-dollar gold piece in my pocket. It’s yours if you marry us right away.”

“I take it you are traveling?” The parson spoke from his office.

“We just arrived in town,” Charles said, raising his voice a little. “I had to go and fetch her like you’re fetching your book.”

The parson came back with two books, his record book and a little book of quotes.

“So, you are with child are you?”

Anne blushed because she remained a virgin all this time, but she didn’t say anything.

“Hum hump,” the parson said. He put on his black coat to look proper.

“Now if you two will stand over here by the desk and hold hands, I’ll get my wife and daughter as witnesses.”

Charles and Anne complied, and gathering his wife and daughter from the kitchen and their dinner, the parson opened his record book, opened his inkwell, and took up his pen.

“What is the groom’s name?” The parson asked, dipping his pen.

“Charles D. Singleton.”

The parson wrote that in the groom’s column.

“And what is the bride’s name?”

“Francis Anne Taylor,” she rang out like a bell.

He wrote her name in the bride’s column.

Placing the tip of the pen back in the inkwell, he picked up his book of quotes and read from Genesis Chapter Two rather mechanically:

“21 And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof;

22 And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.

23 And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.

24 Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”

“Do you two fully understand what this means?” the parson asked with a raised eyebrow.

“We are to have children,” Anne said demurely.

“It means this comes with responsibilities. To provide for them and to teach them the word of God and lead them to be upstanding citizens before God and man.”

They both nodded their heads.

He then read, placing their first names in the blanks, from another section in the book.

"Do you Charles take this woman, Anne, to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in good times and woe, for richer or poorer, keeping yourself unto her for as long as you both shall live? You can say ‘I do.’"

"I do."

"Do you Anne take this man Charles to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in good times and woe, for richer or poorer, keeping yourself unto him for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," she said, trying hard not to dance and jump up and down.

"Then by the authority vested in me by the State of Tennessee, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride in my presence." He smiled, folding his hands, as they did so. Anne grabbed Charles by the waist and jumped up onto her tiptoes to kiss him.

The parson, his wife, and daughter, who was about Anne's age, had to shake their hands and congratulate them. The two women hugged Anne and wished her to have large children. It was one of the customs of the time. She thanked them, and then Charles whisked her out the door and kissed her passionately.

They both ran to the hotel, up the stairs, and into Anne's room. They collected all her baggage and things she had laying about and took them into his room.

"Oh," Charles said in a hurry. "I forgot something. Come out into the hall."

Anne followed him out and he scooped her up into his arms. She screamed in delight. "A groom has got to carry his bride across the threshold." He slammed the door and grabbed her. They continued their passionate kissing long into the night.

Chapter Seven

Charles and Anne Have a Family

Anne and Charles rose an hour later than usual, stretched, kissed, put their clothes on, kissed again, left their apartment, and kissed out in the hall. Hurrying downstairs, they had bacon and eggs plus pancakes covered in honey, another local custom that came from the Indians of the area for those who just got married. (Not the pancakes, but the honey.)

“I want to take you to meet my folks,” Charles said between fork-fulls of pancake.

Anne shook her head. “I thought we were going to ask everyone to come here.”

“Oh, there’s no room for everyone to come here. We could have a picnic, but it would mean a lot if I could take my wife home to my folks.”

“Are we going to move to Saratoga?” Anne took a sip of coffee. “If we are, I would want to go home first.”

“No, no,” Charles said, waving his hand. “I want to live here where the cotton gin is. I found a farm we can buy. That is, Mr. Burke is selling off bits of his property. It’s covered with trees, and we would have to start all over with ax in hand. But ...”

Anne placed her hand on his. “That’s what I want too. I’ll write my parents and invite them to come down here first. We will have a picnic, and then we will visit your folks.”

Anne bit her lower lip. “That will give me time to rest before we travel again. It takes a lot out of me.”

“Okay,” Charles said, placing his other hand on top of hers. “Then I will go ahead and buy that land while we still have the money. After that, we will be in the poor house for a bit.”

“I’ve been there before. It’s only right that young couples start off on their own.”



Little Tabitha raced out to the mailbox when she saw the postman leave. She opened the lid of the box and pulled out a single letter.

“Oh, Mommy! Oh, Mommy!” She ran up the walk to her ma standing on the porch. “We got a letter.” Tabitha panted as she delivered it into her ma’s hand.

“Why, dear me,” she said, “It’s from Anne.” She ripped the letter open and saw the word “married.” “Oh goodness! Oh goodness! Let’s git yer father.”

Ma Taylor carried the letter out into the field, followed by eleven-year-old Tabitha with her flowing auburn hair. She called for the Colonel who was harrowing the field for the planting. He pulled back on the reins, stopped the horse, and turned around to see what all the hollering was about.

“What’s wrong, Woman? Is the house on fire?”

“It’s Anne. She’s done and got married!” She waved the letter at his face.

“Confound it, Woman. Let’s see the letter.” He took it from her and read,

“My dearest friends,

Charles tried a daring rescue of my person. He caught up to the stagecoach you put me on, but he couldn’t stop it. We went to a little town by the name of

Hohenwald, and there he found me and took me all the way to Holly Springs in his carriage. There, we were married the same night. I feel like I've been in a whirlwind.

Charles has bought farmland in the vicinity and is building a darling little house for us to start with. We would like you two to come down to visit us. Bring Tab if you must. We would so like to have you. We can picnic in town or out on the farm.

I met a dear friend on the stagecoach, Miss Hollycock. She owns several little dress shops in Tennessee, and now in Mississippi. She has hired me to run the dress shop here in Holly Springs. It is named Little Miss Holly's Dresses. It's so cute, and I have had lots of customers wanting the latest fashions for their daughters. We also buy from a catalog from the east coast. The general store manager doesn't like us because we have drawn away so many of his best customers. After all, women want to shop where only women are allowed. We don't have to smell the tobacco smoke in our store nor listen to the men swearing and see them spitting. It is refreshing for the ladies.

Best of my love,

Anne."

"Oh, I don't know," the Colonel said, wiping sweat from his brow. "I have so much work to do,"

"Aw, Pa," said Perry who had come up to listen to the letter. "You have men enough to do the work. There's me, Henry, and Calvin and the few blacks we have. We'll git thangs ready fer the plantin'.

Then Henry trotted up, hearing the conversation and said, "And if yer not back soon,

we can do the plantin' too."

"Well, boys. I guess I have been wantin' ta see Anne fer a spell."

"Then we're a goin'?" Ma Taylor asked, grabbing his shoulders.

"Well, I said it didn't I?"

Ma Taylor hugged the Colonel, and Tabitha laughed and hugged them both, and that turned into a turkey trot with the three of them holding hands. The boys slapped and pounded their feet on the sod, hootin', and hollerin'.



Ma Taylor and the Colonel couldn't come until June, but they finally arrived, with Tabitha in tow, in Holly Springs. It was four months from the time Charles and Anne were married. The year was 1847, and the homestead was finished. Now, Charles, with the help of his blacks that worked at the cotton gin, spent his days clearing the land he had purchased. The newspapers, which the women used to wrap the fried chicken in, the bread, the potato salad, and other things, talked about the Ottoman Empire Expansion, the Mormons being kicked out of Illinois, the success of the United States takeover of Mexico, Zachary Taylor driving the Mexican army out of Veracruz, aid to the Irish by those in Connecticut, and what good things the Tennessee President, Polk was doing. Ma Taylor praised the man but didn't see the little snippet about the rise of the abolitionists who wanted to send the blacks back to Africa.

There was a small area behind the new cabin Charles built that was perfect for a picnic. Charles had sawed a giant pine down in the back yard, leaving the stump to be used as a table. He sliced the bottom of the fallen tree to make another table you could put your knees under. A couple of the servants knew how to make reed and willow chairs, teaching Anne as they worked, so they didn't need to sit on the ground.

As the picnic proceeded, the three women came together and cackled like three hens, not stopping for a breath, and Charles sat back and listened to the Colonel tell war stories as they drank the local liqueur.

What the girls were excited about was the fact that Anne was pregnant and showing a little. She was asked what she was going to name it.

“If it's a boy,” she said, straightening her skirt, “of course, we will name it Samuel after Charles' father.”

“But you know it's not a boy,” Ma Taylor said, excitedly. “What's her name?”

“I Like Martha, I believe,” Anne said, placing her hands on her tummy. “She's so busy in there doing something. She just rolls around, going from one place to another. When she lays between my hips, my back hurts a spell.”

“Oh,” said Ma Taylor. “She knows where it's comfy.”

Tabitha laughed. “Never heared no such a thang!”

“Wait 'till it happens to you!” Anne complained.



The Taylors stayed a week before they were rested enough to travel back to Columbia. The Colonel was strong as an old mule and helped to clear the land. Ma Taylor made her services available in the kitchen and cleaning the house. She and Anne had long talks remembering their younger years before children came to mind and comparing how their mothers raised them. Ma Taylor was raised by the notion that sparing the rod spoiled the child, and she worried that she had spoiled Anne, letting her do pretty much as she pleased. She wanted Anne's children to be raised by the Bible, and Anne said she would teach them every day.

When Anne's parents left, Tabitha stayed on to be there when the baby arrived to help out. She could only stay as long as she promised to attend school. There were tears shed by the women and hearty handshakes from the men and pats on the back. Ma Taylor hugged Charles and told him to take care of her daughters. He promised he would. Then there were more hugs and kisses and a final goodbye.

Peace settled over the home of Charles and Anne. A daily routine had been established. Neighbors helped in the barn raising before Charles had to go back to ginning cotton again. Tabitha had no trouble making friends at school, and when the snow came, so did the baby. It was a girl, as Anne knew it was going to be, and she named her Martha. The year was 1848. One year later, the gin broke down, and the backers of Charles' mill left him to pay for the repairs. Not having ready cash because of crop failure, Charles took his little family and moved back to Senatobia. He sold his business and his new farm for pennies.

In 1851, Charles had a boy and named him James Samuel after his father. James, of course, was his Christian name. He was blonde with slanted eyes. Charles wondered if there

was a Cherokee somewhere in his bloodline.

In 1852, they had another girl, Mary, along with a bumper crop of cotton. Charles shed a tear or two and thanked the Lord for his family, the crop, and the turkey on the table.

In September 1854 Anne's father sent this letter:

“My Dearest Daughter Anne,

My hand is shaking. I hope you can read my writing, of which, I cannot scribble but a little bit. I hope my tears do not wash out what I want to say. I loved your mother as you know. She had been sick all week with a fever and consumption. Tabitha and I prepared her body today for burial, and it breaks my heart. I don't know if I will be able to survive missing her. The boys are gone, but Tabitha comforts me. Of course, she has her own tears. I will write the boys tomorrow. We will bury her when you all can attend. Please come home and give me your shoulder to cry upon. I find that my hand goes into my pocket quite often to feel that smooth stone that God alone has touched. I still have that stone in my pocket. It feels like God himself is here.

I Love you. Come home soon.

Your ever loving Father.”

Sure enough, within a week, Charles, Anne, and their little ones, Martha, James, and Mary rode up to the door of the old home near Columbia, Tennessee. Anne hopped down and ran to greet her father who was sitting on his rocking chair. He rose and hugged his oldest.

“Here I am, Pa. Here I am.” She squeezed him tight and kissed him on the cheek.

Later that week Anne's brothers, Henry, Calvin, and Perry came with their families, and the whole family circled Lucy's grave. She was buried with many tears, as there was a lot of mourning, drinking, and praising the Lord.



In 1855, the year Charles' brother George married one of the Cooperage girls, an all-out war commenced in Kansas between the slavers and the non-slavers. There seemed to be a commotion in all the Southern states about state's rights, all caused by The Great Compromise of 1850. There were fist fights in Congress between Northern and Southern representatives. There were those who brought pistols into Congress. The leading Southern Senator, Jefferson Davis, challenged the Illinois governor, William H. Bissell, to a duel.

In 1860, South Carolina seceded from the Union. Other states followed. In December 1861, South Carolina bombarded Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. Charles, with his chin in the air, went to enlist in the Mississippi Militia. When he came home wearing his uniform, Anne burst into tears and ran into the house. She was inconsolable. All Charles could say was, "It is my duty!" As he marched out of the house and into the yard, Anne screamed and ran after him. They both cried in each other's arms and kissed tear-covered lips. With Anne collapsed on the ground, Charles rode off on his horse, Sam. Little Martha, now five, walked out to her mother. "Mama. Mama." She reached over to touch her mother's shoulder. Anne grabbed Martha. "It's gonna be all right, baby. It's gonna be all right." The sky reddened.

The Presleys

Mr. and Mrs. Presley

Chapter One



Sarah Jane Cain



James Madison Presley

Mr. Presley stood in the hot air smelling the pungent ripening cotton. The cotton seed had a distinct smell that whetted his appetite. He glanced over the ten acres of row after row of cotton bushes, each dotted with white cotton pods. The plants were dry, almost crispy. It was harvest time. He took a deep breath of the hot humid air. It was invigorating. The sun was up and the blacks were bringing their sacks to fill. If there had been any cool air during the night, it had dissipated. Today would be a day of sweat, pain, and struggle. The struggle was between man and the weather. Even though it was scorching hot, the almanac promised rain.



Day after day the wagons were filled with bales of cotton. It was money in his pockets. Money to give gifts to his wife and children, money to keep food on the table and

clothes on his family's backs, a roof over their head, money to keep them pleased and comfortable ... for one more year. It was an eternal struggle between man and Nature.

The vision vanished as he opened his eyes and yawned. The real picture came into focus with its dingy smells of dirty and sick bodies of broken men in the camp of their enemies. He lay on a cot in a filthy tent that smelled of excrement, vomit, and sweat. There was a pain of hunger in the pit of his stomach, and he was bored. Everyone was bored and lazy. There was nothing to do but lay there and dream, eat swill, and walk around. The men used to play ball games, wrestle, and fight each other instead of the damned Yankees, but now they lay there poisoned, robbed of their will to fight or live. The older ones were living skeletons.

His name was James Madison Presley. He had to remind himself each day. He had a lovely wife Sarah Jane, and boys, William and John. How were they faring with nobody to run the farm? He stroked the dark beard he had grown as he worried about his family. The blacks have probably run away and joined the Yankees, leaving them to fend for themselves. Everything had been turned upside down.

He didn't have to join the militia, to stand up for his rights, but it had been his duty. What mistake had he made? He had gone over it again and again. He had followed orders. Like the other men, he charged up the hill under insurmountable gunfire. It would have been easy. Just reach the ridge. Hand-to-hand combat would have ensued. He was a good fighter. He could have beaten those Yankees into the ground with the butt of his musket. He made just one mistake. He hesitated as though he hadn't killed anyone before.

The wound in his leg was bubbling pus. It stung, but he had to get up and move even

if pressing his foot onto the ground gave him excruciating pain. He limped outside, leaving the tent behind. The day was blistering hot. The sound of buzzing flies filled his ears.

Everyone was laying down or sitting on the ground. He passed row upon row of oiled tents and stench. The guards leaned on their muskets half asleep. James kept walking, half asleep himself. The pain in his leg was the only thing that kept him awake.



He passed the last tent and came to a split-rail fence. He climbed over it. Nobody noticed. Everyone slept. He walked on into the woods. He would have run if he could, but he just kept walking until it was dark. There was no moon. The sky was overcast with thick clouds. Thunder clapped, tearing a hole in the air next to him. It showed him as a dark figure like a ghost strolling through the night. Yet, no one saw him. The rains fell and drenched the stench from his body.

During the day he slept under the brush and then continued walking at night. In the cover of blackness, he came upon the mess tent of an army camp. It wasn't his army. He snuck in under the bottom of the tent and filled his shirt with bread and sausage and went back into the woods. No one followed. He gave God thanks for his grace.

After several days, he came upon a small farmhouse with the yellow light of whale oil shining through the windows. He looked for a barn but found only a shed. He didn't know where he was and whether he was among friends or foes. He only knew he needed to travel west until he spotted familiar ground.



There was hay in the shed, a horse, a cow, and a number of pigs that made enough noise to make him scatter. Now, he wished for the stench of the camp. He hoped that no one had heard the animals. When back in the woods he leaned against a fat tree. His leg throbbed. He could feel the chills coming on. He wished he hadn't eaten everything.

When James awoke, he was laying in a bed. A little girl in brown pigtails, about seven, wearing a brown frock with white buttons, stood at his side, staring at him.

“Gramps here found ye out’n the woods. Ye were sick and all.”

“Now Jennie, don’t fret the man. He needs his rest.” An older man approached James with a white bowl of chicken broth. He shoed the girl away with his hand. He had mussed-up gray hair and a few days’ worth of beard. He smiled with his one pop-eye and a one tooth mouth. He squinted with his left eye.

“Ye’ve been outta yer head fer a number o’ days,” he said, handing the soup to James. “I took the pleasure of cleanin’ yer wound an’ patchin’ it up.”

James was propped up with two pillows as the bed was too short for him to lie down in. “Where am I?”

“My good man, yer on the border ‘tween Tennessee and the state o’ Mississippi.”

James took the bowl from the kind man. He gulped it down like whiskey. “Ahhh,” James said in exultation. “And who do I have to thank?”

“Berkeley Priest, I am, and this here is Jenny. She’s my right hand man, she is,” he said with a wide grin. “People just call me Berk.”

“Okay Berk, I thank ye to Heaven.” James handed the bowl back to him.

“I was gonna say to sip it. Hope it’ll do ya some good.” He stood there holding the empty bowl. “And might I ask, what’s yer handle?”

“James. James Presley,” he said as he swung his feet to the floor, facing the man and child. “Now I have to be goin’. Gotta git back to my family.” James swooned and fell back onto the mattress.

“Yer a not goin’ nowheres, my good man. Now you sleep a while. Let that broth take hold.”

It wasn’t until the third day that James was able to sit up and eat something solid at the table. His fever had fled, and he could breathe easily. As he ate his chicken and dumplings he noticed Jenny staring at him.

“I like yer beard,” she giggled. “My pa had a beard. He would tickle me with it when he kissed me.”

“Mind yer manners, girl,” the old man said, giving her the eye.

“Yes’m, Gramps.”

“Come nightfall,” James said, wiping his mouth with his shirtsleeve, “I’d better be headin’ out. I reckon my family needs me.”

“I’ll fix ye some vittales to take.” He poured molasses onto his dumplings.

“You sure are a good cook,” James said.

“Have ta be if I want this youngen ta eat.”

“I like lots o’ molasses, Gramps.” She held out her plate of dumplings.

“Youngens gotta grow, I guess.” He obliged with the molasses from a white pitcher with roses on each side.

“I can guess why her father ain’t here, but where’s her mother? If ya don’t mind me askin’.”

“My poor girl died in childbirth. She was only thirteen. There were complications. Doc had to cut’er open like a pig. Must a cut somethin’ he otta not.” The old man bowed his head and shed a tear.

“I’m right sorry,” James said.

Berk raised his head and said, “She missed hell ‘bout a hundred miles, I reckon. She’s wiff my sweet wife now.”

James and the old man sat on the porch until sundown talking about where they used to live, and it pleased Berk so much to find they were both from South Carolina that he slapped his knee and laughed.

When it was time to go, James shook hands with old Berk, hugged and kissed the girl, and went on his way, back into the woods. He carried her laugh with him. It made him smile.



Chapter Two

James Comes Home

By the time he arrived home, James had discarded his gray uniform, having taken clothes from a clothesline. When asked where he was headed by a local farmer, coming around the bend in a wagon, he said, “Goin’ home. Got shot up. Got sick. Got homesick. My two years in the militia is up anyway.”

Farmer Brown, who had his family with him up front let James ride in the back of the wagon. When they came near the farmhouse, James hollered out, “This is my place. I sure am obliged. Thank ya kindly.”

“Any time, Mr. Presley. Any time.”

James hopped out, saluted, and thought to himself, *I guess the beard was no disguise.*

Coming home was like going to Heaven. The wound was pretty much healed, so he could walk almost normally, but Sarah Jane reacted to it when she saw him from the window limping up the walk. She left the little boys as she ran out the door screaming, “James! James! It’s you!” He whisked her off her feet and twirled her weightless body through the air. They hugged and kissed and kissed, making the boys tilt their heads to the side, staring at this strange man.

“You got shot up,” Sarah Jane said with a tremble in her voice, still holding him in her grasp.

“It’s nothin’. Ever things all right now that I’m home.”

James let go of his wife, knelt, and reached for his boys. One was two and the other was five. The oldest was William. His brother was John.

“Don’t worry none, Johnny,” Will said to his little brother, taking his hand. “This here’s our daddy.”

James grabbed both boys and covered them with kisses and tears.

Will said, “Daddy! I got me a lamb.”

“You do? You’ll have to show me.” he picked up his boys and brought them into the white clapboard house.

“I’ll go kill the chicken,” Sarah Jane said as she raced out the back door. “I have a man to feed now.”

“Well, thar she goes,” James said, tickling his boys. “It’s no good visitin’ yer wife when she has dinner on her mind.” He sat his boys down. His heart was full of love and joy.

“Let’s go see the lamb!” William pleaded.

“Then the lamb it is.” James lifted two-year-old Johnny. “You show the way.”

William raced toward the barn and James walked at a normal pace beside him. When they came into the barn it looked so empty. Even the hay had been taken. He followed William over to a stall where a little black lamb stood calling, “Maaaaamy! Maaaaamy!”

“Where’d you find such an ugly duckling?” James asked as William hugged his lamb’s neck.

“We found him, Daddy. We found him.”

“Out’n the woods likely.”

“Sure. We found’im in the woods.”

“Better keep’im tucked underboard or someone will come and snatch him and eat’im for want of hunger.” James was thinking how nice he would taste. “Whatcha gonna

feed'im?"

"Don't know, Daddy." William looked up at his pa with forlorn eyes. "What can I feed'im?"

"Maybe we will make a visit to Farmer Brown over there and see what he has to say about it. Maybe he has a cow or some such other that will give milk."

"Okay, Daddy."

"Now I can't take both you boys and the lamb," he told William, "so you'd better stay here with John and take care o' him."

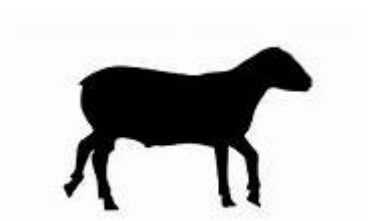
When James picked up the lamb, William got all upset. "That's my lamb, Daddy. That's my lamb." He reached up grasping with his fingers at empty air.

"You gotta trust me with this, Will. I promise you'll see him again."

Tears flowed down William's cheeks as he followed his daddy out to the road.

"Now you boys go back to yer mama and tell'er I'll be right back. Ya hear?"

"I hear," William said, wiping his face with his fist.



At the dinner table, after the prayer was said, and Sarah Jane dished out the food for everybody, James said, "I guess it's the season for chicken and dumplin's."

"Don' you like chicken and dumplin's?"

"Oh, darlin', it's my fav-o-rite!" He grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

"I heard fightin's still goin' on in Texas, an' here in Mississip, thars still skirmishes."

Sarah Jane looked worried.

“I did my time. Don’t worry, the grays are not strong enough to pull me away from my family this time.”

Sarah Jane looked over at grumpy little William not touching his food. “Now what’s gotten into yer craw?”

“Daddy took my lamb.”

“I told ya when I got back, Will. The lamb’s gonna stay for a few days at Farmer Brown’s until it’s weaned. Now I bought it from him, and he said he would deliver. So hush it and try to eat. Now I been gone a good long time and I want a happy family. You think you can be happy to see yer pa?”

“Let the boy alone, James,” Sarah Jane said. “It’s been hard livin’ here without ye, and now yer home. Give’im time. He’ll come around.”

James tussled William’s hair. “Don’t you worry none. Everthang’s gonna be fine.”

At bedtime, James read stories from the Bible and put the boys to bed with a prayer.

When James and Sarah Jane finally went to bed and made love for the first time in two years James cried. “I have missed you so much. I love you and love you and love you,” kissing her each time he said it.

“Now ye got me a cryin’.” Sarah Jane wiped her tears with the sheet. She kissed him good and just held him close.

Chapter Three

James Starts Over

Morning came and James was outdoors surveying his farm, seeing what damage the war might have done to it. As he had predicted, all the blacks had fled except for the older couple who worked in the house, Tobey and Cara.

“I’ll let you stay on if you want,” he told them. “I’ll pay you regular wages, what I’ve seen other servants bein’ paid.”

“Thas all right, Mr. Presley,” Tobey said. “Somebody had to stay and take care o’ the Missus and the boys.”

“I’m grateful, Tobey.” James took the old man’s hand and shook it. “And I’ll fix you and Cara a proper place to live.”

“Oh, we’ll do all right,” Cara said.

“Well, we’ll see. Go back into the house now. I’ve got to get busy.”

Cattle’s gone, he said to himself. Horses gone, pigs gone. No wonder little William wanted that lamb. Barn’s needin’ to be fixed. I promised Sarah Jane a better house, but the war came. With all these Yankees mullin’ about, I’m guessin’ the war’s about over.

“The Yankees came through and took everthang, Mr. Presley,” Tobey said, not looking back.

“An’ what the Yankees didn’t take,” Cara said, “the Grays came through and took the rest.”

“All right. Get back to the house. I’ll see what I can do.”

At supper, James said, “I guess I’m gonna have to find work. We need cattle and

horses. Cotton crop's ruined."

"We at least need a horse er two," Sarah Jane said. "To plow, you know, and our Confederate money won't buy one seed o' cotton."

James sopped up his gravy with biscuit.

"We have a barrel of corn seed, Sarah Jane. Corn. Once we get us a horse."

When Cara started clearing the table and James lit his pipe, she said, "May I say a word er two, Ma'am?"

"Yes, Cara." Sarah Jane turned to see her kitchen help. "Go ahead."

"Well, Ma'am, a lot of us blacks have nowhere to go, and it takes less'n ten men to pull a plow."

"We have nothin' ta feed 'em, Cara." She looked at her empty plate. "Nothin'."

"Nonthin' right now, but you let us worry 'bout the food, 'n we'll do the workin'. We knows that money only come afta harvest. You just let us take care o' that 'n we all will have money by and by."

"Whatta ya say, James?" Sarah Jane asked as if she were very tired.

"I'm willin' to pay them blacks regular wages if they still want to work." James puffed on his pipe and filled the air with a cloud of flowery-sweet tobacco smoke.

"You just let Toby and me take care o' that," Cara said with a twinkle in her eye.

"Them field hands aren't too far aways, 'n they look up to us house folks."

"Okay, Cara," James said, staring at her with his steel gray eyes. "You take care of that, and you'll find an extra penny in yer sock this Christmas."

"Thank ya, kind sir," Cara said as she took dishes to the kitchen. "Ain't that right, Mr.

Toby?”

“Huh?” Toby said as he came in from outside.

James and Sarah Jane heard a loud discussion going on in the kitchen and laughed. They knew from experience that Cara had a way of screwing her thumb down on top of Toby’s dignity and pride.



Chapter Four

James Makes a Stand

The following day, James found the slave shanties filled up again, but this time with freed blacks. It was something he was going to have to get used to. But, he sighed, he could.

Farmer Brown visited James one day to see how he was getting along with his blacks. He saw James had several of the blacks pulling the plow and asked, "Now, why didn't you just come and ask for a couple of mules? I got some old ones I'm willin' to sell."

"Well, Mr. Brown," James said as he gnawed on a stem of grass. "Ya know I can't pay fer them right away."

"Yes, I know that," he grinned. "But we've been friends fer a long time. I know ya will someday." He laughed a little. "Yer boy's lamb is growin' fast. Ya outta send'im over and I can give it to him."

"Thanks ever so kindly, Mr. Brown," James said, smiling. "I appreciate that, and I know little William will just love it."

They returned to the front of the house where Mr. Brown's carriage awaited him. "Now, James," he said stopping to stroke his horse. "May I give you some advice about those blacks, now they've been freed by the Union?"

"Well, they say two heads are better than one." James put his hands on his hips.

"A while ago, ye said you're gonna rebuild those shanties to give them blacks a fair place to live in, but I gotta tell ya what the rest of us planters are doin'."

"Well, yes, what is that?" James put a weight on one side of the scale in his mind, ready to judge what the man was aiming at.

“As is, those blacks, because they’re free and livin’ all together, can start thinkin’ and start talkin’ behind yer back. They may think they have a say on how things are to be run around here. They can put in their two cents worth, and you won’t be ownin’ yer own farm, that is to say, things might get out of hand. If you want to be on top of it all, so’s you can keep givin’ the orders, ya got to separate’em. Build them new cabins, yes, but not together. Divide yer land up into small farms, each family havin’ a section. Charge’em rent on it. You can controll’em if they’re divided that way.”

“I see whach ya mean. I’m sure they’ll go fer havin’ land of their own to tend. Make’em more like families.”

“You can control one man separately better than ya can a whole group. Now I know, ‘cause it’s taken place on my own land. It’s the house folk, ya see. They start givin’ the orders to the other blacks. Hire some others to take their place.”

“Don’t know if the Missus will allow that, but I’ll ask’er.”

“That won’t do, James. Ya got ta be the master of the house.”

“Easier said than done.” James leaned back and swung his hand toward the house.

Farmer Brown laughed. “’Tis true, ‘tis true. Well, ya have a nice day, and send little Willy over and he can take his lamb home.”

“Sure will, Mr. Brown.” James took off his hat and wiped his brow with his sleeve.

As Farmer Brown climbed onto his carriage, he said, “And don’t forget yer mules.” As he drove off, he called back, “I hear the army’s sellin’ mules fer cheap. Ya gotta have as many mules as the black’s got families, ye know.”

“I hear ya,” James answered and then walked back to the house.

He grabbed little Willie who was sitting on the porch playing with his brother and hugged him. “Hear that, Willie? Yer lamb’s big enough to come home. His mama is through with him, so you can have’im now.”

“That’s great, Pa. He’s gonna be a fine sheep. I’ll feed’im and take care of’im. You’ll see. And we will be the best o’ buddies.”

“I’m sure you will. Now let’s go and tell yer ma that I’m gonna steal you a bit.”

“You gonna take me away?” William said, raising his eyebrows. “And never bring me back?”

As they walked through the doorway, James told William, “What’s this? Take you away? Nonsense. I’m just gonna borry ye a bit.”

“Okay, Pa. Then ye can put me back when we come home again?”

“I surely will, Willy.” He hugged and kissed his boy as he walked up to Sarah Jane working in the kitchen.

“Gonna steal this here kid for a while, Mama. Farmer Brown offered me a couple of mules to work the land, and this here young’n is hankerin’ to get his hands on his lamby and bring’im home.”

“Well don’t be gone too long. I got a chore fer ya to do.”

“Always do, Mama.” James kissed her on the cheek and walked out the front door.

“Always do.”

“She always do, Pa. She always do,” little Willy said, copying his pa.

James got to visit with his little boy as they strolled the slow path to their neighbor's house. Willy talked his pa’s ears off, telling him about how Toby got in the mud and turned

all black, how Toby made a pet of a rabbit who was always getting into trouble with the other animals in the woods, and how Toby was “the most laughin’ous person in the world.”

“You go see Toby a lot?” James asked, feeling a little jealous.

“Oh, yes, Pa. He tells the funniest stories.”

“What else does he do?” James reached down and got a blade of grass to chew on.

Willy copied him.

“Oh, he can sing funny too, and sometimes he teaches me to dance.” Willy skipped along, following a rhythm in his head.

James could see he was going to have to rein in his son a mite. He lifted him up and started on stories of his own about how his pa did things and how his pa got the family together one day and took them all away, and they wound up here in Mississippi.

“I used to follow my pa to the fields each day and he would be whistlin’ a tune about ol’ Dan Tucker, or such other thang like about my ma bein’ the pertiest girl around, but mostly a hymn he had sung in church.”

When they got to Farmer Brown’s house James let Willy run to the barn ahead of him. James went to the corral to see if he could spot the old man. There he was talking to another man who wore a wide-brimmed hat and thick sideburns. It proved to be Farmer Brown’s foreman by what they were talking about. The old man wanted him to explain to his tenant farmers the meaning of a good day’s work.

When Farmer Brown saw him, his countenance changed from something fierce to the friendliest face anyone ever saw.

“James Presley!” he greeted him with an outstretched hand.

He took James' hand and shook it vigorously as he asked, "How're ya doin' my good neighbor?"

"Fine as a fiddle. I come to see those two jackasses."

The two of them took a step and leaned on the fence of the corral. Farmer Brown extended his hand and said, "There they are. Two of the finest mules you'll see in these parts."

Of course, they looked a bit run down, but no one said anything about that.

"Did ya bring little Willie?" he said to change the subject.

"Oh, he ran to the barn lookin' fer his lamb."

"Now there's a dangerous place for a little tyke like him." Farmer Brown frowned.

"We'd better show'im where it is. It's not'n the barn."

The old man waddled over to the barn door. "Willie? Willie! Come an' git yer lamb. He's with'is ma down a little ways."

Willie came scampering out and held to his pa's leg, looking up at the old man.

"Ya'll come this way."

They followed Farmer Brown down a grassy slope as he motioned to a black to follow him. "Better git Bicker and have him cut out that lamb."

James and Willie saw something they'd never seen before. A little collie dog ran up and down among a small herd of sheep and chased Willie's lamb away from its mother who ran after him and then stopped. All the while the black was calling to the dog. The ewe called to its offspring for a moment and then stood still, just looking at the men. The black picked up the lamb and handed it to Willie. It was almost as big as the little boy. He hugged

and kissed it several times as it called back to its ma.

James and Farmer Brown went back to the corral where the old man's foreman roped the mules and brought them out.

"You'll find them good workers, you will," the old man said with pride. He handed the ropes to James who lifted Willie and the lamb onto the back of one of them.

"They're pretty tame," James said. "Now, I'll get back to you about payment come November."

"Don't you worry. What are good neighbors for anyways?"

James led the mules to the fence. He stepped up on the fence and hopped onto the other mule. With Willie and his lamb astride one mule and he on the other, they waved goodbye and trotted home, arriving at supper-time. Sarah Jane waited on the porch with a wooden spoon in hand to swat someone if they were too late.



By harvest time, James had divided his holdings up into small shares of land rented by his former slaves. The slave shanties were torn down, and the wood was used to build the houses for his tenants. Since money right now was scarce, it was agreed that a large portion of each tenant's cotton harvest would go to the support of the land owner, who of course, was James and his family. The rest of the harvest was kept by the tenants for their support.

There was one large black, named Abe, who was the overseer before the Civil War. He was also given a portion of the tenant's harvest to support himself and his family,

although he had a plot of his own to tend. His job was the same as before. He would go to each tenant and see that they worked the land as was agreed. If they were lazy, as if they enjoyed their freedom too much, they and their family would be dismissed.

As for Toby and Cara, they were given a little cabin by the woods, and all the little black children treated them as grandpa and grandma and would always run to hear the stories they would tell. Willy and Johnny liked to join the circle of children.

“Where are the boys?” James asked one night when it was time for supper.

“I wonder,” Sarah Jane said as she laid the dishes on the table. “How long will Toby an’ Cara live? Will little Emma,” and she patted her raised belly, “get to hear their stories?”

“I’ll get a strap to ’em if they think those blacks’er family and supper time is story time.” James started to take his belt off.

Sarah Jane put her hand on his wrist. “No, ya won’t, Darlin’. You know you love them boys. It would tear yer heart out.”

“Yer right. Yer always right.” He redid his buckle and wrapped his arm around his wife. “I’m glad I have you to chase the demons away.” He kissed her. “I’m still gonna round ’em up so’s we can have supper.”



Harvest went well, but everyone found that cotton prices had been depressed. Carrying the cotton to Memphis and shipping it down to New Orleans, like before the Civil War, cost more than the cotton was worth. So everyone found there was a cotton mill in

Holly Springs run by the Singletons. Milled cotton always brought a higher price.

On the other hand, the little farmers grew corn and distilled it into liqueur. Many of the blacks as well had secret places in the woods and hills where they produced the stuff. It all started with Sarah Jane's stash of corn seed out in the barn. It was given to the sharecroppers to supplement their wages. What they did with it, James didn't care. They hoped they would grow it to produce more corn, but not very much of it went that way. At least some of it found its way into the ground to keep the barrel half full. That was in Sarah Jane's garden.

James didn't mind because he got his liqueur as a free gift from thankful blacks.

When word spread that the Presley's blacks were distilling liqueur out in the woods, a posse headed by Farmer Brown gathered to go search for the stills. They came onto James' land with torches, hoods, and rifles. James caught up with them, bearing his old musket he had carried in the war. When he caught up with the posse, riding an old mule, he bravely stood his ground, and trained his musket on the leader.

"What are you doin' Farmer Brown?" James asked, recognizing the man under the white hood. "And why in the heck do you have your faces covered if it isn't to do mischief?"

"You come to join us, James?" Farmer Brown asked.

"Can't do that to my own people. They depend upon me for a livin'."

"Well, then. You'd better git outta the way."

"Now, Mr. Brown. Is this how you treat yer friends and neighbors? Where's the sheriff?"

“We’re all sworn deputies in a democratic society to uphold the law, James, and it’s against the law for blacks to make liqueur. You know that.” Farmer Brown had to rein his horse in. It wanted to keep on trotting.

“It’s my liqueur they’re makin’, sir. I hired’em to do so, and if there’s any law against a man makin’ his own liqueur ...”

“Then why’re they hidin’ it in the woods?”

“Why are ye hidin’ behind a mask?” James gripped his musket tight and clenched his teeth.

“Take’em off boys. He’s not the enemy.” Farmer Brown took off his flour sack with holes in it and smiled at James. “It was just to scare any of the colored folk out’n the woods there. You know, just a joke.”

“Didn’t look like no joke to me.”

“Come on boys,” Farmer Brown said as he winked at James. “We’ll skirt around his farm. I know where another still may be.”



Life became a little complicated for James and his family. The harvest went well but selling it to the Singleton’s mill and then paying for shipping to the east didn’t give him the money he was promised. He only had a pittance left to give to his tenants who were scared for their lives. There were strict laws laid down to restrict their movements and lifestyle.

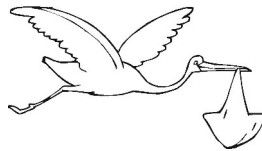
Sarah Jane was about due, and there was a cold rain and sleet that iced everything up. Christmas was around the corner and there wasn't enough money for that. Yet, their home was warm and cozy. There was enough dry wood in the barn for a whole year.

As Sarah Jane put dinner on the table with a hard rain beating against the house, the wind howling, and thunder shuddering everything, she had another pain in her abdomen. "Emma's comin' any day now. With all that racket outside, you'd think God's havin' another chil' too."

"You can't know it's a girl," James said as Sarah Jane ladled chicken soup into his bowl.

"A woman knows these things, darlin'."

Two days before Christmas, little Emma Jane Presley was born.



Recovering From War

Chapter One

Letters From a Soldier

“My dearest Anne,

I wish you could see this giant orange orb in the morning sky rising above the trees. It makes my heart throb at the thrill of it. It takes my mind off my duties as a soldier and gives me a warm feeling that draws me to thoughts of thee. I am lonely for your embrace, and I ask myself, what am I doing here? How is little Martha? Is she well? What about Mary? Are you well? What are the boys doing? Are they behaving themselves? I don't have much time to write. I hope this gets to you soon.

I have more time to write now. We had a little skirmish, but now it's quiet again. The moon is bright enough to make the Union troops hide lest we see them. There is no sneaking up on us tonight. We sleep with one eye open and with our guns and pistols in our hands. Others can't sleep as well as myself. Many of us have taken the opportunity in this lull of fighting to write to our loved ones. I have not been shot yet, nor do I plan to be. If God wants me back home it will have to be on a stretcher. I am sorry to mention it, but this war hardens a lot of us, yes, I could say most of us. I cannot write of the atrocities I see. I would have you think of the beauties I see amongst the calamities. Sometimes a butterfly will land on my shoulder or my quivering hand, and I feel at peace. I wake up some mornings to behold necklaces of wet

diamonds amongst the bushes and the trees. When it gets quiet, I hear the whippoorwill praying. It is things like this and the remembrance of you and our little children that keeps me sane. Yet, at night my tears wet my pillow at the thought of thee, my only true love.

Kiss the children for me.

Your loving husband,

Charles”

Anne pressed the letter to her heart. She had waited several weeks to hear from him, and the silence had felt like the weight of a lead anvil. She watched from the porch as the children played nearby. Sitting on the steps, she leaned over, put her face in her hands, and sobbed, letter in hand.

Anne waited for night for a time when she could relax with the children in bed and fast asleep and then answer Charles’ letter. She sat at the little table by her bed, with a single candle lit, took out a sheet of paper from beneath the desktop, opened the inkwell in its little hole in the right-hand corner, dipped in her pen, and wrote:

“Dear Charles, my love always,

The children are in bed. No one is sick. We are all fine today. You should see how Martha has grown. She is starting the fifth grade tomorrow. I need her help, and it is a real temptation to pull her out, but I’m a believer in education. James is reading his Bible regularly, more than any of us. He will interrupt me to ask what a word means, but I don’t mind. I can see him being a preacher when he grows up. Mary wants to help me in everything. I don’t mind her getting in the way. She is a darling,

even though clumsy. I like her enthusiasm. I let her wash the dishes. That keeps her out of the way while I'm cooking. I get stomach cramps when I go in to town and learn that Union soldiers are coming and going, that they are actually here in Mississippi. Why can't they leave us alone? We didn't invade them. If they ever come on the farm, I'll defend my children and home. I am falling to sleep, so I will leave off writing now. (Sorry for the streaks of ink.) I'll mail this tomorrow.

I love you dearly,

Anne”

She mailed her letter at the first opportunity she had to go to town. When she went to the post office, there was no letter for her. Three months had passed before she found another letter in her hand. As she sat at her little desk, she sighed and opened it tenderly with her letter knife. She couldn't help the tear that dropped onto the envelope. A chill ran down her spine as she unfolded it. It was quite wrinkled.

“My dearest Darling, Anne,

I am glad to be able to rest again. We have been in heavy fighting for weeks. It seems that the enemy is asleep or is just as tired as we are. I just heard firing.

I am still alive. Last week we had to run for our lives. The Union army surprised us and caught us off guard. I lost many friends. Too many. So, I am starting this letter over again. I am hot and dirty, and I smell like an old bear or a dog that's been in the water. Smoke and sweat and dirt along with gunpowder. I have ringing in my ears from cannon fire. I would like to see a green meadow and a clear sunset, but the meadows are strewn with the blood and bodies of men and the sunsets seem angry

and red nowadays. My whole body hurts, and if I stop moving, I fall asleep.

We are on the move again. I will write when I can. Another week has gone by and the mail courier is here, so I will send this much as I have.

Give my love to everyone,
Charles.”

“Oh, Lord God. Give us strength,” she prayed as she fell to her knees. “Please save Charles and his comrades. We need him more than thou, Dear God. We need him more than thou. I knowest thou dost love him and may want to take him to thy bosom, but please, love me too, and the children. Please send him back home safe. Let him rest in my arms. I love him so much. I need him.”

Another month passed, then another, and another. There was a small time that Anne grew numb whenever she thought of Charles. Maybe God took him, but no. Every time she prayed with the children or alone, she felt peace. She still had hope that he was alive. So, she busied herself in the garden or playing and reading to the children as well as with the household chores of cleaning and cooking. Every now and then she would stop, take a breath, and search her heart for that peace. She would bite her lip, shed a tear, and smile. She still had hope.



Charles lay on a grassy slope dead tired. He couldn't move another muscle. All the men around him were dead or bleeding. The Union soldiers passed him by as they gathered up the wounded onto a flat wagon. Charles dared not breathe. He just stared at the eyes of a dead body next to him. It was his friend George Taylor from Tennessee. He had a family of five. He would never get to see them again on this earth. He had shown him the picture of his wife and oldest daughter which he carried in his left shirt pocket next to his heart. The picture didn't stop the ball from splitting his heart open. He had whittled in his spare time, a little pocket-sized rocking horse, to send to his only son of three years. He wouldn't be able to finish it now.

After dark and a long nap, a cough woke Charles. He heaved himself up and hobbled away, using his musket as a walking stick. He should have felt a bit refreshed, but he didn't. He was hot and sweating and felt dizzy, and he had that nagging cough, yet he continued walking back to base camp, what was left of it. Shadows of tattered tents, of those left standing, and hitching posts, tables, a corral. The air stunk of smoke from burning debris. He found the field hospital tent. Half of it was still standing. He went in and found a cot with a dead soldier in it. He managed to tip the cot over, rolling the guy off, and set it back down. Then he lay on it and passed out, still coughing.

Charles awoke to "This one's alive. Has a burning fever. Put'im on the truck*."

Charles was not aware of what was happening to him except for having a feeling of movement. The next day he woke to see beds filled with soldiers. There were nurses walking around tending to them. He was still coughing. His lungs gurgled when he

*truck, "to convey on a truck," 1809

breathed. The next cough brought up a lot of phlegm which he spit onto the floor. He passed out again. When he awoke, it was to the smell of chicken broth. A nurse was sitting beside him.

“Feeling at all hungry, dear?” She was middle-aged. Her face showed a rough life of hard work. Her hands too. “Chicken soup. It livens the soul.”

Charles’ stomach growled. It seemed as though he hadn’t eaten in days. He let the nurse feed him from an over-large spoon. It was liquid Heaven. “Thank you,” he managed to say with a hoarse voice.

“You just rest now,” she said upon rising.

“Where am I? And thank you.” He wiped his lips on his dirty shirt sleeve.

“You’re mighty welcome. You’re in the hospital here in Columbia.”

“I’m from Mississippi.” He peered up with a question on his face.

“That’s okay. We take all kinds here.” She left him, taking the bowl away on a tray.

Charles looked around. He saw blue coats. He determined he was in a Yankee hospital. He coughed and spat on the floor again.

A nurse brought him a bowl. “We’re civilized here,” she said.

“Sorry,” he said. “Is there writing material?” He put the bowl on the little table next to him.

“In that drawer there,” she said as she walked away.

Charles didn’t get to reach toward the drawer before he passed out again.

After three days of heavy fever, and having downed another bowl of chicken soup, he felt strong enough to write Anne a letter. A younger nurse helped him with setting up a lap

table. He breathed a while, letting his arms rest, and then was able to use a pen dipped in ink.

He wrote:

“Dearest,

I will have to write a few words and then rest and write again. I am in a Yankee hospital in Columbia, near to your folks. They told me I have pneumonia. I don't know when they will let me out or how I will get back home. I feel this is the end of the war for me. I have had enough killing. I don't know if I could slaughter a hog. I am so weary of it all. My gallant patriotic feelings have waned. I only want to come home to you and the children and farm. As far as I know, we have lost the war. The Yankees are everywhere and are giving orders. The blue coats have become the police, so I guess we are under martial law. This is all I can write at this time. If you write, send the letter to the post office here in Columbia, Maury County, Tennessee. I'll write when I can. I may try to find work so I can get a stage out to our place. I do have a strong constitution, so I am expecting to get well soon.

I love you all. You are the best.

Charles”



Anne was washing clothes in the tubs behind the house when Martha came racing

toward her waving a letter.

“The mail has come, Mama. The mail has come.”

Anne wiped her hands on her apron.

“It’s from Daddy, ain’t it?” Martha handed the letter to her mother and jumped up and down, clapping her hands.

“You can bet your bottom britches it is,” she said, tearing open the letter.

When she read the letter she felt the greatest excitement since the beginning of the war. After reading it out loud, it was hard for her to finish the wash or make dinner. Her man was coming home, and even though it may be a month or two, she knew he was coming home.

When it was time to eat, she didn’t see Martha. She listened as mothers do and heard sobs upstairs. She went to Martha’s bedroom. She was lying on her stomach weeping. When Anne sat down beside her, she sat up and grabbed her mother and cried upon her chest.

“Oh, Mama. Daddy is sick and he could die.”

“Now, now, Martha.” Anne wrapped her arms around her and rested her head on her daughter’s head. “You heard the letter. He has a good constitution. He will be fine. We just have to be patient in these things.” All the while, Anne’s heart was aching too.

After putting the children to bed, Anne again got out her letter-writing paraphernalia as she sat at her little desk. It was hard to choose her words because of all the mixed emotions she felt, but she finally took a deep breath and plunged in.

“My Dearest Charles,

I received your letter today. My heart is just pounding as I write. I love you so

much and want you home. I can hardly wait. If it weren't for the children I would drop what I am doing and come to you immediately. We have no farmhands now, but I do keep a garden. The children don't know what is going on in the world. I mistake. Martha knows more than the others. She picks it up in school. The others just play when they aren't helping me. We have no cows or pigs except for Bessy. The Yanks let us have the milk cow only because of the children and my much begging. So, we still have milk, butter, and cheese. I wish you were here. I feel so vulnerable. I pray for your return each day.

With lots and lots of love,

Your own Anne.”

Anne put the letter in an envelope, and addressed it to:

Charles Singleton

Columbia Post Office

Maury County

Tennessee.

She put that downstairs by the front door so she wouldn't forget to mail it. She would give the postman a nickel and he would mail it for her. She couldn't leave the farm, there were so many blacks and Yanks on the roads now.



Charles was released from the hospital and went to his old farm where he knew the owner. There he got a room and was able to do work while he recuperated. After he was settled he went to the post office and received his waited-for letter from Ann. After reading it outside on the street, he promised himself that he would return home to Senatobia when he felt better. There was a deep pain in his heart for having to leave Anne on her own. Later that night, he borrowed paper and a pen and wrote back to Anne.

“My very Dearest Anne,

My heart can't feel any worse than it does now because of our separation. I am working at our old farm we sold to the Bledsoe family. I can't do very much at the moment, but I am getting better. I can feed the chickens like a little child, but I can't chop any wood for lack of stamina and strength. But what little exercise I get is helping me to regain my health. Being away from the war is helping me even more. I can wake up each morning to a fine sunrise, smell the fresh air, and work at my own pace. I plan to be well enough to make the journey home in a couple of weeks. I may stop off at Holly Springs to see how the cotton gin is doing. Well, I'll be ... I had to stop writing for a moment. I don't know where it came from, but a butterfly landed on my hand. I had to stop and stare at it. Then it just fluttered away. Right in the middle of the night. What do you think of that? Is it a good sign, or is it not? Well, I can't stop yawning, so I had better lay this down.

I love you all. Say Hello to the children for me.

Love you always,
Charles.”

When Anne read this she felt like laughing. She gathered the children around and told them that their Daddy was coming home soon. They all cheered, but after a week passed and there was no daddy, they began asking, “When is Daddy coming home?” When the second week passed, the children began playing a skit called, *When Daddy Comes Home*. The idea had become something imaginary, something that existed only on stage, whether that was on the front porch or the barn or on a grassy field. But then, at the beginning of the third week, when they had tired of playing *Daddy Comes Home*, the mailman rode up and gave a letter to their mother who was sitting on the porch in her rocking chair. She immediately recognized the handwriting. She tore it open and read:

“Dearest Anne,

I am writing from your folks home. Your father and stepmother are doing as well as expected. Your father got married again at the beginning of the war. They had a mind to write to you and tell you, but things were not going well with the post and transportation. They also lost the farm. Most of it has been sold and parceled out to small farmers. The Colonel said that most of his blacks left for greener pastures up north. But you can’t find greener pastures than Mississippi and here where your folks live. They are living off the interest the Bank is giving them for all the land they sold. They still have a couple of acres where they grow corn and other things they need to live on. They have a few

pear trees and apple trees and lots of berry bushes, so they are well off. They retain a couple of blacks to help them on the farm and around the house. They want me to tell you they love you and miss you. Some day, they say, they will come down to our home for a visit. Your stepmother's name is Catherine.

I'm staying overnight and leaving for home in the morning.

With lots of love, Charles.”

Chapter Two

When Daddy Comes Home

The two months of waiting for Charles was slow in passing. When Charles came riding in his wagon up to the porch, Anne was speechless and couldn't move. Her eyes became glassy. Charles jumped from the wagon and onto the porch and embraced his dear wife. It took a moment for her to respond and wrap her arms around him. They kissed and washed their faces with tears. They stood there for a long time as the children gathered around and embraced them.

After everyone calmed down, a voice behind Charles said, "Howdy do, stranger."

Anne peered over Charles' shoulder. Her father was climbing the steps.

"Pa!" she cried. Letting go of Charles, she reached out a hand to touch the old man as he stepped onto the porch. It was as if to test him to see if he was real. "I don't know if I can stand another surprise. Come here, you old man." She almost broke his ribs, embracing him. "I haven't seen you for ages."

The children, Martha, James, and younger Mary, stood by and watched.

"I convinced them to come with me," Charles said.

"Them?" Anne asked, looking back at the wagon. She saw a well-dressed lady sitting on the front seat, waiting for someone to help her down.

Charles hurried to the steps to the wagon. "I'm awful sorry, Ms. Taylor. Here. Give me yer hand."

Anne watched as Charles helped the lady down from the wagon. "Ms. Taylor? Oh, I fergot she was in the letter."

“I’m sorry, girl. I didn’t tell ya.” There was a twinkle in the Colonel’s eye. “I done went and got married again.”

“You should’ve written me.” Anne moved to the steps to help the lady up.

“With the war and all ...” the Colonel said.

“You must be Anne,” Ms. Taylor said. “The Colonel has told me so much about you. And this is your lovely family?” She had a slight accent Anne couldn’t place.

“Yes, Ma’am. This here’s Martha. She’s sixteen.” Martha curtsied. “This here’s James, my crowning achievement. He’s thirteen. Thought either him or I was gonna die when he was born.” James shook hands with his new grandmother. “And this here is lovely Mary with her golden locks.”

Mary said, “Mama made me this here pink dress. I’m gonna be twelve in November. She knew ye were comin’, she did.”

“Did ya now?” Ms. Taylor said, taking Anne’s hands.

“She had a dream,” Martha said.

“Well, Anne,” Ms. Taylor said. “It seems your dream came true.”

James spoke up. “She’s a regular prophet sometimes.”

Anne shooed everyone into the parlor, saying, “Let’s all get out of this hot air.”

Inside the house was surprisingly cool, with a breeze blowing through the front window.

While Anne ran after a chicken, chopped its head off, and sat on a bucket to pluck its feathers, Ms. Taylor peeled potatoes and carrots. The Colonel walked with Charles about the farm to take a survey. The children were all over their father, wanting rides, jumping up and

down, and asking him questions.

“Daddy! Where have you been?”

“Daddy! Did you get shot?”

“Daddy! Can I have a piggyback ride?”

“Daddy! Let me stand on yer feet so’s we can dance.”

Charles carried twelve-year-old Mary on his back as he canvased the countryside. He danced with Martha, spun her around once or twice, and set her on her feet. No, he hadn’t been shot, and yes, he had been shot *at* many times. Yes, he used his saber, but he lost it. He had a nice hat, and he lost that too. Someone stole his nice black boots. He was all over the place chasing Yanks or running from them. No. He wasn’t afraid. He just wanted to be sure he was safe so he could return home to them and to their Ma.

The Colonel followed the little group with his hands behind his back.

When the children found something new to play with, Charles and the Colonel continued to take inventory. The only animals that were left were a few chickens. The cotton fields were in shambles. They had been wasted as if an army had trodden them down. A lot of it had been burned as if hit by cannon fire. There were a few black squatters on his land, but he would deal with them later. He was sure they were waiting for him to farm again.

When Charles complained of the lay of the land, the Colonel said, “I see a fine piece of cotton-growin’ land.”

“Maybe farmin’ isn’t my callin’.” Charles sighed.

“Had to sell some of my land just to survive the war,” the Colonel volunteered. “You may have to do the same. I’m not sayin’ you’d have to, mind you, but money’s scarce

nowadays. But, you may just have some luck.”

“Well,” Charles said, placing his hand on the old man’s shoulder. “I’m glad you came. You’ll be a fine addition to the family, and I’ll take care of *your* land and home. I can liquidate it and put it into a trust. With the money you already have, you’ll have a fine retirement.”

“Well, Charles,” the old man said, “I’m glad you have a head fer business. But if you’re thinkin’ of us sittin’ around in a rockin’ chair. Think again. Cathy and I ‘re headin’ fer Texas. It’s a wide enough land. It’ll hold two more.”

“Don’t go too far, Colonel. We’d love to have ya stay a while.”

“Oh, we like to visit some,” the Colonel said, kicking the sod. “but when ya git our affairs straight, off we go.” He ran one hand off the other’s palm.



At dinner, Charles asked the Colonel to give thanks for the food. Everyone was so tired from the trip and from visitors coming, that after the prayer, everyone was silent except to say pass this or that. The children were waiting for the adults to start talking. Everyone was sighing as though having great troubles on their minds.

Martha couldn’t stand it. “What’s all this moanin’ and groanin’ for? I’m glad Grandpa and our new Grandma came. And Daddy’s the joy of my life.” Since she was sitting next to his right arm, she grabbed it, looked up, and smiled at him.

Charles scratched her head with his knuckles. “I love you too, Babe. I guess everyone

is a mite tired tonight.”

“Here, here,” the Colonel said. “And if I had a glass of wine, I would toast the two dear women who made such a nice chicken stew.”

“Thank ya, Pa.” Anne was sitting by Ms. Taylor’s left, and she grabbed her arm. “Can I call ya Mama?”

“You darn sure can.” Ms. Taylor reached around her, gave her a squeeze, and said, “Love ya to death.” She smacked her lips and said, “Now, let’s git back to eatin’”

Everyone laughed, and from that point, they all talked with their mouths full.

James spoke up and said, “God love us!” Everyone laughed again.



James

Chapter One

Another Stone

James followed his father and grandfather around as they worked on the farm. He helped them clean out the barn, rode on the borrowed horse to clear the fields, and helped carry wood planks and paint cans to make repairs on the house, barn, chicken coop, and tool shed. When they tore down the old outhouse, he was distressed, but his grandpa assured him there would be a new one by day's end.

James watched carefully how the men hammered in the nails and sawed the wood. He copied how they measured things with sticks and rulers.

“You’re becomin’ a right good hand,” the Colonel would tell him.

But there was another reason he wanted to watch the two. They were new to him. He knew one was his pa and one was his mother’s pa, but he could barely remember them before the war. He had to become familiar with them again and memorize how they smelled, how their clothes smelled, and what they kept in their pockets. Both of them carried pocket knives with rather large blades they used in their repair work or to whittle a toothpick. There were no coins, as money was scarce, but each had a watch they would wind each day. They checked the sun when there were no shadows. That’s the way they could tell it was twelve noon, no shadows, or very nearly none.

James would copy the manner of the way they walked or the way they talked or handled tools and other objects, but when he grabbed his mother by the waist and asked, “What’s fer dinner, love?” he got a swat on the behind with a warning, “Maybe nothin’ fer

you!”

Charles had to sit James down after that and have a man-to-man talk with him. “Now you know your ma is your ma don’t ya?”

“Yes, Pa.”

“Now the way I handle yer ma is fer me only. You need to be a little gentleman and be respectful. Do you remember what Moses said about respectin’ yer parents?”

“Yes, Pa. Honor thy father and thy mother so you can live long in the land.” James scratched his head and screwed up his face. “Pa?”

“Yes, son.”

“If people die young, is it because they were mean to their kin folk?”

“Not necessarily. Sometimes God just calls ‘em home because he gets lonesome fer somebody and wants to give them a hug and treat ‘em a little special like.”

“Can’t he treat ‘em special down here?”

“Well, the Bible tells us ever one’s time is counted, and he gives rain to the wicked as well as the righteous.”

“Will, I’ll be danged.”

“Maybe you’ll be hanged ‘cause you get caught up on things.” Charles winked at James just to show he was kidding. “Come on. Your ma is callin’ us to supper.”



In watching his grandpa, James discovered that sometimes when he was still, he

would fiddle with something in his right front pocket. When it was time for bed, he watched his grandpa take all the things out of his pocket and lay them on the chest of drawers. He spied an odd thing. Sitting with the collection he took out of his pocket was a white translucent stone. He approached it to look at it, but the Colonel stepped in front of him. They didn't see Anne standing in the door.

“Aw,” the Colonel said, putting his hand on James' head. “You seen it, didn't you?” He picked up the stone and kneeled down in front of him. “You see this?”

“Yes, Grandpa.”

James went to grab it, but the Colonel closed his fingers over it. “It's never been touched but by God and myself,” he said reverently. “That's why it's so special. Now, in the Bible, it says all good people will be given one, a white stone.”

“Pa,” Anne said, coming into the room. “So, ye still carry that stone in yer pocket?”



James went rock hunting. A few hills nearby had outcroppings with water running over them among the pine trees. Beyond these hills were the highland plains with more forests. There were not so many farms up there because of the lack of soil. It was like the top of an enormous mountain that had been worn away, nothing but rocks, but shallow rivers from the higher altitudes provided spots of fertile soil.

To a little boy, the hills were mountains. He thought for sure he could find a stone like his grandfather's there. He had wanted to go alone, but Mary caught up with him. How

could he find a stone that only God had touched with a girl tagging along? Wouldn't it have to be something private? Prayer was always private, except when there was family prayer. But this was different, and if she saw him picking up rocks, she would want to do the same and maybe spoil things by grabbing the stone that was meant for him. He got a little peeved.

“Go back, Mary. I want to be alone.”

“But what're you doin', James?” she said as she carefully made her way through the brush.

“I'm not doing nothin'. I'm just lookin' fer rocks.” James continued marching up the hill, following a stream that eventually ran down under their spring-house where Pa kept the meat, the eggs, cheese, and other things.

“Are ye lookin' fer perty rocks?” She caught up with him, panting hard. “Let's rest. I brought ya a biscuit. It's got a piece o' cheese.”

“I don't want no biscuit. I want to find rocks.”

“Kin I have yers? I'm awful hungry.”

“Go ahead.”

Mary sat down on a big flat rock on the edge of the stream, pulled her long dark hair back and tied it up with a string she had been carrying. “There's lot's o' rocks here.” She swished her hand in the water, spied something, and lifted it out gently. She dried it on her dress. “James! I found a diamond. Or maybe it's a ruby.” She held it out for him to see.

“Aw,” he said after examining it and giving it back to her. “It's just a piece of red glass. Someone dropped a bottle sometime, and that's all that's left of it.”

“'Tis not!”

“’Tis so.” James tried his luck, picking up rocks and throwing them back. “No girl can find a ruby. Ya gotta be a man.”

“James Samuel. That’s a fib. I’m gonna tell Mama on you.”

“Well, you just go ahead.”

Mary started sobbing. “You don’t like me! You’re just jealous ‘cause I found somethin’ and you didn’t.”

James sat beside her. “I’m sorry, Mary. I just wanted to find a God stone like the Colonel has. You have to be alone when ya find it, or it doesn’t work.”

“Will you find me one, James? I want to be close to God too.”

“Oh, Mary. Look around ya. This is God’s country. Listen to the stream. It’s God’s voice singin’ to ya, tellin’ ya he loves ya and he wants ya to be good. Listen to the breeze in the trees. God is here. You are close to him. Don’t ya understand?”

“It is lovely here, ain’t it?” Mary wrapped her arms around her knees. “I reckon He is here. He smells sweet, doesn’t he?”

“I reckon He does.” James pushed the hair out of his face. He remembered passages of scripture where God was telling him to love everybody. He put his hand on Mary’s arm and felt a little remorse. “You’d better eat yer biscuit. I plan on goin’ fer a long walk. Probably a mile’er two.”

“I got another biscuit.” She handed it to James.

“Wait. We gotta say thanks.” James put his hands together as his mama had taught him. “Thank ya Lord fer this food, and please, Lord, take care ‘o us lost souls. Amen.”

James and Mary ate their lunch at the little laughing stream that was trying its hardest

to put them to sleep as it bubbled over the rocks and stones and watercress.

When they finished their biscuits and drank from the stream, they headed out to look for more stones like their grandpa had. They eventually found a trail running across the stream.

“Come on, James,” Mary said, excitedly. “Let’s see where this here trail leads to.”

“We can’t go a long ways,” James said, cautiously.

Momentarily, a dark figure came upon them from the other direction. He wore a wide-brimmed hat with a feather stuck into the band, and long braids down to his chest which was covered with a beaded vest. He looked pretty tanned behind the vest, and his dark arms were muscular. He wore a loin cloth over his trousers and then moccasins on his feet. He wasn’t so dark when he stepped into the sunlight, but it startled the two when the man spoke. “Howdee! You must be Singletons. I seen yer house over the ridge.”

“You an Injun?” Mary asked, squinting a him.

James was shaking in his boots and tried to hush Mary.

“You want’um buy sorghum?” the man said as he bent down a little.

James and Mary jerked their heads back as if he were going to bite.

“You want’um buy whisky? Make from sorghum.”

“We don’t drink whiskey, feller.”

“Got any money?”

“I got this.” Mary raised her hand with the red glass in it. “It’s a ruby.”

“Red glass. Got lots of red glass. Tell Mr. Singleton Rodney has lots of sorghum, or whiskey if he wants some.” The man stood tall and smiled. “I’ll go over to the Pickles. See

if they want some.”

The man passed the children and went down the trail the way they had come. Mary was going to follow the man, but James shook his head and motioned they should continue up the hill. He was quite shaken by the experience and it gave him more reason to keep looking for what he called the God stone. They continued their search until their stomachs told them it was dinner time.

James brought back several good-looking rocks to put in his collection resting in a bucket near the back door, but he hadn't found what he was seeking. He went further back to find the shade tree near the spring house. He sat in the shade on a stump until his nerves settled down. Of course, he wouldn't tell anyone he was scared by an Injun.

James and Mary heard their names being called as they meandered home, following the stream. By the time they arrived, their mama was standing on the back steps with her arms folded, one hand grasping a wooden spoon she used to paddle children with, and showing a mighty angry face.

Anne changed her sense of *I'm going to spank you to what in the world*, when Mary came running up to her, saying, “Mama! We met an Injun. He was all painted up with war paint on his face and carryin' a hatchet, and he was gonna smite us on the head with a mighty passion, but we ran and got away.”

James' face told the truth as he sighed and wagged his head. “Thar she goes again with her wild tales. Mama, he wanted to know if ye wanted any sorghum.”

Anne waved her spoon at her kids as though she were chopping a carrot. “Now you keep away from those Injuns. They are a dirty and lazy lot, and they will cut yer throat soon

as look at ye,” and she swatted each of them on their behinds as they passed into the kitchen. “You all will be the death of me. And Mary!” she let the door slam. “You stop tellin’ these tall tales ‘r yer tail will git mighty sore.”

After dinner, Mary brought out her “ruby” she had found and showed everyone, but when Martha laughed at it, she frowned, went outside, and threw it onto the ground. Later, the Colonel spied it and picked it up. He followed Mary, who had gone back into the house and was sulking on her bed. He passed her bedroom, praising the find.

“Why, I’ll betcha,” he spoke out loud for Mary to hear him, “this little piece of gem will bring in lots of money. Look how it shines. I betcha this here’s the biggest ruby ever found in these here parts.”

Mary jumped off her bed and ran down the hall to find her grandpa, and when she saw him in the parlor tossing the red glass up and down, exclaiming, “What a find. What a find,” she called out, “That’s mine!”

“Is it now?” He sat down and patted the seat next to him. Mary sat beside him, moaning, “But it is mine.” He put his arm around her and squeezed her.

“I found this here little gem on the ground outside.” He winked at her, holding the glass up to the moonlight streaking from the window. “Now you claim it’s yourn.”

“Uhm hum.” She nodded her head. “James and I found it in the stream up on the hill. I mean I was with James when he was lookin’ fer rocks an’ I dipped my hand in the stream and thar it was, in my hand. So, it’s mine.”

“Then why did you go and throw it away?”

“’Cause I was mad at Martha.” She pursed her lips. “She can be so angry at times.

She is a burden to us all.”

“You want it back, do ya?” He held out the red glass. “It’s still pretty and shiny, no matter what it is. It’s just like how God sees us. We are his gems, you know.”

“How’s that?” She asked.

“We shine just like a diamond, like those stars up in the night sky. He made us that way. Everthang in Heaven is shiny.”

“Did we come from Heaven?”

“You can bet yer bottom dollar.” He leaned over and kissed the top of her head.

The Colonel saw Martha and called her over to him. “Pull up a chair, Martha. We were havin’ a discussion. You know what an angel is?”

“We weren’t discussin’ angels,” Mary volunteered. She received a slight kick from her grandpa. “Ouch.”

He smiled at her. “We were discussin’ the things that make people happy.”

Martha pulled up a chair and sat on the other side of the Colonel.

“Now the Bible says,” the Colonel said, turning his head to see Mary and Martha. “All God’s children are angels. That’s the way he sees us, and that’s the way he wants us to see each other. Remember the Golden Rule?”

“Yes, Grandpa,” the girls said in unison. “Do unto others as you would have them do to you.”

“Jesus said that.” He squeezed both girls. “Now you two make up.”

Chapter Two

James' Conundrum

James was watching how his grandpa was teaching his sisters. He didn't understand why he was trying to talk them out of owning something like that little stone he kept in his pocket. It sounded like he wanted them to accept a second best and not the real thing.

Perhaps Grandpa knew he was listening and was actually talking to him. Whether or not he was, James took it personally and grieved that his grandpa didn't want him to have a God stone.

He found his pa in the barn, cleaning the floor. He realized his pa had asked him to do this yesterday and he started feeling very guilty.

"You come to help?" Charles asked.

"Why doesn't the Colonel want me to have a God stone?" James asked as he grabbed an extra shovel.

"What's this?" Charles looked back over his shoulder to see his son getting on with his chores, finally.

"You know, the stone he keeps in his pocket."

Charles and James naturally divided the floor into left side – right side as if they had received secret instructions.

"Aw." Charles paused and leaned on his shovel. "You mean ..."

"The little stone he keeps in his pocket. He says he prays to it, and he can hear God."

Charles continued his work, but James had to stop and take a breath. It was hard to keep up with his pa.

“I think,” Charles explained, “that you have a different interpretation of what’s goin’ on. He just keeps a stone in his pocket because he fancies it.”

“Well, I want a stone like that, anyway.”

“You have a whole bucket of pretty stones near the back steps.”

“None of them,” James huffed and puffed his words out. “Are the right one.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be lookin’ fer one, maybe ye should be prayin’ fer one.”

“May be.”

They got halfway done when Charles brought over a wheelbarrow for them to shovel their piles of dung in. “This will make good mulch for the garden.”

“May be.”

After they got their piles out to the dunghill, James said, “Thank you” to his pa.

“What’s a family for if we can’t help each other.” Charles took his son by the shoulder as they headed for the stream where they could wash themselves.



That night, as James lay in bed, he realized what his pa had done. *It was my chore he was doin’*, James said to himself. He had forgotten everything when he went out to look for that God stone. *But how can I find one if I don’t look fer it?* He got out of bed, realizing that because of his much thinking, he had forgotten another chore. He had forgotten to say his nightly prayer.

He clapped his hands together and prayed, “Dear God, how can I find a stone of my own if I don’t look for it?” After completing his prayer, he climbed back into bed when a scripture came into his mind. It was Revelations 2:17. “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.”

James got down on his knees again and asked God what is meant by the hidden manna. He waited a long time, but no thought came to mind, no scripture, so he got back into bed. After a while when between sleep and wakefulness, the thought came. Jesus had said that he was the true bread that came down from Heaven. Isn’t that manna? Well, that was a lot to think about. Was it Jesus he needed? He fell asleep with that thought on his mind.

When morning arrived, Anne couldn’t find James. She called him from the back kitchen door. Everyone came to breakfast but James.

As Charles was scarfing down the last of the pancakes and eggs, Anne asked him if she had seen James.

“He’s out’n the barn there,” he said with his mouth full, “You can’t budge him. He’s readin’ the Bible.”



James came up with an agreement with his pa. He would read the Bible on his own

time and keep up with his chores except when there was no planting. If his pa could get enough money from the sale of land, he told him, there would be planting very soon. He would then hire out a few blacks to share the rest of the land and grow their crops. Then they would pay their rent each year after harvest time.

For several weeks, James saw only cornbread and beans on his plate, with cornmeal mush for breakfast. They tasted good until they ran out of ham for the flavoring. There were plenty of greens, both collards and turnips Anne had canned for the winter, and beans too, so they wouldn't starve. Charles always gave thanks for what little they had and never complained. Anne kept saying she wished she had more to give everyone, but all she got was a sad stare from Charles.

After the first snow, one of the sharecroppers made his way to the back door. He had something in his hand. Anne answered his knock and was surprised at the ham he gave her. It still had its foot and the hairy skin attached.

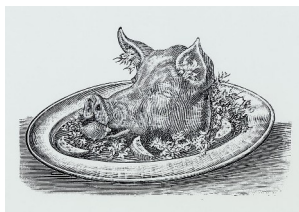
“Whard ye git it from?” she asked him.

“It's wild, Mum,” he said, baring his white teeth. “They in the thickets. It's are rent, Mum. F'om Moze and Janny.”

“Rent?” She said, dumbfounded, staring at a miracle. “Thank ya, Lord.”

“It's all we got, Mum.” He tipped his hat and left.

“I'll tell Mr. Singleton,” she called out. “And thanks.”



That night, Anne surprised everyone with ham in the beans. It smelled so good, everyone's mouth watered.

When Charles came in, slapping his hat onto his breeches, he asked, sitting down at the table, "Where in tar-nation did that come from?"

"It's a gift from God, Pa, a gift from God." Anne clapped her left hand over her right which held a wooden spoon.

Charles blessed the food, and then Anne served the beans with the juice over cornbread, passing a plate to each person. When she served herself, she sat down and said, "It's also rent from Moses and Jenny."

"I see," Charles said. "I told'em I wouldn't expect rent until after the harvest, and that will be next year." He ate a few mouthfuls and then said, "Ya see, you give'em free rent fer a year, they come fer the land and the work, and then you got'em hooked. They have families livin' on yer land, and then in one generation, ya got a whole lot o' labor."

"If'n ye can keep'em," Anne replied.

"I thought about raisin' their rent ever now and then, so they are more obligatin' to me."

"Now that ain't Christian," Anne complained.

"Slow down, Ma. As I was explainin', you can force'em to stay by makin'em need a bigger crop, or you can get James here to read from the Good Book to'em and explain their need to share."

James sat thinking about what his parents were talking about when an idea came to his head. "Whey don't you just lower the rent, and then, maybe they will want to stay."

“Now we don’t want to be overrun with the colored folk,” Anne said, shaking her fork at James, “by bein’ overly nice to’em.”

“Yes,” his pa agreed. “There are too many mulattoes already.”

“What’s a mulatto?” Mary asked, wiping her nose with her napkin.

“It’s a lighter-skinned negro person,” Anne said.

“How did he get that way? The negros around here are black,” Mary said, pouring more beans on her cornbread.

“Hmmm,” Anne said as she started humming a Christian song. “That’s a discussion fer another time. Come help me do the dishes.”

“Okay.”

“I’m goin’ out to see Moses,” Charles said, getting up from the table.

“Oh, must you?” Anne complained.

“Yes, I must,” Charles said, grabbing his coat from the wall peg. “I want to know where he got that ham.”

Anne left the dishes and put her hand on her husband’s shoulder. “He didn’t steal it. He said it was wild.”

“I believe you, Ma,” Charles said, kissing her cheek. “I just have to know where those wild things come from.”

As his pa opened the door, James grabbed his coat. “Can I come with ya, Pa?”

“I guess it won’t hurt.”

“Can I come?” Martha asked.

“No, my firstborn,” Charles said tussling her hair. “You have schoolwork. Come on,

James.”

Charles always kept a loaded shotgun by the door. He grabbed it as he left. He also took a kerosene lamp with him that he kept on the porch. He lit it and a home-rolled cigarette from a worn leather tobacco pouch he kept in his shirt pocket.

“I don’t use this in the house cause of yer ma, you understand.” He took a puff, let out the smoke and they were off across the field. “You don’t mind if I smoke, do ya, son?”

“Ain’t no words in the Bible about it, so I guess yer safe.”

Charles laughed.

When they came to the little shack of Moses and Jenny, they saw the lamp was lit inside. There was a golden glow that came from the corn sack curtains. There was a bright moon out, making the cabin look black on the entrance side.

Charles knocked on the door. Moses, dark, tall, and skinny, peeked out of a crack in the door. “Who’s dat?” he called out.

“Mr. Singleton,” Charles answered. He almost said, your owner, but he caught himself. “It’s yer landlord.”

“Yes sah, Mr. Singleton.” He slowly opened the door. “We were about to go to bed.”

Charles and James entered and looked around. It was a one-room house with a bed on one end and a fireplace oven, table, and two chairs on the other end. The place smelled like a campfire and grease. They had a couple of pictures and posters on the walls, a small cupboard by the fireplace, and a thin chifforobe at the end of the bed. Jenny was already undressed and in bed. She just turned her back on them.

“Moses?”

“Yes sah?”

“Were you going out tonight?”

“No sah. I al’ays wear a jacket to bed. It gets cold at night.”

“I was just wondering if you could tell me where you got that ham?”

Moses became a little jittery as he stared at the gun Charles was carrying. “I told the Missus that it’s wild. Came out o’ the brush.”

“I’m wondering if you could show me?”

“I’d be happy to aftah work tomorrah.”

“I mean, right now. Can you take me right now, tonight?”

Moses put his finger between his collar and his throat and pulled it out as if to make more room for his neck. His voice stretched a bit and got tighter as he said, “I guess I can.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

They all three went outside, but when they went down the steps, Moses said, “Truth is, I and some othah fellahs ah goin’ coon huntin’. I guess they won’t mind lookin’ fer a few pigs?” Moses grinned, showing his white teeth. “If you don’t mind comin’ wif all us?”

“No, I don’t mind. Let’s go.”

“Ya won’t need the gun, though.”

“It makes me feel safe.”

“Okay. Follow me.”

Moses led Charles and James into the woods. They walked a little ways until they came to a clearing.

Moses Stopped. “You wait heah, and I’ll talk wif the boys.”

Charles and James waited on the edge of the clearing. They heard an excited discussion and cussing among the blacks, but it seemed that Moses calmed them down.

The one that seemed to be their leader came over to Charles. “Ya won’t need that gun. Ya see?” He held up a coil of rope. “This all we need.”

With an “Okay,” the men headed out deeper into the woods.

Dark shadows with long arms and prickly fingers kept grabbing James’ jacket as he tried to follow the group, who themselves were darker than the shadows passing through the undergrowth. They slid right through without being touched, or so it seemed to James. The woods had become so thick the trail had disappeared.

The men fanned out and became still and silent. There was a noise like they were running through the woods, dropping things, and bumping into trees. James couldn’t see what was going on. There was a rustle of leaves. His pa had him stay with the lantern so they could find him when things were over.

James heard heavy grunting nearby. He froze, his eyes fastened on the bush in front of him. Then a squeal, as he saw a hairy boar dash out of the brush and charge him. Before he could move, the boar was face to face with him. The lantern lit up its huge tusks, and the boar flew up into the air and into darkness. James, out of breath, stood there panting. *Dear God!*

The tree above him creaked. He could hear the boar above him struggle, and then a black man jumped down in front of him. He laughed at James, showing his white teeth.

“You got yo’ sel’ a juicy pig, boy!”

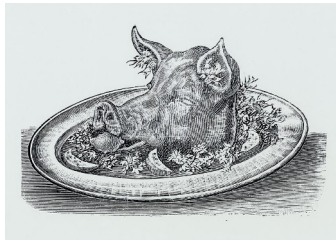
All the blood had drained out of James’ face, and he looked like a ghost. He was

gasping for breath when all those blacks came out of the dark brush, laughing. It was all James could do to not yell out a stream of expletives. He strained to keep his anger from being noticed, but not known to him, he was whimpering.

Charles walked over to him and grabbed him, holding him close. “I’m sorry. I should have left you home.”

“I, I, I can take it.” James took several deep breaths. He had to show these black men a lot of courage. He didn’t want to be thought of as a little boy. He smiled and laughed back at them. “I’m good.”

Moses took a knife and gutted the boar. “That’s how it’s done.”



Three boar were taken that night. Moses helped take one back to the Singleton’s place. The other two disappeared with the other blacks. Moses helped Charles tie the boar onto a thick limb of a tree outside the back door of their house.

“Thank you, Moses. I’ll take care of it tomorrah and smoke it.”

“I wouldn’t do that, Sah,” Moses said with eyes wide open. “It won’t las’ the night. No Suh. Bars’ll get it fo’ shoah.”

“You’re right. I’ll go to the barn and get a saw. You can clean out the insides a bit and take the hide.”

Charles and Moses forgot about James. He just stood by with the lantern, which was near the end of its wick, and took note as to how to butcher a pig.

Anne watched from the back door. The snow below the beast turned red.

Anne opened the back door and stuck her head out. "James! Time fer bed."

"Aw, Ma. Gotta hold the lamp."

"Ye can put that thing on the stump."

James came in and told Martha and Mary all about his adventure. They had been sleeping, but with all the noise and voices outside and then inside with their ma talking to James like he did something wrong, and James coming into into their bedroom, the girls couldn't sleep.

"I had this old hog charge at me," he said to them. "I thought I was gonna die fer sure. Then one o' those blacks caught it an' hung it up a tree. Everbody patted me on the back and said how brave I was."

Anne poked her head into the bedroom to listen to her rascal boy. "You sound like yer braggin'. Ye ought to thank the Lord yer safe, an' He had a hand in it all, savin' yer life, an' all."

James walked up to his mother. "Mama, I was prayin' the whole time I was there. It was so scary, an' especially when I saw that hog. He was a biggen. I cried out to the Lord, and he delivered me like Daniel in the Lion's den."

"I think, son," Anne said, grabbing his ear, and pulling him towards his bedroom, "you not only brag, but you tell tall tales."

"It's true, Mama," he said, wincing at his ear being pulled. "I was attacked by a wild boar."

"Well, it's past time you were in bed. So git yer clothes off and git under the covers.

An' don't fergit to pray." Anne stood there, watching with her hands on her hips, to make sure he obeyed. "Now, good night."

"Night, Mama." He usually called his mother Ma, but when things got tight, he reverted to when he was a toddler and called her Mama. He did this whenever he got in trouble. He also told stories to make up for not having an excuse. This was his effort to soften his mother's heart toward him. It usually worked.



Chapter Three

James Loses a Sister

Martha had a boyfriend. She said she met him at school, and they had fallen in love. James found all this out when he showed up at the door one Saturday evening in October 1865. His name was JP. He was tall and skinny, the kind that became overweight when they got married. He was quite friendly and congenial. James didn't think he was handsome except for his personality. His dark hair was thick and cut about the ears and neck. His lips were thin with a smile as wide as Texas. His gray eyes glistened when he smiled.

As he was knocking, Charles came up behind him and said, "Go right in." JP jumped.

He tried to shake hands with Mr. Singleton, but the man just went right by him, opened the door, and ushered him in. A cold breeze shivered everyone, and when the door was closed, the fire from the fireplace in the kitchen warmed up the parlor again, and everyone went about what they were doing.

Martha had been reading a book called *Pride and Prejudice* for English class while curled up in one corner of the divan like a cat, Mary was playing with one-year-old John on the floor next to Martha, James was practicing a hymn on the old out-of-tune piano, and Ma was in the kitchen finishing up supper.

"It's a late supper, son," Charles said, wrapping his arm around the boy, "so you might as well join us."

Martha noticed who was in the house, closed her book, and stood with her head tilted, and smiled at JP. "I'm over here, ya big oaf." Instead of waiting, she hurried over to her beau. She placed her arm around his waist and told her father, "I'll take JP, Father." She

wouldn't dare say "Pa" in front of JP, and so her pa raised his eyebrow, letting go of the boy.

"Supper's on the table folks," Anne's high-pitched voice rang out. If anyone had been sleeping, they were awake now.

Chairs had to be moved from the living room so everyone could have a place at the table. Anne put little John in his high chair next to her, gave him a dish of gravy and broken-up cornbread, and then commenced serving the others as they sat down in their places.

Everyone found a slice of ham, a boiled egg, and greens on their plates. There was a plate of cornbread and a bowl of gravy in the center of the table so people could help themselves. Charles gave the blessing on the food and everyone started ladling food into their mouths.

"Where ya from?" Charles asked JP as he dipped his cornbread into the gravy on his plate.

"Over there in Tishomingo, Sir," JP said, slicing his ham into strips. "But my dad is from Virginia, and my mom is from Alabama."

"I imagine ye were born in Alabama?" Charles asked.

"By brother was, but I was born here in the great Mississippi. Our farm is on the other side of town. My pa thought it a better place fer goin' cotton."

James blurted out, "Do you like rocks? I got a whole lot of perty rocks in a bucket outside."

"I know a teacher at school who would love to look at'em, but fer me, I seen too many rocks in the fields at the farm. Too many. I bet I've built a mountain of rocks by now."

James jerked his head back and blinked. "My!"

The family got to know all about JP. He was, as Martha said, “a scholar and a gentleman.” This was his last year in school, and he was expected to work in the cotton business now. He wanted further education, but since the war, there was a lack of workers at the farm, something he wanted of his own someday, but the prospects of that were dim. Keeping his father’s farm running was now a top priority.

After dinner, James caught Martha kissing JP. He felt he should say something, but he also felt a restraining hand on his shoulder. Maybe it was his conscience. He guessed they were going to get married soon. He hoped so. He didn’t want Martha to get into trouble. He’d heard about one girl who had to leave school. There were whispers in corners about her. No one wanted to talk to her, and everyone was embarrassed by her situation. People were sensitive to these things. Children should be born at home under the protection of a father and a mother. Her boyfriend left her the moment she started showing. He didn’t want that to happen to Martha. He had to say something.

When JP left, James ran through the snow to catch up with him.

“Can I do something for you, James?” JP asked, turning around. He had probably heard the crunch of the snow behind him.

“JP,” James said, as he pumped up his courage. “What are yer intentions with my sister?”

JP smiled and put his arm around James. “I have the best of intentions, James. Your sister and I are getting married in December. Don’t worry. Martha and I talked to your father this very night, and we’ve set a wedding date.”

James screwed up his face and hugged JP. “That relieves my heart so very much.”

“Now, there, James.” JP grabbed James’ shoulders and held him at arm’s length.

“Let’s shake hands and be brothers.” They shook hands and then hugged each other again.

“Welcome to the family, JP.”

“Gotta get home. Have to get up early tomorrah.”

James waved and ran back home. The first thing he did was to hug Martha. “JP told me. I’m happy for ya, Martha. Right happy.”

Martha kissed his forehead. “You couldn’t be more happy than I am. Oh, my heart’s goin’ pitter-patter. I don’t think I’ll sleep tonight.”

“You two git to your beds,” Anne told her kids. “We still have work to do in the mornin’.”



The next day, James looked through his collection of books, thinking perhaps he could give one of them to Martha for her wedding gift. He came to one that had an interesting title, *A Cry in the Wilderness* by Geoffrey Thompson, a Welshman. He slid it off the shelf backward with his finger into his hand. It was a book of Christian poems. Opening it, it landed on the leading poem, the one the book was named after. Of course, it would. He had slipped a piece of paper to bookmark it. It read,

I heard a cry in the wilderness of my mind,

A singular and lonely cry of agony and pain.

My heart strained and tore and filled with light.

I heard an answer as He called my name.

My stony heart broke and He picked up the pieces,

Handing them to me to form a heart of clay.

My mouth I opened and left me with no reason;

All the words I spoke together fell like rain.

A cry like a night owl flew forth from my soul.

And whether it fleeth or whether it goeth,

Whether in the depths or in the heights, it fails,

And I bend the knee, and He says, Come, follow me.

Maybe he would keep this book because this poem always stirred his soul. It gave him reason to want to follow the Lord and to preach His word. He slowly closed the book and slid it back onto the shelf. He took up *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. He will give this one to her, even though he liked it equally well. He took it and wrapped it in a scrap of blue velvet he had retrieved from his mother's sewing basket. Martha can always give the cloth back.



James hadn't taken any notice of Martha and JP when they were in school. He only paid attention to the teacher and to his studies. He turned a blind eye to what other people were doing. He couldn't see Martha and JP sitting behind him making googly eyes at each

other. He didn't notice they talked to each other on the porch of the school at recess. But now that JP made it a regular outing every week to come and visit Martha on the weekend, he took notice. It was as if a dog's ears stood straight up when something important was happening. He was the first one to welcome JP every weekend until the big day came.

The wedding was on the first day of December, a Friday. The weather was clear. The sun was shining. The air was crisp with a bit of a nip to every breath. But that didn't stop the merrymakers from attending the ceremony at the little church in town. Percy Nichols with white curly hair, and a beard to match, wearing a black suit, played the organ as the Struders and the Singletons and their friends, the Pickles, Cooperages, and the Neighbors filled the church.

Percy played the Wedding March with much pomp and circumstance as Charles paraded his daughter down the aisle. Two little girls in white threw confetti in the aisle before the bride and her father, seeing there were no flowers in bloom at the time. After the ceremony, everyone hurried through the bitter cold to the French Hotel, owned and run by Arnold French, where warm, mulled punch, sandwiches, and fruit cake awaited the festive party. The room was filled with chatter and laughter and merry red cheeks amid the smiles. Everyone had to pay their respects to Martha and JP with lots of toasts and applauses. Charles dinged his wine glass with a spoon several times until he gathered the crowd's attention.

“This day is a great day to celebrate and do honor to the two families coming together. Martha is the epitome of intelligence, love, and joy, and though she will break our hearts leaving the nest, we will always be close by and counting the grandchildren to come.”

Everyone laughed and applauded.

James noticed among the guests a peculiar girl who was roaming around, eating a cookie. He had never seen her at school. She must be a guest of the hotel. She looked at him, giggled through her smiling teeth, and skipped away, hiding amid the crowd. He went looking for her. She must have been twelve or so, wearing a light blue cotton dress. Every time he found her, she giggled and ran away. After two or three minutes of this, he couldn't find her again.

Then there were many more speeches, congratulations, and conversations until one by one, each family left except for the bride's and the groom's families who cleaned up the mess that was left behind. Charles and the father of the groom, William, took their time cleaning up as they had to taste the leftover fruitcake, sandwiches, and cookies.

All the Singletons hugged Martha and shook hands with JP as they left the building. Anne shed tears at having to give up her firstborn and letting her go and live with the in-laws. It was only until they could afford their own house. Of course, they would stay close by.

When the Singletons returned home, Anne and Charles sank down onto the divan and sighed.

"I'm glad it will be a while," Anne said, catching her breath, "before little Mary will find herself a beau."

"Yes, Ma," Charles agreed. "If this happened every year, and God bless those with big families, it would wear us out, now, wouldn't it?"

"You can bet yer bottom dollar!" Anne sighed again. "I gotta git up and put those two

young'uns to bed." She raised herself up with effort. "We gotta git up early tomorry. Work, work, work."

Anne hugged James as he came from the nursery after having put the little ones to bed. "Yer a mighty blessin' to a poor ol' woman." She kissed his head and slapped his bottom. "Now ye git ta bed."

"Pa, let's us git ta bed. The kitchen's gonna have to wait 'til mornin'."

James was haunted by a vision of that girl he saw at the reception. She visited him all night in his dreams, smiling and giggling. He woke up in a sweat. Remembering his dreams, a chill went through his whole body. At breakfast, he didn't look well, and his mother put her hand on his forehead.

"Boy," she said. "You ain't goin' to town today. You got a fever. You go right back to bed."

It was true that he didn't feel right, and he wasn't hungry. As he left the kitchen, he turned and said, "Ma, you should have seen her."

"Seen who?" She asked, holding her wooden spoon in her hand.

"That girl."

"What girl? There were lots of girls there. Go on. Git back to bed."

As he walked down the hall, he said, to himself, "That very special girl."

Emma

Chapter One

The Cute Little Girl with a Giggle

Five-year-old Emma Jane peered out of her window. She could see the giant magnolia trees beyond the portico of the Greek revival mansion. She knew there were thick columns under the roof below her window. She watched her dog Sally play with its mother. The blacks called them Coon hounds. They seemed to be native to the area, as the Indians also had similar hounds. They say they are good hunters. Emma didn't pay much attention to hunting. She only liked to play with her pet. She stepped down from her window seat and continued playing tea time with her porcelain dolls.

Her black mammy called. Her name was Maggie, short for Magnolia. "I have nice cakes fo' ya, Baby."

"I'll have my tea up here," little Emma shouted, standing at her half-opened door. "Rose and Mary say they are too tired to come down."

"If I have ta come up they'ah, I'm gonna tan yer little fanny."

Emma decided she didn't want that today, so she hurried downstairs as fast as her little legs would take her. She ran into the kitchen with her curly hair bobbing up and down. She hopped into her chair, and Maggie said, "He'a ya go," scooting Emma up close to the table.

"Afta you eat up, ye can go play wiff yer puppy." Maggie served Emma small squares of sandwich and cake intermingled so she could choose what to eat. "Then I can go an' clean that bedroom o' yours."

Emma climbed down from her chair and started running back upstairs.

“What’s you doin’ girl? I’m gonna swat yo’ fanny if’n you don’t come right back he’ah an’ finish yo’ snack.”

“I gotta save Mary and Rose!”

“Doggone that girl!” Maggie exclaimed as she climbed the stairs, her two-hundred-and-fifty-pound body huffing and puffing. “I’ll git you yet!”

Emma took her dolls from their little chairs away from their little tea table, hugged them close, and slipped under the bed. She sat on bended knees with abated breath and her face held up. She watched the door from under the bedspread that hung down over the edge of the bed. Maggie swung the door open and gave the room a good sweep of her eyes. She returned to the hall, calling Emma’s name. “Emma! You come he’ah now. Don’ play wiff me!”

After a while, Emma returned her dolls to the tea table and resumed playing with them.



Maggie went back downstairs and cleaned up the table, throwing away Emma’s cake and sandwiches into the garbage pail. She then started on dinner. It would be beans and rice with squash soup laced with onions. She would caramelize the onions to make them soft, just the way Master Presley liked them.

At dinner, Emma showed up at the table and Maggie looked at her as though daggers

could come from her eyes.

Emma's mother, Sarah Jane, scooped beans to her mouth as daintily as a dove. Before putting them into her mouth, she asked, "Maggie, did you and Emma get along today?"

"Yes'm," she lied. "We git on like two peas in a pod 'r like yer coon hound and her pup. Heh, heh." She smiled to her mistress as wide as her lips could stretch as she served the yellow squash soup, smelling like onions and pepper.

"I spied cake and sandwich bits in the kitchen pail today," Sarah Jane said in a way to let her colored mammy know who's boss.

"Little Emma was not feelin' well today, Ma'am." Maggie backed up toward the kitchen door.

When Sarah Jane looked back to speak to Maggie, she had disappeared. "Where is that girl?"

"Now, now, Mother," James said. "Be kind."

Emma was stuffing her face as fast as she could with the fragrant beans and rice, on account of having missed her tea time, and was startled when her mother, unabashed, said, "She's gonna have to learn who's the boss around here."

"What has she ever done to you?" James asked sipping his hot and spicy soup. "She's a good servant, and one of the best cooks we've ever had."

"She's a busy body and won't let me into my own kitchen." She sighed and then said, "Hand me some o' that corn bread. This soup isn't thick enough."

James handed her the cornbread, but not without two-year-old George grabbing some first and stuffing it into his mouth.

“Now, George,” Sarah Jane said. “We got to learn manners. Put the cornbread on yer plate before ye eat it.”

Emma giggled, and little George looked at her and giggled. As he placed his cornbread on his plate, his daddy poured molasses on top of it. He grabbed it quickly and put it up to his open mouth, taking a bite. The molasses dripped all over him and the table. Everyone laughed.

William and John, the two older boys, stared in amazement.

“I’ll get a wet towel,” William said. “I’m done anyway, if I may be excused.”

“Thank ye, Will,” his mother said.

“I’m done too,” Emma said, getting up.

“An’ what’s that there on yer plate, mind ye?” Sarah Jane asked, pointing with her fork.

“Can I give that to Sally?” Emma moaned. “I’m aaawful full.”

“If ya don’t eat all yer food,” Sarah Jane said, “you’ll grow up so skinny no one’ll see ya if ye turn sideways.”

Emma shook her many ringlets.

“Dogs gotta eat somethin’, Mother,” James said. “Come and git my leftovers too, Sweetheart.”

Sarah Jane scowled at James.

William cleaned up George, while Emma and John cleaned the table, taking the leftovers out to the dogs.



Chapter Two

Sally

The Presleys hosted the Harvest Festival that year. It was warm enough for a picnic with fried chicken and barbecue until the sun settled onto the horizon, then everyone was invited to come inside. The planters from all over the county skipped to my Lou, pranced through the Virginia reel, and had a good old square dance, hypnotized by the best fiddler in Mississippi, William Gonzer.

It delighted and thrilled Emma to sit there at the top of the stairs clapping and singing along. Her dog Sally, who sat at her side, crooned so much Maggie had to take her outside. When Emma tried to follow, Maggie grabbed her before she got out the door.

“Missy you got no shoes, no coat and you would catch yo’ death! My, my.”

Maggie had a one-armed grip around Emma’s waist and carried her back upstairs as the girl screamed bloody murder. Dancers stopped and clapped as they watched the circus. When they heard a door close, and the screaming became muffled, they went back to their dancing.

There was one more activity that happened that night. As Emma stared out the window, worrying about Sally being out in the cold, she saw men leave the dance, take their hounds from their wagons, and head out into the woods to hunt coons.

“Poor, poor, Sally,” Emma moaned. “They left ya tied to a tree. Don’t worry, darlin’, someday we’re gonna take ya coon huntin’.”

Maggie opened the door to see if Emma was all right. She found her asleep on the window seat and carried her to bed.



Christmas came with freezing rain. Mama trimmed the tree the day before with the help of the children. They threaded popcorn together, making a long string that they wound around the pine tree Daddy had just cut down. Candy canes were placed carefully around the tree as well as sugared and dried fruits such as apples, peaches, and apricot rings. Another string of red berries was wound around the tree in the opposite direction to the popcorn. Daddy then placed candles around the tree and lit them to the cheers and hurrahs of the children.

Fruitcake was served after a dinner of wild turkey and ham along with bottled green beans, yams, and potatoes from the cellar. They toasted the good health of all with mulled apple cider and a prayer of thanksgiving.

Before they went to bed, the Christmas story was read by Daddy from Luke, and they sang a rendition of *Silent Night* and ended with family prayer.

It was hard for the children to sleep, staring in the dark at their stockings hanging at the end of their bed, wondering what gifts Saint Nicholas was going to bring.

Morning came before the sun did with the children racing downstairs, holding their full stockings before them. Settling onto the living room floor, they each shared what gifts were given them. There were oranges, apples, ribbons and jewels of hard candy, carved animals and animal cookies, little wagons for the boys, and a new doll for Emma.

“I’m gonna name her Mary, the Queen of Christmas,” Emma proclaimed.

“She was no queen, Emma,” John said, popping a candy jewel into his mouth. “She was a mama.”

“Jesus was a king,” she explained, “so Mary was a queen. The song says so.”

“If you say so,” John remarked.

“I do say so. So there!” Emma blurted out.

Sarah Jane came down the stairs. “Arguin’ all ready? You kids behave. It’s Christmas day.”

Emma ran to her mother to hold out the new doll she found in her stocking. “Look what Saint Nick gave me.”

“Saint Nicholas,” she corrected her. “Yer daddy will be down in a little while ta light the Christmas tree. I’m gonna go make pancakes fer ever’one.”

“Can I help?” Emma volunteered.

“You may,” Sarah Jane said. “I was gonna call ye in here anyways.”

After a breakfast of pancakes and molasses, everyone gathered around the Christmas tree. Daddy lit the candles again, they sang *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* and then distributed one present to each person. The two young ones received knitted stockings. The two older boys received knives. John received an old pocket knife of his father’s, and William was given a hunting knife.

Emma snarled at her stockings and danced around, holding her new porcelain doll out at arm’s length. She named it Janie after herself, Emma Jane.

Later on, the children were asking if they could eat their oranges. They were allowed

to do so as a dessert for after dinner. When the time came, William noticed that Emma was not eating hers, only sitting on the divan, sniffing it.

“Emma?” William asked while sitting in the kitchen. “Aren’t ye goin’ to eat yer orange?”

“Not me, Billy Willy. I’m just gonna hold it and smell it. It smells so good. I am gonna keep it a long time so I can just smell it and smell it and smell it.”

“It will git old and stinky,” William teased, “grow green mold on it and git very rotten. Then ye won’t git to eat it attall.”

Emma frowned, stood, and pointed at William, holding the orange close to her heart.

“Billy Willy! Yer teasin’ me.”

“Stop teasin’ yer sister, Will,” Mama said matter-of-factly.

“Yes, Ma’am, but it will dry up.” He took a deep bite of his own orange, letting the juices flow down his chin and onto the table.

“I’m gonna save my orange too,” little George said.

“You’d better eat it,” William said with his mouth full. “It’s already cut up really nice fer ya.”



As the days of January passed away, so did Emma’s orange. One day she was looking all over the nursery for it. When Maggie came in to clean her room, Emma asked, “Where is my orange? I looked and looked for it all over. I just can’t find it.”

“You funny girl! It’s right they’ah on the shelf where ya left it.” Maggie lifted it up to hand it to her.

“That’s not my orange. My orange was big and round and smelled so sweet.”

“Wake up, honey girl. This is what happens when ya don’t eat it when yer supposed to.” Maggie placed the dried-up orange into Emma’s hand, folded her arms, and stared down at the girl.

Emma threw it down on the floor. “It’s not *my* orange!”

“You stop throwin’ things in this room,” Maggie said with her brows squeezed together. “Now you pick up that orange and give it to me. I’ll go and throw it away properly.”

As Maggie descended the stairs, she met Master William and showed him the orange.

“I told’er, didn’t I?” He shook his head and continued on upstairs.

He poked his head into the nursery. “I told ye, didn’t I? You should’ve ate that orange when it was fresh.”

Emma responded by running to the door, saying, “Out! Out!” She pushed on the door until William left, and then it slammed.



That spring, Sally was old enough to go out with the other dogs on the hunt. When the other dogs were gathered together, Sally would run to Emma, run back to the pack, and run to Emma again, barking at her.

“She wants me to go too,” Emma said, rubbing her hand against her head and neck.

She barked at her again.

“She wants yer permission, girl,” Daddy called.

Sally pranced around Emma as she held him by the leash. “Okay, Sally,” she said.

“You go on. Go.” She pointed to the pack and released the leash, and she ran over to join the other dogs, not looking back.

One of the men picked up Sally’s leash, and she looked up to him as if he were her new master.

Emma watched the men and the barking hounds disappear into the brush to the left of the house. She waited all day at her window upstairs until dark. Maggie couldn’t persuade her to eat anything until everyone else had left the table. Maggie was able to coax her to eat a little mashed potatoes and gravy. Then she went back to her window seat and stared out into the dark night.

Around two o’clock in the morning, Emma woke up to the sound of hounds barking. She went to the window seat in her warm nightshirt, peeked out the window, and saw the men’s torches coming through the brush they’d gone into hours ago.

Emma donned her coat and slippers and ran downstairs and out the front door. She ran over to where the men were loading their hounds into their wagons. She looked around for Sally but couldn’t find her. She overheard the men talking.

“Sorry about yer hound, James.”

“Yeah. Sorry. She was good-spirited.”

“But she wasn’t strong enough to hold up to that wild boar.”

“Yeah. Ripped her guts right out.”

“That’s okay, fellers,” James replied. “Thanks for helpin’ me bury her.”

Her! Her! Emma thought. *Where’s Sally? I don’t see Sally.*

Emma took off for the woods, screaming, “Sally! Sally!”

James ran after her. He reached her just before she entered the brush. “No, ya don’t.”

Emma screamed, kicked, and struck her daddy with her fists. He restrained her arms, but she continued to struggle. When her arms were free, she reached out toward the woods.

“Sally. Sally. Sally.”

“She’s gonna be fine now,” James told his distraught daughter as he held her tight and walked back to the house. “She’s in Heaven now. Ya know? She’s gonna be huntin’ them coons for the rest of eternity and havin’ lots of fun.”

“I want my Sally. I want my Sally,” she sobbed.

Maggie was able to put Emma back to bed. Her emotions had run dry, but she breathed in jerks as she slept.



When Christmas came around again, and Emma found an orange in her stocking, she took it out, ran out her door, and threw it over the banisters, hitting the floor and bouncing.

“I don’t want it!”

Sarah Jane took her daughter in her arms. “What have you got against that orange? It ain’t done nothin’ to you.”

“It don’t last.” Emma started sobbing on her mamma’s shoulder. “It don’t last.” She looked up at her mother. “Just like poor old Sally. She didn’t last. NOTHIN’ lasts.”

After calming Emma and leaving her at the breakfast table, Sarah Jane approached James in the living room. “What are we goin’ to do? Ya think she will accept her Christmas present?”

“I’m sure she will. It’s been a long while since Sally died,” he said, giving his wife a hug.

With everyone gathered at the Christmas tree, James gave each person a box wrapped in homemade wrapping paper stamped with a design using carved potatoes. But one box was only tied with string, and it had holes in the sides. A little whimper came from the box as James handed it to Emma.

“And this is for you, Emma,” he said, smiling.

Emma received the box with great excitement. She ripped the strings off, popped the lid, and grabbed the black and brown spotted puppy, embracing it, letting it lick her face.

“Oh, boy! A puppy!”

Suddenly, her face became sullen. She put the puppy on the floor. She walked away with tears in her eyes, tears she didn’t want anyone to see. When the puppy playfully followed her, she kicked at it and fled upstairs. *Nothing ever lasts.*



Chapter Three

Emma Learns a Lesson

George adopted the new little puppy. He was almost all white except for a few brown spots here and there. One covered his left eye, the ears were brown, and there was a particular black spot near the white tip of his tail. He wagged that all the time and appeared to smile whenever anyone was around.

When George announced that the puppy's name was Toby, Emma told him, "You should name him Spot."

"Well, now," George said, imitating his daddy, "you don't have no say so, do ya now? You don't want'im, so Daddy said I could have'im. An' his name is Toby!"

Emma stuck out her tongue and then her bottom lip, walking away with her arms folded. She grabbed her coat, went outside, and started kicking rocks, as there were no dogs or kids to kick.

Toby led George outside. The little dog went over to Emma and prounced about her feet, smiling up at her, until she kicked him. He ran away with a cry but then came back and started barking at her feet.

"Georgey!" Emma yelled. "You git this dog outta here 'er I'll change its color ta black an' blue."

"Come on, Toby," George called as he walked away backward. "Come on, boy."

"I don't want no dern dog nohow!" Emma exclaimed. She sat under the nearest tree and pouted.



Toby grew to be a great pal to George. They were always found together, and even a new baby brother couldn't separate them. George and Toby ran races, played fetch the stick, and even went hunting together. Even though Toby wasn't locked up with the rest of the hounds, he seemed to have an instinct for routing out foxes, weasels, boar, and even little mice. Whenever Toby found a mouse, he would gobble it up, leaving George laughing.

There was one annoying thing Toby did. He would go up to Emma and whine. It really irritated both her and George. She would grab a stick, or if she was inside, a rolled up newspaper and swat at him and cuss, saying, "you go bother someone else", "I'm not yer friend", "get outta here", or "I'll tan yer hide!" Then she would show her suffering by wheezing or breathing in jerks, and when no one was about, shedding a tear or two. There was her dog being raised by a brother of hers. She couldn't stand it. Daddy had given the dog to her. Yet, she hated the thing. It was enough to make her dizzy. She would just have to go sit under her tree again and pout.



"I don't know what to do wif dat girl," Maggie complained to Master William, the big brother who was expected to know all things. "You gotta *do* somethin' wif her."

William scratched his head. "I'll talk to'er."

He found that if he approached her when she was in a bad mood, he couldn't get one word out of her edge-wise. So he made a plan. He got George to keep Toby outside for a

while for Emma's sake. George said he would do it if it would help. He felt as bad as William, and it was a brother's duty to try and cheer her up.

After a couple of days of not seeing the dog in the house, William approached Emma as she came down for breakfast.

"Say, Emma. Me and John are goin' to look for the honey tree after breakfast. Would you like to go?"

It seemed like a bright light lit up in Emma. He knew she loved honey. She smiled and asked, "Could I bring Mary and Martha and Janie?"

"You can bring little Janie. How about that? I don't think Mary and Martha would like it if we met a bear."

"Or a hog," she said. "They don't like hogs neither."

William picked up his little sister and carried her into the kitchen to eat breakfast. "We'll try to stay away from the hogs, but you are right. No hogs."

He sat her down in her seat. "Goodie. We will have honey but no hogs." She grinned and shook her curls.

"We'll have none of that, girl," Maggie said, setting pancakes in front of Emma. "We don't want you eatin' your hair."

Emma laughed at the thought of eating her hair.

William looked at Maggie and jerked his head back as if giving her a signal. She winked at him. The plan was working.

After breakfast, Emma went upstairs, grabbed her coat and her little doll Janie, rushed downstairs and out the door with her two big brothers. She licked her lips and rubbed her

tummy as she thought about all the honey they were going to gather. “Umm, umm!”

The woods seemed a bit scary, so she stuffed Janie into her coat. William took a long stick with a basket on one end, and John carried a bag of dry kindling.

“Why are ye carryin’ such an odd-lookin’ basket, Willie?” Emma asked. Then she spoke to John. “Whatcha got in that bag?”

“It’s kindlin’, Emma,” he said. “We’re gonna smoke out the bees when we find the tree.”

“Will it hurt the bees, Willie?” Emma asked in a pretended hurtful voice, the one she used to talk to her dolls.

“Naw. They don’t like smoke, so they just fly away.”

John added, “Now if we built a fire, they would stay right there and buzz so to keep the hive cool so it don’t melt from the heat. We could never get any honey by hurtin’ em.”

Emma folded her arms and shivered as if she were cold. “No fire. No fire. We won’t hurt the bees.”

“No, we won’t hurt no bees,” William affirmed.

Now, Emma didn’t know that John and William already knew where the honey tree was, but they pretended to find it.

William stopped and put his hand to his ear. “Listen to that, Emma. Can you hear the buzzin’?”

Emma stopped. “Yes. I hear a buzz, buzz, buzz. It’s gotta be the bees.” She almost dropped Janie, but she held the doll tighter by pressing her arm against her coat.

When Emma took off running, William grabbed her shoulder. “Careful, kid. We gotta

sneak up on them er they will go crazy, an' they might bite.”

“We don’t want that fer sure.” Emma exaggerated sneaking up on them. She let go of her coat, and with both hands out in front of her, she formed claws with her fingers, stepping ever so lightly. She didn’t notice Janie fall from beneath her coat. She had completely forgotten the doll, abandoning it to Nature, so intent she was on getting that honey.

William and John placed kindling in the pole basket, lit it with a piece of flint, and then covered it with wet wood they found lying around. It made a big smoke. They held it up to an opening high in the trunk of an old elm, and the bees scattered.

Emma hadn’t noticed that John had also brought a picnic basket with a handle. As William climbed the tree, arriving at the big hole where a branch had broken off long ago, he reached in and threw down several honeycombs. John caught them in the basket lined with a damp cloth.

The three of them marched home as though they had a piccolo and a flute. William’s lips could imitate both. They didn’t know that little Janie needed rescuing. Emma laughed oblivious to her loss, marching through the woods, trying to whistle like her brothers, and carrying their delicious bounty.



Unbeknownst to the three little soldiers, George and Toby had been following.

George wanted to get honey for himself, so he covered his head with his coat, climbed up the tree, and grabbed a handful of honeycomb, sliding gleefully back to the ground. He immediately started eating the honey, but he found that the bees were upon him. He and Toby ran as fast as they could, but soon found they were covered with bees. Toby had to dash into a nearby pond and hold his breath until the bees went back to their hive. George thought Toby was doing the same thing, but he had run home faster than the bees.

The honeycomb was gone and so was Toby. George was wet through and freezing, but he warmed himself by running home. What a tale he had to tell his brothers.



When George was climbing the tree, Toby had sniffed the ground. It was Emma's smell. His nose rubbed against a porcelain doll that Emma had dropped. He knew the doll and who it belonged to. He quickly grabbed it just before there was a cloud of bees. He followed George as they ran from the bees, but when George dove into the pond, Toby ran home. He looked around for Emma and found her sitting by her favorite tree. He peered up at her and threw the doll at her feet. He waited there expectantly.



Emma tried to focus through her tears. She examined the doll and then Toby. She

stared at him until an aura of recognition lit up her mind. She picked up the doll and embraced it. Then she called to the dog. “Sally. Sally. Come here, girl.” Toby ran up to her, and she embraced him, still holding onto the doll. “Oh, Sally. Sally. You’ve come home.”

When George arrived home, he found Emma playing with Toby.

“Come here, Toby,” he called.

Toby prounced around Emma a couple more times. George called to him again and then Toby acknowledged his master by looking at him for a moment. Then he continued to play with Emma.

“Toby, Toby,” he called again.

“Her name isn’t Toby. It’s Sally,” Emma said, getting on her knees and hugging Toby.

George drew close and petting Toby, said, “Emma. This is a boy dog, and his name is Toby.”

“Is not,” she said, sticking her tongue out. “She looks different, of course, but I can tell it’s Sally. I didn’t want to believe when she was a puppy, but I know it now. Only Sally would bring Janie back to me.”



When James found that Emma had decided to make her claim on the hound she had been given last Christmas and that she and George continually fought over who owned it, he began to think that it had been a mistake to give the hound to George. Telling them to share the hound seemed futile, so he locked it in the kennel with the other hounds.

Come hunting season, James found that Toby was smart. It was as if he had absorbed all there was to know about hunting from the other hounds. Every time he took them out, Toby took the lead and would root out a coon faster than any other hound, even in the company of the neighbor's hounds. Whenever asked about the young hound's training, James not only claimed ownership but said that he had trained the hound himself. But that didn't matter to Toby. All he wanted to do was to hunt.

There were times, though, when Emma approached the kennel, he was right there to lick her fingers through the chicken wire. If George ever showed up, she would leave, and Toby would lick his fingers.

One day, George, a couple of years older, got permission to go hunting with Toby, so he let him out of the pen, and off they raced into the woods.

"You got'im, boy," he called as Toby raced ahead of him. And then when he saw Toby run right up the trunk of the bee tree, he said, "Oh, lordy, no!" He raced away as the swarm of bees gathered. But Toby came down with a mouth full of honeycomb and raced after George.

After they were a safe distance, and Toby dropped the honeycomb at George's feet, George took off his hat and swatted Toby on the head. "That's not what we're after, dumb hound!" Toby ran back home, leaving George dumbfounded.

When Toby got to the house, he pawed the door. Emma was returning from a neighbor's house and saw him. She raced toward him, and he prounced around, jumped up and down, and ran back to the door, looking at her with his tongue hanging out, panting. She opened the door for him, and he raced up the stairs on the right of the living room.

When he came down, he had Janie in his mouth. He politely laid her at Emma's feet and looked up at her as if smiling.

"You precious hound, you," she said, kneeling and hugging him. "Whether you are Sally or Toby, I think you are the smartest dog around, and I love you."

That evening at the dinner table, the family heard a heart-warming, though strange tale.

"Daddy," George said, holding a chicken leg in the air, "When I took Toby a huntin' today, he had no intention of chasin' after a coon or a squirrel or nothin' else. He ran up the bee tree and snatched a honeycomb, no matter how many times he got stung. Then he gave it to me. I think he's gone loony." He took a bite of his chicken leg and said, "Then he ran away. Emma said he went to her."

"And ya know what he did then?" Emma asked. "Why he went up to my bedroom and fetched old Janie, my little doll I had lost. Ye remember Willie? He found it and returned it to me. Well, today, he went into the house, fetched Janie and gave'er to me again, like he wanted me to play with it or somethin'."

After mulling it over in her mind, chomping down on gristle, Sarah Jane said, "Ya know, I rightly think he was tryin' to show he's the friend of both you all."

After this, both Emma and George sensed that the fight for Toby was over, and they could share. Toby loved them both, and that was enough.



Chapter Four

Emma in School

Emma's school was larger than most. It had three rooms, two for each age group, and a common room for activities and community meetings. The end rooms had fireplaces with chimneys, but the middle room where the older students met had only vents to the rooms with the fireplaces. The inside walls were off-white, and the outside walls were red brick with brown trimming. It was a new building, taking the place of the little red schoolhouse that had been there for decades.

Emma had recently graduated to the upper grades, as she was now ten years old and in the fifth grade, and she hated it. She was an in-between kid. She felt like she was in the wall between the little kids and the big kids. She, nor her friends, felt like they fit in. They weren't learning to read. They had done that, but they couldn't understand the things the big kids had to read, like Chaucer, Tennyson, or Blake. She had enjoyed the fairy tales of *The Brothers Grimm*, but now, she had to read *Readings from the Bible*, and her teacher's favorite, Rudyard Kipling. His stories seemed interesting, but she thought his writing was atrocious. She could understand the Bible because she had always read it. What was terrifying was learning long division. She couldn't remember anything the teacher told her when it came to arithmetic.

The kids were nice, but they all had odd habits that drove her wild. It was like chalk scraping against the chalkboard or a metal shovel dragging against rock. Skinny Terry Gibson squirted her with pickle juice during lunch because he liked to sit by her. She would pinch him, but he wouldn't go away. Mary Higgenbotham would clear her throat very loud

right in the middle of a lecture or a test, and Emma couldn't concentrate. She wanted to strangle her. One day outside she found the girl trying to clear her throat, and she said, "Here, let me fix it," and she put her hands to the girl's throat and commenced choking her. A couple of the boys had to come to the rescue and pry Emma off little Mary. Poor little Mary. From then on, she was frightened whenever Emma came close, and she would run away. Evidently, the choking did some good, for the girl didn't have that problem much anymore.

Emma did well enough in school, but there were not so many of the students who liked her as when they first met her. She would always find a fault and try to correct them. She was always straightening the tie of Tommy Snodgrass or telling Sissy Shore that she was color blind because her stockings didn't match her blouse or her bonnet didn't match her skirt. She even went up to Lillian Summers and complained every time she was late for class.

There came a day when her "friends" couldn't stand it anymore, and at recess, went in force to the teacher, Miss Morehead, giving their reasons why Emma should be expelled from school. The teacher replied, "Children! Children! What is the meanin' of this? Have you all gone mad?"

"No, Miss Morehead," they all answered. "Emma cannot say one kind word to us."

"Even if she is right," Michael Gilliam said. "She is just a naughty little girl who thinks to rule us all."

"My, my," she said. "Well, I must talk to her if she is causin' such a row."

Emma stayed after school that day and wrote on the blackboard, "I will not criticize

my friends, what they say, look like, or what they do.” three hundred times.

Emma was silent for a week or two, but then she said, “Oh what a fancy dress, Marla. Did it come from France?” She put on a coy smile and blurted out, “Oh I was just kiddin’.”

Another day, she had ink on her finger, and touching Sally Draper’s nose, said, “What’s that on your nose?”

After that row settled down, she locked Martha Borges in the outhouse.

Then she put a frog inside Millie Simon’s desk. When the girl flipped it open to get a book, she screamed. Emma laughed, and Miss Morehead almost pulled her hair out, calling, “Emma Jane Presley! Come here and stand in the corner. You will wear this dunce cap for the rest of the day!”



The teacher tried to be kind and fair to the students. Usually, if they misbehaved, all it took was a whap on the hand with a ruler to quieten them down, but that didn’t work on Emma. Standing her in the corner didn’t work. Now, she had to think of expelling her. She would take Emma home in her carriage and talk to her parents.

“No, no, Miss Morehead. Please don’t do that,” she said while the teacher dragged her to the carriage. “I won’t do it again. Please don’t tell my parents. You don’t know them. They will spank me so hard it will bleed. They will put me down in the cellar in the dark for a week. They will starve me until my bones stick out.”

“Miss Emma Jane! Get into that carriage.” Miss Morehead lifted her. “I will see your parents and let them deal with you. How about that?”

As they drove away, Emma started whimpering, and then cried loudly, shedding many tears. Miss Morehead paid her no mind, so Emma stopped, wiped the tears away, and waited for the inevitable. When they arrived at the farm, Sarah Jane came out to greet them. Emma jumped down and ran to the back of the house.

“Now what was that all about?” Sarah Jane asked, her hands on her hips.

Miss Morehead climbed down and tied her horse to the little black statue. “Let me tell you all about it, Mrs. Presley.” And she did.

Sarah Jane didn’t know what to believe. Emma was so quiet at home, never getting into any trouble, she just stood there in wonder with her mouth open and her hand rubbing her chin. “Well, I’ll be darned!” was all she had to say for the moment. She thanked the teacher for bringing Emma home and said, “I’ll take care of it.”

“I hate to expel her, you know,” Miss Morehead said.

“Yes, I know. I know.” She walked the teacher to the carriage and thanked her again. “I’ll see what I can do.” She said goodbye to the teacher and watched her drive away. Then she turned to the task of finding Emma.

She might have run off into the woods. She wasn’t around back, and when she checked, she wasn’t inside the house. She used to go and play with her dolls whenever she had been naughty, but that was when she was a little girl. Then a light lit up in Sarah Jane. *I know where she is. She’s with that dog.*

And indeed, that is where she found her. She was at the chicken wire fence talking to

Toby who had his paws leaning against the fence and licking Emma's fingers through the wire.

"I don't know why I do those things, Toby. Honest. I just have the devil in me."

Sarah Jane stood there and listened to her confess to a dog. *I guess it's better'n not confessin' at all.*

Emma's mother walked up to her slowly and put her arm around her. Emma turned around, hugged her mother, and cried, "I'm sorry. I'm awful sorry."

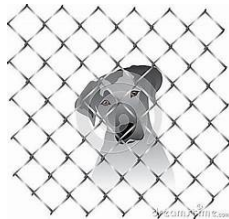
"Emma, are ye puttin' me on, or are ya really sorry?" she asked, holding her daughter by the shoulders.

"I'm right honest, Mama, sorry as sorry can be."

She stood peering into her daughter's eyes. She seemed to be sincere. She remembered her school days. She had pulled a few jokes herself, so she knew a little of what Emma was going through. She pulled her close to her, and they walked back to the house. "We will see. But if you're not tellin' the truth, I'll know about it, ya hear?"

"I hear, Mama." With deep breaths, Emma put her hand behind her back and crossed her fingers.

Toby barked several times, looking puzzled, as if to say, is visiting time over so soon?



When Emma was thirteen, there was a spelling bee competition in Senatobia. She had won the spelling bee in Coldwater and in surrounding towns within the county. Now she

was ready for the final competition which would include a stay at the French Hotel.

At most, the hotel was second rate, but since Emma hadn't been in a hotel before, it was a fantasy world, full of giant oriental rugs covering dark wood floors, drapes over the windows, heavily carved furniture that matched the dark wood wall panels, and Greek columns supporting arches over the main walkways. To the left of the entrance were double doors to a restaurant, and directly in front was the desk where you signed in. The lounge was to the right and took up most of the first floor. The rug was heavily decorated with red motifs as was the upholstery of the chairs and divans. Two spiral staircases went upstairs, one to a ballroom, and one that went to the rooms. The design of the ballroom was a dance of light and dark blues rippling through the furniture and drapery.

When Emma visited her room, she found it simple with dappled flowers for the wallpaper and elaborate carvings in the chest of drawers and chairs. The bedstead was colored pearl but was metal with lots of springs under the mattress. The bedspread and pillows were embroidered with birds among tree branches containing faeries and flowers.

She revisited the ballroom. She imagined it to be filled with couples dancing, and as she pranced about between them, she fancied she saw a boy a little older than she. When he started chasing her, she laughed as she hid behind the imagined couples and finally raced down the stairs to her parents waiting impatiently at the entrance to the dining area.

That night, she was haunted by the image of that boy from the ballroom chasing her. Sometimes she laughed as she teased him, but at other times, she was frightened. Why was he chasing her? She woke up exhausted and confused. After this, winning spelling bees didn't seem to matter.

Even though she went to the school that morning, the sparkle of the contest had gone. Nothing ever lasts. Her parents were likewise confused, and she didn't want to talk about it.

“Did you have another row, young woman?” her mother asked.

“Leave the poor girl alone,” her father said. “She must be goin' through a lot, tryin' to win the top prize and all that rubbish.”

They could only guess because Emma wouldn't talk to them. Romantic dreams? It was awful. She didn't even like boys. All the boys she knew in school made fun of her, calling her dog-face or corn-stalk. She was ugly and skinny. Even the nice dresses her mother made for her couldn't compete with the store-bought dresses the other girls had. Her dresses didn't have puffy sleeves, and they had too many flowers on them. But she liked flowers. She would stare at her reflection quite often and talk to herself.

“Millie Moor,” she called herself, “yer so beautiful. I love yer sparlin' eyes. They look so intelligent. You know yer smarter than them fancy pants and silly pricks, those ladies in their finery with dead men's bones in them.” (reference to Matthew 24:27)

Emma went back to the plantation, depressed that she gave up so easily, but mostly because that boy in her dreams was only a ghost, not real at all. She pined because she wanted him to be real.

She was through with education, having to deal with the taunts and jeers, and right down slander. She knew she was better than them at school. She would learn to be an old maid and take care of her mother and pa when they retired. She would just help out around the plantation and become a servant, a right good old spinster.



James Becomes a Preacher

Chapter One

James at School

James loved studying history. He was good at arithmetic, but singing in the choir didn't work. When he tried for the course, they didn't want him. They told him he couldn't hold a note; it was like water in a sieve. He did however excel in sports such as foot racing and baseball. There was a little river nearby where the boys could compete in rowing exercises and swimming. There was talk about adding a gymnasium to the school, but the opposition said it was too expensive and the children could do their calisthenics outdoors.

James had several want-to-be girlfriends. He tried to ignore them, hanging out with the boys all the time. Mostly though, whenever there were picnics or school parties, there were not very many that paired up as romantic couples. There was one older couple who seemed to be serious; Jane and Austin were looked up to as being the oldest in the school. They seemed to take charge of all the parties. They were old enough to be chaperoning.

Austin liked to give the younger boys advice. He told James, "I see you studying the Bible a lot. See you at church talking with Pastor Hodgkins. You are top in your class as far as your grades are concerned. Have you thought about attending college?"

"Naw. I thought I would stick around here for a while after I graduate. The farm needs to be kept up. I could help Miss Travers here at the school."

"I really think you should go to college. Maybe Miss Travers will persuade you if I can't."

“That might be the case. I know Pastor Hodgkins went to college.”



Chuck Weatherspoon was an amiable boy. He had large horse teeth, red hair, and freckles. His smile made the girls swoon, and all the other boys liked him. He was a terrific pitcher and won all the foot races. He seemed to have only one fault. He despised James.

James couldn't understand it. He tried to be friends with Chuck, but talking to him turned sour every time. He would call James a mama's boy or a sissy, or Preacher.

“I don't want you around, Preacher,” he said as James tried to come up to him to talk. “Stay away from me.”

One day James found out why he was so antisocial with him. He confessed, “Girls shy away from me when you are near.” He gritted his teeth. “You're bad society. Git away.”

James blinked once, looked at Chuck with a blank expression, and walked away. He didn't feel hurt. Chuck was just a fact of life, someone to be admired from a distance, like a hero you would read about in storybooks. Sometimes while writing at his desk with the teacher's back to him, he would glance at Chuck. He was a very handsome guy.

Chuck was an exercise in Christianity. If he could love Chuck, even from a distance, he would be doing the Christian thing.

James often looked around the class to see if he could be friends with the other boys. Most of them were pretty rough and tumble while James tried to be mild-mannered. He liked everyone, especially the girls. He often looked at each one to see if he could fall in

love with one of them, but none could compare to that one from his dreams.



Pastor Hodgkins appeared tall until you walked up to him. He was only five-eight with a long face. His straight gray hair was cut short about his ears and neck, but hung loose and would move back and forth as he walked. His small eyes were too close together, and his nose would remind one of a goose. He held his lips together as though he was pondering. He wore a black suit when he preached, and he preached with a mellow voice unless he wanted to emphasize something, and then his voice boomed and reverberated down the aisle of the little church.

Pastor Hodgkins, walking through the woods one day to get to the Leadbetter home, came across James imitating him. He would quote scripture and try to project his voice to all the animals of the forest. The pastor snuck up on the boy and tapped him on the shoulder. James almost jumped out of his boots.

“Pastor!” he exclaimed, turning around. “I, I didn’t see ya there.”

“I’m sure you can study yer Bible without all this hullabaloo.” The pastor grinned in a small oval, showing his perfect upper teeth.

James held his Bible to his heart. “I was practicin’.”

“You a Bible scholar, son?”

“I been readin’ the Bible since I was knee high.”

“Your daddy taught ya?” The pastor sat on a nearby stump.

“I would foller along while my daddy read. I would look over’is shoulder. We have a big family Bible.”

“Umm, hump.” Pastor Hodgkins scratched his clean-shaven chin. “Would ya like to do some readin’ fer me?”

“Ya mean in church?”

“Yup. Can ya start Sunday?”

“I’ll have to tell my folks. They don’t like surprises.”

“Maybe I’ll stop in ta say hi when I come back this way.”

“Thank ya, Pastor. I’ll appreciate it a lot.”

James and the pastor parted ways. Pastor Hodgkins continued to the Leadbetters and James went back to the farm.



True to his word, Pastor Hodgkins knocked on the door of the Singleton’s farmhouse. Ma Singleton answered.

“Pastor!” she said, dropping her jaw. “What brings you here? Who died this time?”

The pastor reared back and laughed. “No, no, Sister Singleton. No one died. I came to talk about yer son, James.”

She grabbed his arm and pulled him into the house. “What’s he done?”

“A great deal, I’m afraid.” He took off his hat and held it in his hand.

“Oh, dear,” she moaned. “I gotta sit down fer this. Come on in and pull up a chair.”

The pastor followed her into the parlor and took a seat next to hers. “Ya know James

reads the scriptures a lot.”

“Is he too loud?”

“That’s not the point ... well, maybe it is the point.” The pastor scratched his head. “I found him out’n the woods today learnin’ to project his voice. He has a good voice.”

“Is he disturbin’ the neighbors?”

“I don’t rightly know, Sister Singleton. What I do know is that he has a beautiful readin’ voice. That’s why I’m here.” Pastor Hodgkins leaned forward and put his hands together. “I want him to read fer us come Sunday.”

“Of course, he’ll read fer ya.” Ma Singleton’s eyes lit up. “I’ll slap’im if he don’t.”

“I’m sure we won’t have to go that far, Sister Singleton.” The pastor smiled as much as he could.

He rose to go, and Ma Singleton protested. “You don’t have ta part so soon. I made a fresh pot o’ coffee.”

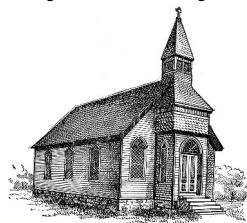
“Another time, Sister Singleton. A pastor’s time is precious, ya know. I have someone else to visit. Always visitin’, ya know.”

They walked to the door. “Well, come again when you can stay.”

“I will. I’ll want to talk to yer son again, also.”

Ma Singleton watched the pastor amble down the stairs and across the yard.

“Bless’im,” she said to herself. Then she yelled, “Bye Pastor. See ya Sunday.”



When Sunday came, James had this nervous hunger inside. He tried to cover it up by eating lots of pancakes, but as they walked to church, his stomach bubbled and boiled. This was going to be his first reading with the pastor. He didn't want to mess up. When they arrived, the pastor was shaking the hands of all the arrivals. When James stepped forward, and the pastor took his hand, he felt such a love from him that all the bad feelings melted.

“I set a chair for you up on the stand,” he smiled.

“Okay, Pastor.”

After the opening hymn, *Jesus, Savior of our Souls*, and a prayer from the pastor, everyone stood to read from the prayer book. James stood at the pulpit and savored the moment. He led the congregation in reading Psalm 23:

“1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

That was followed by reading the prayer that was on the opposite page:

“Save me from my pride, Lord,

My focus on just me;

Help me learn to serve, Lord,

Show me how to be;” (Prayers-For-Special-Help.com)

Help me follow thee, Lord,

Place my steps in thine;

Put thy words in my mouth, Lord,

Tell me what to say;

Make my life holy, Lord,

Make me divine.

James walked back to his seat, and the choir director led the congregation in several songs, pumping them up to hear the Word of God from the pastor. He preached a sermon on trusting in the Lord and having faith in His will. The organist played a melody while the ushers passed the plate. They sang another song, *Bringing in the Sheaves*, and the pastor closed with a prayer. Then the pastor commenced calling people to the altar. James felt moved to go down to the altar himself and pray for the people there. He felt the cleansing love of the Savior.

After the meeting was over, Pastor Hodgkins asked James to wait for him in his office. After a few conversations with friends and the congregation had left, the pastor went to his office in the left back part of the chapel. James was sitting there full of pride at helping out with the meeting and waiting for the congratulations he expected from pastor Hodgkins. To his utter surprise, the pastor started out with, “How dare you!”

“How dare you,” he said again, going behind his desk and sitting in his fine leather chair. “You are not given liberties reserved for ministers of the Gospel.” He gave James a

stern stare.

“I’m sorry, Pastor.” James moved to the edge of his hardback chair. “I felt moved upon to help those poor people coming to the altar.”

“I asked you to do some reading. You have a good voice. That’s *all* I asked you to do. Don’t presume authority you don’t have.” Pastor Hodgkins raised up on his hands, thought again and sat back down. “We’ll say nothin’ more about this. I will give you one more try. If you stay in yer place, I’ll keep ya.”

“Thank you, Pastor. I promise I’ll refrain next time.”

“Ya don’t see the choir director comin’ up to preach, do you?”

“No sir.” James fought his feelings and tried to be humble to his maker’s representative.

The pastor rose, extended his hand across the desk, and smiled. “I’ll see ya next week?”

“Yes, sir!” James felt happy and thrilled as he shook the pastor’s hand. He knew he had been forgiven. He would try to do what the pastor wanted him to do and not overstep his bounds. That afternoon James found himself in the woods again preaching another sermon to the forest creatures.



Chapter Two

James to the Rescue

Chuck proved to be a challenge. If James could convert him to Christ, that would be a gold star, and maybe then he would be his friend, but every time he approached him, he forgot what he was going to say, or Chuck walked away or started talking with someone else. So, James gave up for a while. He did not, however, give up his preaching in the woods and reciting in Church.

It was almost advantageous that Chuck and a few of his friends came upon James in the woods.

“Hey, Preacher!” He walked up and slapped James on the shoulder. “Who you preachin’ to? I’m sure the trees don’t have any sins.”

James turned to see his adversary. “If you and your friends there sit down here on this log, I’ll preach to you.”

“I’m sure you would, loudmouth.” Chuck stuck his leg behind James and shoved his hand into his face, knocking him to the ground. Everyone laughed and left James resting on his elbows.

That didn’t hinder James. He got to his knees, prayed for Chuck that his heart would be softened, and then stood with Bible in hand and continued to preach. There was a little rabbit that hopped out from behind the log and listened to the strange noise maker.



There was a tender and skinny little young woman that showed up at church the next Sunday. She seemed to be quite impressed with James, for she stared at him the whole time. She had a winter complexion crowned by black curls. Even her eyes were black. Her dress was almost white as if it were old but well cared for and was covered with delicate needlework.

James watched her leave with her parents after the service. She glanced over her shoulder and caught his eye.

Monday, while walking to school through the red and yellow crunchy leaves, a carriage passed him. It was carrying that strange girl. She waved at him. It seemed they were heading for the schoolhouse. By the time he arrived, she was sitting on the school steps. As soon as she noticed him, she waved frantically. He walked up to her, ignoring all the jeers from the other students, and sat next to her.

“I’m afraid,” he said politely, “that you have a knowledge of who I am, but I don’t know who you are.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Tabitha Taylor. Yer mother pointed you out to me. Ya see, she came over to visit last month, it must ‘ave been. I’m yer cousin. My daddy is yer mother’s brother.”

“You must mean Uncle Calvin. He’s the one with all the children.”

“Weeel, we got more’an you all got.” She laughed in her high-pitched voice.

“Whats you doin’ here in Senatobia?” James hunched over to see her better.

“Just visitin’ more relations.” She had a wide thin smile.

“Then that couldn’t have been yer parents I saw.”

“Nope. My mother’s cousin, Mr. Sawyer’n his family.” She sighed and rested her chin in her scrawny fists.

“I didn’t see any others at church.”

“They’re all grown an’ outta the house.”

“Well, here comes the teacher.” James stood and offered his hand. She grabbed it and stood along side him.

“Okay, children. Sorry I’m late. Let’s get in and be seated.”



During recess James and Tabitha sat under a tree together, and he offered Tabitha a pickle.

“Maybe a bite.” She took a bite and gave it back to him. Then she started on her buttered biscuit.

Chuck came along and said, “Well I’ll be. Preacher here has him a girl.” He bent down and put his finger under her chin, turning her head this way and that way. “Not much to look at.”

“Leave us alone, Chuck,” James groaned. “You have a whole playground of people to bother.”

“But yer my favorite, Preacher.” He swatted James alongside the head and walked away.

“School bully?” Tabitha asked.

“Not really. He likes everybody. He just doesn’t like me fer some reason.”

“If I were a boy, I’d pop’im one.”

“He’s very athletic. I’m sure you wouldn’t win even if you were a boy.”

“I’d kick’im in the you know wheres.”

“Why, Tabitha!”

She giggled.



There was a small creek behind the school that wound its way west toward Strayhorn. Marsh grasses and cattails lined its shores along with pin oak, dogwood, and sycamore, with a sprinkling of white oak and river birch. There was a small pier built decades ago where a couple of canoes were tied up. They were long and smooth and were used for racing. Because of the twists and turns of the little river, regular racing boats wouldn’t work.

Heavy rains to the east made the current swift and dangerous that Saturday. Doug had invited Cornelia Wilder to a boat ride. Her skin was pale and soft as a baby’s. She had pulled her straight auburn hair back, held together by pearl combs. That exposed her small, tender ears. Her neck invited a kiss. She had a joyful smile below a nose one would see only on a Greek statue. Doug could put his big hands around her waist with no space left over, and he did that as he lifted her into the canoe. Her only abnormality was the tip of her nose. It was as round as a marble.

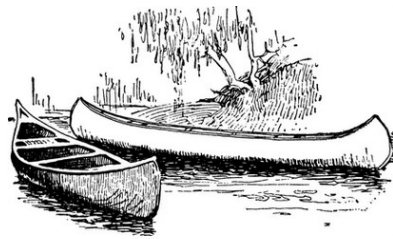
She had to tuck her petticoats into the canoe so they didn't hang out and get wet.

The sky was clear and bright blue with only a few puffs of cloud. The river seemed to stand still, yet, where the water lapped the shore, little eddies broke off and hurried downstream. The placidness was only an illusion made by the bright sun. As soon as they were both in the canoe, and Doug let go of the tie rope, the canoe spun around. Cornelia gave a short scream, but Doug had the boat under control in two seconds, using his paddle.

"That was fun!" He declared. "Huh?"

"It was ... thrilling," she said, looking around like a frightened doe.

They were on their way to adventure.



James was clearing brush near the creek that adjoined Tom Pickle's farm. Tom's brother, Henry, had left the region, giving his land to his brothers Tom and J P. James worked all three farms at different times during the year. It was difficult if J P was around, as they would both answer to the call of James and then they would have a laugh.

What James saw coming down the creek wasn't a laughing matter, though. He saw Cornelia and Doug passing swiftly in a canoe. They were arguing politely, but James could tell by her voice that the girl was scared. It seemed that the canoe was going too fast for her liking. James waved, but they didn't notice him. He had a hunch he should follow. He was using Tom's horse, Meriwether, that day, and it was tied not far away. He ran over to him and hopped on.

Meriwether carried James down a side path at a quick trot to a little bridge the creek ran under. He jumped off the horse and saw the girl in the canoe coming toward him.

Doug was missing.

So was one oar.

Cornelia was trying to paddle, but the canoe kept spinning.

“Help! Help!” she called. Then seeing James, she waved frantically. “Help me!”

James jumped over the fence on the bridge as the canoe passed underneath.

He missed.

As the canoe swung back around, he caught hold and lifted himself in.

“Hand me the oar!” he yelled.

James forced the canoe to shore. Cornelia jumped out and ran toward the path, and being very expert in the brush, got caught in a thorn bush. When he caught up to her, she was blubbing.

“Cornelia, calm down.” he said softly as he gently unhooked her dress from the thorns. “Where’s Doug?”

She pointed upstream. As soon as James released her from the bush, she grabbed him and cried on his shoulder. “Thank you! Oh, thank you!”

“Don’t forget to thank God. I’m sure He sent me to help.” James pried her off of him, leading her toward the horse. “Let’s go find yer boyfriend.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” Cornelia wiped wet hair from her face. “We were just going on a boat ride. Just a boat ride, you see,” she started sniffing. “I’ve lost him.” Then she bawled.

James became nervous. “Now, now, Cornelia. We must hurry. We may yet be able to save him.”

When they arrived at where Meriwether was patiently waiting, Cornelia asked, “What’s this?”

“Hurry and get on. We’re wastin’ time.”

“You don’t expect me to ride like a man, do you? She put her fists on her hips defiantly. “That’s a man’s saddle.”

“Come on. I’ll help you. You just put one foot in the stirrup and swing the other leg up and over.”

“That’s not lady-like.” She unruffled her dress.

“Come on! Times a’wastin’” He grabbed her foot, she screamed, he placed her foot into the stirrup, and boosted her into the saddle. She was very light-weight. “Now take yer foot from the stirrup so I can climb up.”

“What’s a stirrup?”

“It’s what’s yer foot’s in.”

Meriwether was getting anxious, whinnied, and started moving his back end in a circle.

James took hold of the reins and started petting the horse’s neck. “Steady, steady. You’re going to have two riders. It’s an emergency.” He grabbed the saddle horn and swung himself up, slapped Meriwether on the rump, and they were off. He held the squealing girl by his left arm and held the reins with his free hand. All the while, he became embarrassed at the closeness of this girl.

They crossed the bridge to the west side and went down toward the place where he had seen the canoe the first time.

After a minute, she cried, "Stop! It was about here." She pointed toward the creek. "He was struck by an over hanging limb. It knocked him into the water."

"Stay here." James tied Meriwether to a dogwood bush.

He made his way through the brush to the water. He spotted Doug downstream. He ran toward him. His face lay in the mud. James turned him over, noticing a bloody forehead.

James threw water on his face several times, washing the mud off, trying to wake him. He felt Doug's chest. His heart was struggling to beat. He wasn't breathing. He raised him, grabbed him around the waist, and lifted him. He was quite heavy. Trying to move him, he had to yank Doug's body, take a few steps backward, yank, and try a few more steps, yank him again, and in this way, tried to get him back to the horse. After a minute or so, Doug started coughing, fought to stand up, yelling, "Hey, what is this? Git yer hands off me."

James let go. "Can you stand? You've had quite a blow. You weren't breathing. Thank God yer alive."

"What do ya mean? Where's Cornelia? Where's the canoe?" He held his head and swayed.

James grabbed his arm. "Hold on. We don't want ya to fall back into the water, now, do we?"

"I'm all right." He took a deep breath. "Let me go."

"Can ya walk?"

“Yes, I can walk. Let go.”

James let go, waited a second to see if Doug was okay, and said, “Cornelia is over here.”

“What are you doin’ with Cornelia, Preacher?” He jabbed James’s chest with his forefinger.

James stepped back. “You left her alone in the boat.” He put his hands on his hips and then scratched his head, wondering how to treat the thankless. “I had to help, get her to shore. She was speeding down the ...”

“Where is she?” Doug demanded. “Is she all right?”

“Come this way,” James said, directing Doug to follow. “She’s waiting for us.”

Cornelia saw the two boys coming through the underbrush. “Doug! Are you all right? You’re all bloody.”

Doug approached the horse. “Are *you* all right? What are you doin’ on a horse?”

“James here rescued me. I thought I was going to drown.” She reached out to Doug while James stood by watching. “Git me down.”

Doug helped her down, put his arm around her, and turned to James. “You put her up there?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t have a coach.” James sighed. “I needed to take care of her and look for you.”

“Well, that’s not how you treat a lady!” Doug screwed up his face. “What’d ya do with our canoe?” He stood there holding Cornelia close to his side. *He* was now the protector.

“It’s a mile or so downstream. I guess I’ll let you and Cornelia there go back and carry it home. You’ll never be able to paddle upstream in this current.”

As James turned to leave, Doug said, “Wait. We gotta git Cornelia home. Then we can come back for the canoe. You up for a trek?”

“Yeah. My work can wait another day.” James took a step back with one hand on his hip and with the other, he scratched his nose. He looked at the ground and then back up to Doug, wondering how to help him.

“I’ll take Cornelia home on the horse and come back for you.”

“Okay.”

“I’m not getting back on that horse.” Cornelia took a step away from Doug.

He said, “You can ride side-saddle like a proper lady, and I’ll walk alongside, leadin’ the horse with the reins.” Doug smiled. “I’ll go slow.”

“Okay. Be gentle.”

She let Doug put his hands around her waist again and lift her onto Meriwether, letting both legs dangle down on his right side.

Meriwether turned his head to look at her and grunted.

James walked behind the two until they came to the little bridge. “I’ll stay here until you return.”



“Okay,” Doug said without looking back as they crossed.

James waited, leaning on his elbows against the north rail of the little bridge, staring at Doug as he approached, riding on Meriwether’s back. *It must have been three hours,* James thought. “What kept ya?” he asked. He noticed Doug was wearing a bandage around his head.

“Let’s git the canoe,” Doug responded. “Where is it? And what are ya goin’ to do with the horse?”

“Don’t worry about Meriwether. He’s a smart horse. He’ll go straight home.”

James walked down and off the bridge and up to Doug who slid off the horse. James grabbed the reins from Doug, and wrapping them onto the horn of the saddle, slapped Meriwether’s rump, and away he went.

“It’s this way,” James instructed, walking back across the bridge. “I hid it in the bush just in case.”

They marched down the path and then into the brush where James had hidden it. They pulled it out and onto the path, bent down, and rolled it onto their shoulders. They had plenty of experience doing this during the boat races at school.

James didn’t know if it was from a guilty conscience or if Cornelia told him to do it,

but as they walked along, it seemed that Doug was trying to apologize or thank him.

“Cornelia said you brought me back to life. I don’t know about that. I do know I got knocked off the boat. It was going pretty fast, and then I woke up when you were dragging me.” He spoke apologetically, but it wasn’t the words most people would use.

They crossed the bridge to the side that led back to the school. Nothing more was said as they walked. When they arrived at the pier, they slid the canoe into the water next to the other canoe and tied it up to the post.

James offered his hand. “Thanks for helping.”

“This doesn’t make us friends,” Doug said as he crossed the schoolyard and down the road that led to Tom Pickle’s place.

James followed.

Doug turned around. “Why are you following me? Didn’t I tell you to leave me alone?”

“I have a few things at Tom Pickles’,” James said, hands in his pockets, as he walked along. “I’ve been working there all day.”

Doug huffed. “Okay.” He walked a little ways and then said, “I took Cornelia there. Tom Pickle is my uncle, and we were going there afterward. He’s holding a party for the family.”

When they arrived at the Pickle farm Doug said, “Pick up yer things and be off with ya.”

“I have to talk to yer uncle first, tell’m I’ll have to come back tomorrah to finish the work I started.”

“Okay, but don’t dawdle.”

When they arrived at the farmhouse, James saw a picnic going on in the front lawn.

Tom Pickle saw him and Doug and went up to them.

“Doug! James!” He grabbed the two boys and hugged them both. “I’m glad yer back. Come along.” He put his hands on each of the boys and led them over to a table where Cornelia waited. “Cornelia told me all about what happened. I’m glad yer both safe. If ya want to clean up, the pump is out back, and Jack Robbins can get clothes for ya.”

Doug spoke to Cornelia and then headed for the back of the house.

“I’d better git along home, Tom,” James said, putting his thumbs into his back pockets. “I’ll see ya tomorrah and finish up with the brush along the creek.”

“Nonsense. You can’t go anyway. Yer folks are here.”

Chapter Three

The Picnic

That was a surprise. James was really tired and wanted to rest, but he thanked Tom and headed out back. A chill rippled up his back. He felt a pull, turned, and spotted a girl through the crowd. His heart stopped. His whole body froze, and he broke out into a sweat. He hadn't thought of her for a long time. It was so unreal. She was *the* girl he had seen at his sister's wedding a couple of years ago. All he could do was stand there staring at her and breathe heavily. He caught her eye. She smiled and started skipping, lifting her skirt with both hands. She giggled, swirled, and then fled, getting lost in the crowd.

James wanted to chase her as when he was at his sister's wedding, but wiping his dirty hands on his shirt, he realized he needed to go out back and wash up. As he walked toward the back of the house, he saw a black gentleman holding a bundle of clothes. *He must be the long-time butler, Jack Robins*, James thought, as he was dressed in tails and had short gray hair.

He addressed James as "Master James?" as he handed him clothes. "You will find that these fit pretty good."

James took the clothes and said, "Thank you." He kept looking back at the picnic hoping to see that girl.

Jack Robbins asked, "Is there something else I can do for you?"

"No," he said, hesitating. "Thank you." He hurried off to the pump around the back.

He met Doug returning to the picnic and, he assumed, Cornelia. Doug went out of his way to bump into James's shoulder, almost knocking the clothes out of his arm.

“Scuse me, Preacher.” He walked away laughing, having an air of being sure of himself.

James washed up and changed clothes out by the pump. He was glad everyone was in the front yard. There were very young black kids playing by the outhouses, but that didn’t matter. They wouldn’t have noticed. They were too busy jumping through hoops or ropes.

Walking back to the picnic, James’s heart beat hard. It was enough that he was tired from all the work he did that day, but now, worried he would miss seeing that girl again, he felt very fatigued yet walking on air at the same time. It was enough to make him dizzy. Spotting his family all neatly dressed and seated on a blanket, surrounded by many other families, he felt like coming through the dark shadows into the light of day.

“James,” his mother, Francis Anne, called out, “I’m glad to see you made it.”

His sister Mary said, “Sit with me, James.”

Young John cried, “You never sit by me.”

Mary calmed him down with, “Don’t worry, he will sit between us. Then he will be sitting by both of us.”

“Yay!” he cried.

But James’s mind was preoccupied. He looked around but didn’t see *her*, the girl from his dreams. Everyone looked at him, and he saw that they each had plates. Then he realized he was hungry, and said, “I guess I had better git me a plate.”

Martha, now a Struder, waved at him from behind their parents. She lifted her new baby for him to see.

“Hi Martha,” he said. “Congratulations.”

His father Charles pointed with his knife, and his mother said, “Over there.”

He winked at his sister and walked as if he were in a daze to a line of tables covered with food. He saw potato salad, fried chicken, sliced ham, Bar-b-Qued beef and sausages, greens and beans, and all kinds of pickles. There must have been ten different kinds of pickles, one for each member of the Pickle family. And then there were the cold cuts for sandwiches.

James walked along filling his plate, and at one point, where there was a bowl of green beans and bacon, two hands tried to grab the same serving spoon. At least, that’s what James thought. When he grabbed the spoon, she grabbed his hand. They both withdrew and looked at each other. James remembered seeing the back side of her light blue dress just before he saw the green beans. She stood there smiling at him with her thin lips. Her facial features matched her body. She was thin everywhere except for her broad-rimmed hat which was also blue with two pink ribbons hanging down. It matched her blue dress with its pink accents of ribbons running through the lace.

James stood there in shock.

“Go ahead,” said a light soprano voice. “You were here first.”

“Uh.” James didn’t know what to say. “Oh, no. Uh, ladies come first.”

“Thank you.”

She took green beans, and James followed her, not taking anything else.

“Have we met before?” He asked, passing up the candied yams. “You look awfully familiar.”

“Yes, so do you.” She picked up a couple of biscuits. “What family are you from? I’m

with the Presley's."

"Singleton's. Hey. I remember you now." He followed her away from the table. "You went to my sister Martha's weddin'."

He kept following her until she stopped at a particular blanket occupied by the Presley family.

"I'm sorry. I don't remember goin' to no weddin'." She stood there with heart palpitations, trying not to get excited. "This is the guy that's been hauntin' all my dreams. I must smile, but to jump up and down and grab him or laugh would be way out of line," she whispered to herself.

"I'm sure it was you. It was at the French Hotel here in Senatobia." He stood there with a half-filled plate, feeling like an idiot.

The girl took a deep breath. "Would you sit with me? We can talk."

He sat down beside her, but he lay his plate aside.

"You remind me of someone I did see," she said, "at the French Hotel, but it wasn't a weddin', it was a spellin' bee."

"Well." James screwed up his face as he tried to remember. "We saw each other somewhere, I'm sure."

"It must have been in Heaven," she said, scratching her nose.

"Well, I'll be!" Her mother, Sarah Jane, exclaimed. "Ye come over here an' sit wif yer family an' don't introduce yer new friend." She pointed at her daughter with her fork.

"Oh, Ma, this is?" She raised her eyebrows as she stared at James.

"James Singleton, Ma'am."

“It’s James Singleton,” the girl said shyly.

“She never brought home a stray man afore,” Sarah Jane said, gnawing on a chicken leg.

James stared at his new friend. “But I don’t know yer name.”

“She’s Emma Jane,” her mother said.

“Oh, Ma, I can speak fer myself. Emma.” Emma sighed.

“That’s a nice name.” Jame’s appetite got thrown out the window.

James’s family had noticed him walk by with a girl, but they didn’t stop. They went and sat with another family.



“Well, I’ll be dog-gonned,” Francis Anne said. “What do you think about that, Charles? Charles. Git yer nose out’o yer plate and pay attention.”

“We been abandoned, Mama,” Mary said.

“I thought he was gonna sit by us,” little John said, dropping his shoulders.

“I think he’s picked up some girl,” Anne said.

“Looks like the girl picked him up,” Charles said.

“Wiiill, I don’t think it’s fair!” John said, folding his arms and pouting.

“Eat yer dinner ‘re the mice will come an’ carry it away,” Anne said sweetly.



Emma and James sat staring at each other. Hunger for food was replaced with hunger

for each other. They agreed without a word, grabbed each other's hands, and ran away to find an empty spot under a tree all their own.

"I have a tree at home." Emma landed under a sycamore tree in the woods. "I sit against it whenever I need to be alone and think."

"I go into the woods with my Bible and just stand there in awe." James said, smiling. "But I'm never alone. God is always there."

"I feel the same way when I go out there, even though Toby always follows me."

"Who's Toby?"

"He's my hound dawg."

James joined Emma. They sat there for a long time staring at each other. Both of them nervously pulled at the grass, and as they noticed what they were doing, they laughed.

"I don't have a personal dog," James said. "I haven't really noticed, but I think there is a dog on the farm. If there is, I think he belongs to some neighbor. We have cats in the barn."

"So do we. The hounds stay out o' the barn." Emma reached around her knees to hold her feet.

"What do ya mean ...," they said in unison and laughed again.

"Oh, you go first," James said, placing his hand on her shoulder. He jumped when he realized he was touching a girl.

"When you said you saw me. I declare. It wasn't in the right place." She squeezed her feet and looked up at him.

"I thought I saw you at my sister Mary's weddin' reception, an' you ran away, an'

since then, I've dreamed about you almost every night for a full year." He pulled at his collar. It was getting awfully tight.

"I could have sworn it was you at the hotel, but I knew it was only my imagination. I have a big one, you see." She shrugged. "That night, I dreamed of a boy. He was a farmer, and I'll be dangled if you don't look like him." She touched his face.

"Ohhh!" James exclaimed. "I wouldn't want to see you danglin'."

She grimaced and pinched him on the arm.

"Ouch." He scrunched up his face and rubbed his arm. "What'd ya do that for?"

"Now, then. They would have to dangle me wouldn't they, if you weren't real. They would think I'm loony." She caressed his face. "Oh. It's me I should pinch." She pinched her own arm. "I guess I'm not imaginin' ya. I feel awake."

"I don't think it would be much of a picnic," James said, holding her hand, "if I went to a hangin' party and you were the one being hung."

"I guess no one has ever said such a nicer thing to me before ... I think." She tapped her face with her free finger.

They enjoyed laughing with each other.



James and Emma hadn't noticed the sun going down. They only heard people calling their names.

"Emma!," Sarah Jane called.

"James!," Frances Anne called.

Then there were several children calling out, “James!” and “Emma!”

“I guess we’d better be gitten’,” Emma said, taking her head off his shoulder and replacing her wide-rimmed bonnet.

James rose and offered his hand to Emma. He lifted her to her feet, and she put the other hand to her mouth, answering, “We’re over here!”

The two lovebirds crunched through the overgrowth, and when Emma saw children racing toward them and the two mothers in the background, she said, “Mithers smithers. If I were a bit younger, my *mither* would have a switch in her hand.”

“Your mother doesn't want you this close to a man?”

“Oh, she wants me to now.” They stepped out into the clearing. “She has a time tryin’ to get me with a beau. She’s dead set on measurin’ me fer a weddin’ dress.”

Mary stood back while little Johnny grabbed hold of James’s hand while Eddy of the other family grabbed Emma’s.

“Where you been, James?” Johnny said in a whiny voice.

“Yeah, where you been?” Eddy asked Emma.

“We’re ya smoochin’?” Mary asked as they walked by her.

“Everbody’s been lookin’ fer ya,” Ma Presley said (Sarah Jane) as she joined the crowd marching back to the picnic.

“People git worried ya know,” Ma Singleton said. (Frances Anne)

James and Emma were pulled apart by their families.

“Can I call on ye?” James asked.

“You’d better,” Emma Jane said, laughing, “or I’m gonna be in trouble.”

“Now don’t say a thing like that,” Ma Presley said. She turned to the other woman as they separated and said, “Bye, Miz. Singleton. Hope to ta see ya again,”

“Hope to, Miz. Presley.”

James couldn’t sleep. He couldn’t lay in his bed. He stood by the window peering at the moon and the stars, wondering if Emma Jane was doing the same.



Emma was under her tree with Toby at her side. He lay his chin on her leg and stared at her with longing eyes.

“Now don’t you go and get jealous just because I got me a beau,” she said, petting his head and neck. He whined and licked her fingers.

Emma sat there for a long time until a song came to mind she had heard long ago. She sang softly.

“The lady sang a song she heard along an open path
For her boy to hear, touching his heart so dear.
Her voice was as a nightingale that filled the air;
So sweet a song he had never heard in all his life,
A song that floated to his ear and moon and stars;
He sent an angel from on high to say ‘I am yours.’
Sweet, sweet, my love is yours, you took my heart away.
You took my heart away. Sweet, sweet.”



Chapter Four

Courting



Emma



James

James found the Presley farm and rode on his horse up to the front door with flowers in his hand. The whitewashed house had a wide veranda with Greek columns separated by white balustrades. Everything was painted white except for the wooden planks on the portico. They were stained and polished.

Woo, Wee! Thought James as he looked around. “They are a might rich,” he whispered to Meriwether.

He dismounted his horse, a payment for the work he had done for Tom Pickle, tied him to a ring a cast iron black boy held in his frozen fist, and stepped up a couple of stairs to the porch. He walked over to the door and banged the big brass knocker. He could hear an echo, evidence of a large entrance behind the door. Presently, a tall, portly black gentleman opened the door. Instead of asking his purpose, the butler said, “She is waiting for you in the drawing room.”

And how did she know I was coming?

“What a nice house,” was all James could think to say as he looked around.

The room was circular and held a wide staircase that arced up against the left wall arriving at a second-story terrace.

“Right this way, sir,” the old gentleman said, waving his hand toward an open door at the foot of the stairs.

The butler stood at the entrance and motioned him to enter. James peeped into the room, not knowing if it was proper to enter or not.

“Come on in, silly boy.” He heard a familiar soprano voice beckoning him. It was Emma. She sat, leaning into the corner of the divan. She patted the cushion next to her as if she wanted him to sit there. She wore an expensive-looking blue dress with a dark burgundy bow covering the lace around her neck. The same kind of bow decorated the top of her head. The ends of her puffed sleeves exhibited white lace. Her hair hung in long curls on each side of her face.

James almost tip-toed into the room as though he were in church. He sat slowly down beside his dreamboat, worried everything would pop like a bubble. He handed Emma the flowers.

“Here. These are for you.”

“Mattie!” she called. “Come get these flowers and put ’m in a vase.”

When Emma raised her voice her soprano turned into an alto.

A young black maid dressed in a black uniform with a white frilly apron, and wearing a white bonnet came and snatched the flowers from Emma. “Yes’ m, Miss Emma.”

As Mattie left, Emma called after her. “And bring James and me some refreshment.”

“Will do, Miss Emma,” echoed through the entrance.

Emma touched his knee. “I do hope you like cake and lemonade.”

“Oh, yes. I do.”

“You can wait for the preacher to say that.” She giggled, covering her mouth with her dainty handkerchief.

James blushed. “I expected yer loyal dog to be sittin’ here.”

“Oh, I thought he was.” When she stopped laughing, she said, “Oh, no. I don’t let’m see company until ..., well, we would have to go out to the kennel afterwards, and I’ll introduce‘im to you.”

“I’m an outdoor person,” James said. “I never had a dog before. I just never thought of it. Never had pets, but I do try to entertain the locals out’n the woods.”

“I can just see ya out there surrounded by all them animules, sort o’ like that feller, what was his name?” She looked up at the ceiling as though that’s where her memory resided.

“That was St. Francis of Assisi.”

“Oh, yes.” She touched her cheek with her fingertips. “I remember my mommy telling me that story.”

They sat there in silence for a while just staring at each other. James wanted to ask her what she had been doing lately, but since it was her house, he waited for her to say something next. She did after a couple of minutes.

Mattie brought in a silver tray with two tall lemonades and small plates filled with cookies and petit fours. They were iced with different colors and striped with white frosting.

She sat the tray on the tea table in front of the divan and left the two to fend for themselves.

“Help yerself,” Emma said, lifting a petit four off the plate and grabbing her lemonade.

James helped himself to the cookies and saw that Emma had a napkin on her lap, so he took one of those from the tray, laid it in his lap, and piled cookies on it.

Emma laughed. “Why don’t you just take the plate?”

James put the cookies back, took the plate, and set it on his lap. He smiled as he took his first bite of a petit four. “These are good.”

“You can thank my black mammy. She knows how to cook.”

“I guess she made these yummy cookies too?” James smacked his lips.

“Yes, bless my soul. She is the best cook.”

“Does she let you do any of the cookin’?”

“My soul, no!” She screwed up her face. “She allows nobody in that kitchen ‘cept herself.”

James and Emma stared at each other for a long while, munching on cakes and cookies and drinking lemonade. Then it occurred to Emma to say something.

“What do ya do?” She clasped her hands over her knee.

“I do odd jobs around the farms, as much as I can get. The farmers aren’t used to white folk workin’ for them. Except for my friends, they usually call men like me white trash.”

James finally decided he would enjoy that lemonade sitting on the tray. He gave it a few sips and sat it down again.

“You gonna be a farmer like yer daddy? Or, some say you’re a preacher.”

“I ain’t gonna be tied down, you see, to a farm or any other kind of industry.” James slapped his hands together. Then he smiled broadly. “I believe in followin’ the Lord an’ bein’ his disciple. I have to be free to go anywhere or do anythang that the Spirit sees fit to lead me.”

“That takes the cake.” She took the last petit four. “And I do mean that literally. But I imagine that you take those Sunday School classes a bit serious.”

“I do, I do.” He took her right hand. “I think, that is, for me, it’s the only work worthwhile doin’.” He patted her hand. “Of course, helpin’ the neighbors is the same work as the Lord did when he was here.”

“That’s true.” Emma sucked on her lower lip, then made the announcement, “And if I married you, James, I bet I would be as poor as a black ninny.”

He sipped his lemonade and took another cookie, not acknowledging what she just said. He changed the subject back to economics. “The Lord said that he had nary a place to lay his head. And I guess so. Anyone in the Lord’s ministry will be just like him, and as poor.”

“I’ve been to Memphis,” Emma said. “They have churches with large congregations. Those preachers must rake in the money.”

“Ye can’t serve God and mammon, you know.”

Emma smiled gleefully. “But it helps when ye got it.”

“Don’t matter to me.” James put his empty plate back on the silver tray and gulped down his lemonade. “I got access to all of God’s creations. I go out into the woods, and I

feel richer than anyone."

Emma rested her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands. She smiled. "You are inspirin'." But then, she pouted.

Emma rose abruptly. "Let's go see Toby."

James grabbed his lemonade glass. When he found it was empty, he said, "Ah, shuckes," under his breath. He stood up and placed his hand in hers. They left out the front door before her butler could assist them.

The kennel was out behind the barn to the left of the big house. Other dogs had to have their own cage, but most of them were caged together. Toby, even though his hunting skills couldn't be touched, was caged with the rest of the group. He couldn't be left alone. He would just howl all night.

When Toby smelled his mistress come, he ran to the chicken wire and jumped against it, riveting his eyes onto Emma. He jumped up again, and barked, clawing at the fence, but when he noticed there was a stranger with her, he backed down. His body tried to return to the corner where he had been sleeping, but his face stayed staring at Emma. He wagged his tail, and when she came up against the fence, he jumped up and licked her fingers she stuck through to hold onto the fence.

James came up against her and Toby backed down and whined.

"Toby. Toby," Emma called. "This is James." She put her arm around him and caressed his shoulder. "This here's my friend."

Toby came up to the fence and sniffed. James put the palm of his hand against the fence. Toby sniffed his hand and sat down, panting. He looked at Emma and then looked at

James. Then he jumped back up to Emma, scratching at the fence and whining.

“Okay, Toby,” she said. “You can come out, but you won’t be jumpin’ on my dress.”

“Is he that trained?” James asked, putting his hands in his pockets.

“He’d better be, er I’ll box ‘is ears.”

When Emma opened the gate, Toby came out at the speed of a locomotive, and instead of jumping onto Emma, he jumped onto James and tried to lick his face. James laughed and tried his best to handle the situation, but Emma had to pull him off, saying, "Down, Toby! Down. Be respectful ta visitors.”

Toby whined then barked and tried to get away from Emma’s hold onto his collar.

“Come on. Back in the pen fer ya.”

James opened the gate for her as she forced him in. She closed the gate, and Toby aggressively jumped at her, digging his front paws into the dirt and barked.

“Now you behave,” she said, as though she could intimidate Toby, “or I’m not comin’ back fer a long time.”

She took hold of James' hand and led him away from the dogs, which, by now, were all barking and howling in support of their brother Toby.

“He just wants to play, play, play. That’s all he wants to do.” Emma walked away, staring at the ground.

“I guess he’s just like a child,” James said, also staring at the ground. “We’re goin’ to have to get used to such actions when we have children.”

Emma stopped and looked up at James. “Are you proposin’?”

He put his arm around her thin waist. “I thought it was mutual.”

Emma stepped away. "It's not mutual until ye propose."

"Then," James said as he got down on one knee, grabbing Emma's right hand, "I formally propose. Emma, will you marry me?"

"Then do I get a ring?" She stretched out her hand.

"Yes. I'll get you the perttiest little ring I can find, one that will fit yer tinky little finger."

Emma jumped up and down, saying, "ya-us, ya-us," and jumped into James' arms.

Chapter Four

The Announcement and Wedding

There was a small note in the Tate County Record:

“James S. Singleton and Emma J. Presley have announced their nuptials. Family members are invited to attend their wedding which will take place the Eighth of September on the Presley Plantation.”

It took several weeks of arguing with her mother before Emma could convince her that marrying James was right for her. She only consented to Emma just to stop the conflict.

Emma gave her a great big hug and smiled brightly from ear to ear.

Her mother told her that now she could get off the veranda and move back into the house, for she had at one point in the argument thrown Emma out.

Her father was all for the wedding if that was what Emma wanted, but he couldn't understand it. He explained to her that she would have to live in abject poverty. She had always been given what she wanted. Why would she throw all that away?

“Because I love'im, Daddy,” was all she could say.

They were sitting on the divan in the sitting room.

“Honey,” he said. “Love lasts only five years. When the children come and the bills come, and you have to keep the house clean for parishioners and the like, you have to make the decision each day whether to love your husband, leave'im, or kill'im. By then, love doesn't come automatically.”

The dogs started barking in a peculiar way.

“I gotta go. I told Toby to tell me when James shows up.” She hugged her daddy. “I'll

love'im always."

"Okay, just remember what I said."

Emma raced to the front door, opened it before the butler arrived, and there stood James shining radiantly.

"I have my weddin' dress all sewn and fitted," she said as they embraced.

"I have my Sunday suit all pressed." James kissed her neck. It was so soft and sweet smelling, like magnolias.

The Butler arrived and unburdened James from his suit.

"Come in. There is decoratin' to do."

He kissed her again with a great big hug. "Can you believe it? Tomorry we will be man and wife."

"And Toby?" she asked pathetically.

He took her by the shoulders, pushed her out to see her clearly, and said, "Man, wife, and dog."

They laughed.

The rest of the day was spent gathering boughs and flowers and tying them together with wide ribbons saved from Christmas. By the end of the day, not a door nor a window was left without the touch of Nature, making the whole house smell like a forest.

With the help of a few of the black children who lived on the farm, they built a bowery within the large entrance, covering it with ribbons, flowers, and Christmas bells for effect. That was the children's idea.

When it was time to go, Elijah, the butler asked James, "Won't you stay? Bobby Joe

has taken your horse to the barn for the night. Don't worry. He will take very good care of him. There is a room prepared for you upstairs."

James gave Emma a questioning look.

"I thought you would be tired," Emma said, holding his hands. "And I just can't let go of you. Please say you'll stay."

"All right. But in the mornin' we gotta make up a wagon to escape in. After the marriage, I gotta run away with my bride and make our own home."

Emma jumped up and down on her dainty feet, saying, "Oh thank ya, thank ya." Then she grabbed him and kissed him right on the mouth in front of the butler who cleared his throat.

"Don't forget, though," she said, "The weddin' reception is right after that, and we might be stayin' up late."

"Well, I don't want to!" James said in a huff, slamming his hands into his pockets and staring down at the floor. He saw an ant and kicked it sideways with his foot.

"Now, dear," she said as she led him up the stairs, "Everone goes through the same thang. It won't hurt ya just one day."

They arrived at the top of the stairs. He took her hands in his. "I'm afraid that if we don't leave this place, we will get stuck here."

"You let me worry 'bout that." They arrived at his bedroom. The door was open. "You just get a good night's rest. I'll see ya at breakfast."

They said good night to each other, kissed, and stared at each other as Emma backed up to her bedroom. She smiled and waved as she slowly disappeared behind the door. It

shut, and she was gone.

James went into his room and shut the door. A lantern on top of the chest of drawers had been lit. He saw a night shirt laid out for him on the bed. He yawned as he undressed. It had been a long day, and it seemed that Emma had planned another long day tomorrow. He was anxious to get her home and alone.



James was awakened in the middle of the night as if the house was on fire. It was Emma yelling. “Git yer clothes on! We gotta hurry! The dogs ‘re loose. The chase is on!”

“What!” James rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “Oh, dammit! Pray the Lord forgive me.”

In two seconds flat, James was running down the stairs, following Emma. *The dogs are loose.* It made him want to curse. These Virginians brought their peculiar ways to Mississippi. It was just the other day he was talking to Charles, Emma’s pa. He had forgotten all about it. The neighbors always take the new groom hunting on the night before the wedding.

“Now don’t forget. Goin’ huntin’ with the hounds is the glue that holds neighbors together,” he had told James.

Well, he told himself running to catch up with the pack, preachers need to get in there and be friendly with the neighbors.

James found that hunting was mostly getting swatted with tree limbs, getting

scratched by bushes, getting your feet muddy or soppin' wet, and trying to keep up with the fellers.

Toby was in the lead, as usual.

The dogs howled through the night and led the hunters this way and that, chasing a ghost, as it were. It was a goose chase as far as James was concerned. But eventually, and it seemed like several hours of chasing, the dogs treed a coon. Everyone stopped and took a breather, watching Charles raise his gun in the bright moonlight. All the dog owners leashed their hounds so they wouldn't chomp on the coon after it was shot. The firing of the gun rang through the forest. The body of the coon dropped to the ground with a thud. The dogs barked, and tried to get to the coon, but were held back by their owners. They each gave their dogs a reward of beef jerky.

Emma petted Toby, and he licked her in the face. "You did great like ever, Toby."

Charles lifted the raccoon by its tail. Everyone gave a rebel shout and slapped each other on the back as if they had done all the work.

"Isn't it fun?" Emma asked, approaching James.

"Fun as Hell," James said, sarcastically. "I never spent such a night."

"We do it all the time." She placed her hand on James' shoulder. "You should know that coons 're night creatures."

"I did have fun, but sometimes ..." James thought of all the times he went into the forest and contemplated God. The little animals would just come up to him to listen to him preach. He would never raise a gun to them. "Let's get back home. I know that liqueur comes next."

James and Emma walked through the forest hand in hand with Toby following. The crickets played their fiddles. The owls screeched and whooped. They could hear Toby panting behind them. The bright full moon hung overhead, following them.



Emma was up with the sun and knocking on James' door. "Breakfast is ready. Git yer body up. We're havin' our weddin' breakfast with the family."

Where does she get the energy?

James had to pull himself out of bed. He sat there a couple of minutes rubbing his face. He would usually shave before breakfast unless he was on the farm, but he didn't bring a razor. He sluggishly dressed and went to the chest of drawers where there was a porcelain dish and water jug set decorated with blue windmills. Beside it was a razor and a bar of soap. He poured water into the dish, and with his hands, splashed water onto his face, shaved, and then rubbed his hands through his hair to comb it as a bachelor would.

"Better hurry before nothin's left," Emma said with her ear to the door.

When James opened the door, she almost fell into his arms. Surely that would have been romantic, but she straightened up and said, "You sure are quiet."

"Did I get any sleep?" was all he could say.

Emma grabbed his hand and ushered him downstairs. The veranda bent around the house to the right when you're outside. They walked through the dining room which extended out to the veranda for having breakfast outside when the weather was nice, and

today, there were blue skies and sunshine. Cows mooed in the background, and the smell of hay drifted by.

There was William, home from college, George, the young teen, and ten-year-old Tom already eating. Then Emma's mother, Sarah Jane, walked in apologizing for being late. Charles came in even later. He complained about one of the workers in the barn.

"Charles, please," Sarah Jane said calmly, but as one who had a hangover. "Let Emma have her wedding day breakfast."

There were ham and eggs, bacon and biscuits, jams and jellies, pancakes and cornbread muffins, strawberries, peach preserves, and apple tarts. Everyone stayed busy stuffing their mouths. Charles and his boys tried talking to James about the night's hunt, Emma and her mother were planning the marriage, and James just stared at his plate filled with everything on the table by who knows and when.

James kept falling asleep every time he blinked, so, after eating a few bites, he excused himself. He walked to the front of the house, found an old rocker, sat down, stretched his legs, and fell fast asleep. He enjoyed only a few moments of nap time when Emma's voice woke him.

"Come on," she said excitedly. "We're goin' horseback ridin'. That will lift yer spirits. Wait until you feel the breeze in yer face. It will be wonderful."

So, James and Emma strolled down to the barn where two saddled horses awaited them. One of them was his old friend Meriwether. He bobbed his head up and down and whinnied. He was all ready to go. As they mounted, James was surprised at what refreshment that little nap did for him.

Off they raced, passing magnolias and elms on a grassy plain. The air was refreshing as Emma had said. He and Emma laughed and enjoyed the breeze.

“Come on!” Emma yelled. “I’ll race ya to Leadbelly’s Landin’.” Off she went.

James held Meriwether back a couple of seconds because he knew he was a faster horse. He let go of the reins, and Meriwether was off like a professional racehorse. He was professional enough to have won many betting races, but when he started slacking, Tom Pickle gave him to James. But still, he was a good runner.

James caught up with Emma as they came to a dock sticking out into a lake. She didn’t stop. She turned around and raced back to the plantation. James let her win. He wouldn’t admit that out loud. He let her brag about her steed.

“I bet ya you haven’t seen a faster horse!” She laughed. “Havenin’ fun?”

James just smiled.

“Come on,” she said, kicking her horse. “We gotta lot o’ time on our hands afore the weddin’.”

James rubbed the middle of his forehead, wondering what was up next. He didn’t have to worry, because when they returned and put the horses in the barn, she led him up to the veranda. They sat in a nice breeze that smelled like freshly cut grass and enjoyed a tall glass of lemonade. After she had finished her drink, which had been spiked with the dew of a Kentucky still, about five minutes of small talk and she dozed off. That was just right for James. He put his hands behind his back, stretched his legs, and napped for a long time.

James woke up and looked around. He was alone as he expected. Emma had gone off again. At least, she didn’t take him with her. He lay back again and started snoozing when

Emma called.

“There you are. Come on. We gotta get dressed.” She grabbed his hand and pulled him off the chair.

“That time already?” he asked.

James’ stomach suddenly became upset, and his heart beat hard and fast. It was actually happening. His bachelorhood was ending. He was marrying scary Emma. He was sure there would be battles over who got to be the boss, but he loved her, didn’t he? He was taking her into a life of vowed poverty. How would he be able to keep her? All of a sudden, he was standing in front of his bedroom.

“See ya in a while.” Emma waved and disappeared into her bedroom.

James found his newly pressed suit laid out on his bed. He had never seen such a fine job of ironing. His mother couldn’t have done it. He picked up the suit. It was a nice way to start a new life. He imagined it was something like being baptized and having your sins washed away. He made a mental note to ask Emma if she had been baptized. He took a deep breath and got dressed.

He walked out onto the gallery, walked over to the balustrade and looked down into the foyer. People were gathering and sitting in the chairs provided. His mother looked up and waved at him. He waved back. He saw his dad and sisters Mary and Martha. They were there with their families, and little brother Johnny was there. It seemed like a lot of Emma’s aunts and uncles were there too.

James walked slowly down the stairs. If he was going to be a preacher, he should get used to congregating and mixing with a lot of people. But today, being around a bunch of

strangers, he just wanted to run away and hide. He would dig himself into a hole and fold up like a crawly bug so only his armor was showing.

He joined his family and was talking about what all were doing when the butler asked him to come to the front.

A piano had been brought in, and as soon as James was positioned within the bowery, a pianist played the Bridal Chorus from the Richard Wagner opera Lohengrin. It was becoming popular now at weddings, copying Queen Victoria's wedding, as was the use of the white gown.

Then everyone's eyes turned toward the arching staircase. Emma Jane walked stately down the stairs. Her gown sparkled. She was joined by her father, James Madison Presley who took her arm in his, and they continued their march toward the bowery. Here, Mr. Presley gave Emma's hand to James.

As he looked into Emma's eyes, a thought flickered through his mind. She loves me only because my name is James, just like her father.

They now both faced the minister, the Reverend Hodgkins, whose tall Ichabod Crane features never changed.

The pastor gave a little sermon to James and Emma about having to live together, that the only way they would know happiness was to be good Christians and live by the words of Jesus in the Bible and to treat each other as He would treat them. They were to raise their children to be good Christians, and they were to always love their neighbor as themselves.

After that, James heard himself say, "I will," and then, being in a daze, staring into the eyes of his sweetheart, he heard Emma say, "I will."

“Now you may exchange rings.”

James fumbled around in his vest pocket and found a plain gold band which he placed on Emma’s wedding finger with the words, “With this ring I do thee wed.” She in turn took a wider gold band and placed it on his wedding finger repeating the same phrase. He didn’t notice where it had come from. Then they kissed.



That night, the newlyweds spent the night in the woods. Emma wanted to take Toby because he knew the woods, but James objected.

"This night is ours. I want to have you all to myself."

"Okay. I just thought ...," Emma said, settling down on a pallet made upon Nature's floor. "It would be nice to have our first night in my bedroom."

James leaned over from his pallet and kissed his wife.

"Unacceptable. There would be no room for me on yer bed."

"I guess yer right." She returned the kiss.

James had previously killed a rabbit, and now it was on a skewer above the coals of their campfire. They cuddled and stared at the fire, watching the flickering sparks rise into the night air.

When you've had a very busy day with long hours standing and greeting people, some

of whom you don't even know, it is nice to be with more than a friend, eating rabbit and drinking coffee. Emma and James hadn't realized how famished they were. They both sighed as they gobbled up the legs and what little flesh there was on the breast and ribs.

"This is so good," Emma said, taking a sip of her hot coffee. "I've never known rabbit could be so delectable."

"Yeah," James said, looking around for more, but they had a scarce table. "Except it doesn't appease the stomach."

"Yer vocabulary's improving." She gnawed on the leg bone as if she were a ravenous beast.

"I don't know if that's because of my readin' or listenin' to you." James sat leaning his arm on his raised knee. "Would ya like me to rustle up more vittles?"

"I brought some o' that carrot an' nut cake. We can eat that."

"We might as well. It leaves ya with an appetite, but it is quite fillin'. I tasted a bit before we left."

"Well, here it is." She reached over and brought it out of the rucksack. "I was in such a hurry, I didn't bring nary a plate ner a fork."

James added more branches to the fire, wrapped his arm around Emma, and ate his cake. They cuddled for a while, staring into the flames, and realized how tired they were. They lay down, covered themselves with a blanket, and fell fast asleep in each other's arms.



The early morning brought with it cold, damp air. Emma pressed against James to get warm.

"Let's not git up just yet," Emma moaned.

"Okay."

The next hour would be memorable for at least five years.

Emma stared into James's eyes. "What do we do now?"

"Well. Everything else we do today will be second best." He kissed her for a long time. "But we must git goin'. We don't want to miss breakfast."

Emma sighed. "What's breakfast? I'd rather have you fer breakfast." She grasped him even tighter.

"Come on. We'd better git."

James took her hand and lifted her. Emma wrapped herself in the blanket. James rolled up the pallets and strapped them onto the rucksack. He then poured what was left of the coffee onto the simmering coals. He collected the coffee pot and tin cups and put them away in the rucksack. He stirred the coals to make sure there was no more fire. He lifted the sack, put his arms through the straps, and grabbed Emma's hand and then the rifle. As they walked, she let go and put her arm around his waist.

They didn't notice the leaves turning red and yellow or the calling of the whippoorwill or the mockingbird. As they walked along through the grass and undergrowth, their attention was only on each other. When they came out of the woods, they met Charles and a few workers following him.

Charles stopped. "How was the night together in the woods? You get any sleep?" He

smiled.

"Oh," James answered. "We had a lovely time."

"Daddy, I was cold," Emma said, wrapping the blanket tighter.

James pulled her back to him and squeezed her with his arm. "You weren't cold last night." He chuckled.

Emma frowned at him and walked away, high and mighty, at a good pace.

"Ya better catch up to yer misses," Charles said, slapping James on the shoulder.

"She's gettin' away."

James caught up with her. He followed her into the house. They made their way to the breakfast room off to the right of the foyer and ran into John who was coming out.

"You missed breakfast," he said, chomping on an apple.

Elijah was in the breakfast room helping the maid, Maggie, gather up the dishes.

"Don't worry, folks. I saved you some."

He rolled out a serving trolley with covered dishes on it. He set the tray on the now empty table. "Help yourselves."

James and Emma sat down next to each other and lifted the silver domes. There was ham and eggs, pancakes and jellies along with empty porcelain cups which Elijah presently filled with steaming coffee.

"Thank you, Elijah," Emma said, scooping scrambled eggs onto her plate.

"I always have sunny side up at home," James said as he took several pancakes.

"Well, don't you be tellin' the help what to do. You go ahead and eat them eggs." She stuffed eggs into her mouth. "Elijah went to all that trouble to saved'm fer us."

“I didn’t say I wasn’t gonna eat ’em, I just made a comment.” He scraped scrambled eggs onto his pancakes.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t a talked to a preacher that way.” Emma kept her eyes on her breakfast.

“I would like maple syrup, though,” he said, cutting his pancakes with a knife and fork.

“We don’t use syrup in this house, just jams and jellies. That’s what we put up. We don’t have no maple trees, and even if we did, we don’t live in New England or Canada. We’re Southerners.”

“I can appreciate that. We’re all Southerners in these parts.” James spotted sausage among the ham slices and speared it with his fork. “What’s that red jelly?”

“Currant.” Emma handed it to him.

“You seem to be a bit cranky this mornin’. Maybe we could go back in the woods and ...”

“Now don’t start that. Bein’ cold makes me cranky.” She sliced the air with her knife, pointing it at him.

James leaned over and put his arm around her.

“Eat yer breakfast,” she said with a slight hint of irritation.



James spent the rest of the morning in the woods reading his scriptures.

Emma went up to her bedroom to pack. When the maid came in to help her, she shooed her out. Emma was going to take her bedding off, but she sat on the edge of the bed instead and started weeping. She lay down, covered herself with her thick, feather-stuffed bedspread, and caressed it.

After a short nap, she sat up with the bedspread still wrapped around her. She studied the room. In front of the bed was a short round table set for tea. It was a child's tea set with a four-place setting. Her three ceramic dolls, Jannie, Mary, and Rose were all sitting in their places, waiting for Emma to join them. Their white skin glistened. Their hair was properly curled, and their red smiles were muted. They stared at her, tempting her to sit down. Jannie's outstretched hand invited Emma to visit. She kneeled by the table.

"I'm sorry, girls. I can't visit today. I must pack you all away and take you on a long, long trip." But she didn't pick them up to put them into any box. Instead, she reached out and petted each one with tears streaming down her cheeks. "How I will miss you all."

Beyond the tea party was a dark mahogany desk with shelves filled with all her favorite storybooks above a slanted door that opened out to make the desk. She stood and walked over to the books. She lifted one from its shelf. It was the *Mother Goose Melodies* or *Sonnets for the Cradle*, her favorite. She leafed through the pages, admiring the illustrations. Among the other books, that she caressed, were *Little Women*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Light Princess*, *Eight Cousins* and *Rose in Bloom*, *What Katy Did at School*, and *The Magic Fish-bone*.

Emma opened the drawers beneath the desk and took out all her old dresses that were

still puffy and filled with petticoats. There were the shiny mono-colors and those decorated in different kinds of bright colored flowers. A few of them still fit, but were not for modern fashions, and then there were the tiny girl's clothes she still kept. At one time in her life, she believed her dolls would grow up and inherit them. She lay her dresses all across the bed.

Then came the window seat. Emma sat there wrapped in her bedspread and stared out the window as she was used to doing. She watched herself on the front lawn playing with a puppy called Sally. Then she saw her older self playing with Toby. She sighed, remembering the olden days.

She looked away and folded her hands between her knees. How many Christmases had she spent as though they were coins deposited in her mechanical box? She saw it up there on the shelf with the books. It was a miner with a pick ax. You put a penny in a slot in the ax, push a lever behind the man, and the ax would swing down, hitting a metal rock, and depositing the coin into the slot in the rock. It didn't always work, but you could just put a coin into the slot. She shook it. There was still money in there.

She remembered the Christmas when she received it. The tall tree was in the middle of the foyer, all lit with candles. Daddy passed out the presents. When she was given the box, covered with wrapping paper decorated with a potato stamp in red and green bells, she screamed with delight. The box was tied with a red ribbon, which she took and placed in her hair. She ripped the paper off the box, opened it up, and there it was. A miner with an ax. At first, she thought it was a joke, just this little statue. It was nice, she guessed, but what could she do with it? Daddy had said, "It's a bank. You put a coin in it like this." He pulled the ax back, put a gold dollar in it, then pushed down on the lever in the back, and the gold coin

disappeared into the rock.” She screamed. “Daddy! Where’d it go?” He turned the box over, flipped another lever, and the bottom dropped open, spilling the gold dollar. *I deposited that gold dollar into that box a dozen times or more that mornin’, not payin’ any attention to anythang else.*

Emma turned her head back to the window, leaned against it, and feeling the warmth of the sun on the bedspread, fell asleep.

It was in the late afternoon when Maggie found Emma asleep in the window.

“Girl? What am I gonna do wif you?” She looked at the open drawers, the empty handbags on the floor, the dresses laid out on the bed, and exclaimed, “You haven’t even started packin’.”

Maggie had to pack for her, and when she did, Emma sobbed.

“What’s wrong wif you, girl?”

“I don’t want to leave home,” she said between sobs.

As she was stuffing one of the bags, Maggie said, “You need ta grow up, girl. Yer married now.” She stood, put her hands on her wide hips, and said, “Come ova he’ah an’ help me pack.”

Emma groaned. She was so accustomed to obeying her nanny that she left the window seat and grabbed a handful of books. There was a trunk at the end of her bed, so she opened it and deposited her books in it. She wouldn’t let Maggie pack the bedclothes, though.

“We’re gonna stay one more night,” Emma said, slumping down on the bed, “so I’ll pack up these in the mornin’.”

“Okay, but be sure, er you’ll have nothin’ fo’ yo’ bed in yo’ new home.”

By tea time, Emma had several handbags and her trunk packed. She didn’t see any way to pack her bedclothes in any of the handbags or the trunk.

James was back from the woods and was standing at her bedroom door.

“You ready to go?” He leaned his raised elbow on the door jamb. “You don’t look ready. Can I help?”

“No.” As she sat there on the edge of the bed, she looked at him with a pleading expression. “Can we stay just one more night?”

“I got responsibilities in the Church. That’s why we postponed our honeymoon.”

“I know.”

“They sent me up here to fetch you. You need to eat before we make the trip.”

He walked over to her and took her hand, lifting her off the bed. She embraced him and sobbed on his shoulder.

“I can’t leave right now. It’s too sudden.”

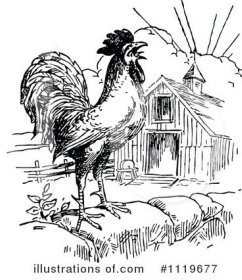
“Well, maybe I can go and come back in a week. How’s that?”

“But if we can have just one more night together.”

James relented. “Okay. We’ll spend one more night.”

“Thank ye, oh, thank ye.” She kissed him gently and smiled.

Together isn’t what she meant. James found himself in the guest room alone. What she meant was to be able to sleep in her own bedroom, in her own bed, the one she grew up in for one more night.



James woke up to the sound of a rooster. There was barely any light, but he made his way over the chest-of-drawers and splashed water on his face. He got dressed and went outside. He filled his lungs with the fresh morning air and looked back at the house. There was no light coming from Emma's room. He went out into the woods and said his morning prayer.

When he was finished, he noticed a little black girl sitting on a log watching him. Her head was covered with pigtails. She wore a plain gray dress with no sleeves.

"Whatcha doin'?" she asked.

"Prayin'." He sat on the ground in front of her wondering what *she* was doing.

"What's that?" She hadn't moved. She continued to stare.

"Why, it's talkin' to God." He peered at her with much curiosity.

"But Mammy say not to curse. Not to say God."

"Oh, my dear." James covered his mouth. She copied him and jumped a little. "I guess I'd better say talkin' to Heavenly Father then."

"That's better." She smiled. Her white eyes and white teeth lit up the scene.

"Who is that you were talkin' to? I ain't seen nobody." She put her hands together between her knees.

"Why, he's the one who made the sky with all the stars an' moon an' sun, an' he made

the earth an' planted it with all these trees an' flowers an' bushes, an' everthang. He even made all the animals an' fish an' birds. The last thing he made, not 'cause he is unimportant, but 'cause he made all these thangs fer man to enjoy when he got here."

"Why didn't he make us girls?"

"Well, the first man, called Adam, had a hand in that. You see, the woman was inside him."

The little girl pursed her lips. "How'd that happen?"

"No, no. It's not quite like that, you see. God ..." The little girl pursed her lips again and pointed to James. "I mean, Heavenly Father put Adam to sleep and then took a rib out of him and made a woman from it."

"He ain't made me from no rib. My mammy dug me up."

James raised his eyebrows. "The thing is, there had to be a man and a woman, but we won't go into that right now. Anyhow, Heavenly Father wanted ever'one to have a mother and a father. The mother to raise the children, and a father to bring in the vittles. You got that?"

"Uh Haa." She twiddled her fingers and appeared to get disinterested.

"Now Heavenly Father commanded the man to pray to him so neither one would get lonesome and Heavenly Father would know what the man wanted so's he can bless the man and his family."

There was a call from inside the woods. "Henny? Henny! Where art chew?"

"I gotta go 'cause I done gone, an' I'm through." She got up and ran toward the woman's voice.

James noticed a smell, and that she had deposited a little gift for the earth. He kicked dirt on it and said, "I'll be darned, girl!"

He went back to the house where breakfast was waiting for him. When he arrived at the breakfast room, he didn't see Emma.

"I guess Emma is late?" He asked the family.

"She won't come out of her room," Sarah Jane said, sipping her coffee.

"Nobody can git her out," Johnny said.

James scratched his head. "I guess I'd better go up an' have a talk with her."

"Won't do no good, Massah James," Maggie said as she refreshed everyone's coffee.

"You go ahead and sit down he'eah, an' I'll fix you a plate. Neva min' Emma. She'll do as she pleases, but I know she'll be down directly."

Halfway through breakfast, Emma did show up. James rose from the table and greeted her with a hug.

"I'm sorry, James." She lay her head on his shoulder. "I missed you so all night."

"I missed you too." They kissed. He took her hand and led her to the table. "Come and have somethin' ta eat. Every thang is goin' to be all right."

"It was actu'lly the smell of the coffee that woke me up." She winked at James.

Chapter Five

Making a Home



After breakfast, Emma and James found a wagon outside, waiting for them. One cow was attached to it. The servants brought Emma's bags and trunk down along with James's suitcase. One of the stable boys had brought Meriwether and tied him to the wagon. Emma hugged her mama and daddy tearfully and kissed them each. James raised his hat to Sarah Jane and shook Charles's hand, but Charles suddenly wrapped his arms around James.

"Take care of her, James. She's gonna need a lot of tendin'."

"I will, Charles. I will. I love'er so." He shook hands with him again.

Charles slapped him on the back. "God go with ya."

James went over to Sarah Jane because she was sniffing.

"She will do all right," he said, taking hold of Sarah Jane's hands.

"God bless ya, son," she said and then hugged him.

James helped Emma ascend to the wagon seat, and he mounted Meriwether.

"All is loaded," called one of the boys.

"Well, Emma, let's git. Come on Meriwether, we're goin' home."

James rode beside the cow, praying she would make the trip, and with Emma at the reins, they were off down the road to their good old home in Senatobia. But maybe not so

good.

“Where we goin’ anyway?” Emma said after five minutes of traveling.

“Just foller me. We’ll git thar.” James looked straight ahead with confidence.

“Well, I’m not gonna foller you if I don’t know where I’m goin’!”

“Okay, okay.” James let Meriwether slow down until Emma caught up with him. “I have a smart little house picked out near the edge of town. It has a nice yard with a white picket fence and good shade trees. It’s not very old.”

“Ya mean the pastor’s house?” Her face looked disgruntled. “That old man stinks, like’e never took narry a bath in’is whole life.”

“Well, I’m sure we can clean it up to our own satisfaction.”

Emma grumbled. “You mean I can clean it up.”

“Umm. Do I smell fried chicken in thar?” He asked, changing the subject.

“Maggie fried it last night, I suppose. Hay cow! You smell that fried chicken? You’d better think about how lucky you been, slowpoke. You’d better be grateful it was the chicken an’ not you.” She slapped the cow with the reins, but it just plugged along as if nothing ever happened.

“Mooo!”



It was about eight miles from Coldwater, the nearest town to the plantation, to Senatobia, and adding a couple of miles out of town where they started, it took them half the

day to find a good parking spot to eat that chicken. There was a nice breeze under the elm trees where an old log lay. It looked like a table oak that had been uprooted by a storm decades ago and was just right for sitting on.

“Now, this is proper chicken,” James said, making fast work of a leg and thigh.

“Too bad we won’t have Maggie cookin’ fer us.” Emma liked the breast meat best.

“I noticed ya’ll had nice apple trees about.” James wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “I wonder if anyone had thought to ...”

“I thought too,” Emma said, standing. “I asked Maggie to make sure she put some refreshment in the wagon, and I don’t mean lemonade.”

Emma reached under the seat of the wagon and pulled out a jug of apple cider.

James laughed with his mouth closed. It was full of chicken. “Gimmy. Gimmy.”

Emma poured the cider into two tin cups.

“Don’t need no cups,” James said.

“Now, Preacher. Ya gotta be civilized.”

She handed James a cup. He guzzled it down and smacked his lips. “Now that’s good Southern refreshment. My my.”

Emma sat beside James and sipped her cider gently and lady-like. “You can enjoy it just as well this way, an’ it lasts longer. “

“How ‘bout more, Dear.”

“I’m not a deer, an’ I want it to last. Please.” She poured him more cider, and he drank it slowly.

“Thank ye. Thank ye. That tops it off,” he said with a wide grin.

There was no hurry for the two to get back home, at least, that's what Emma said. So they took their time to get to know each other better, just talking about the weather, and why Toby had to stay behind.

"You know," James explained with cup in hand, "that he needs to be with the pack. That's his life, chasin' after them varmits. He'll always be wanting to go huntin', an' we aren't a huntin' family. Maybe after the boys git grown up enough, but by then, Toby will be an ol' man needin' is rest."

"I know, but I'm gonna miss'im the same." Emma took the last sip of cider and looked out into space. "Maybe when we git settled, we can send fer'im. He'll be a good dog fer the babies."

"But I thought ..."

"It's settled!"

"Okay, okay."



It was late at night when they arrived at the house. The light from the lantern hanging on the wagon lit the house to give it a spooky appearance. Life had foreclosed on the Reverend Hodgkins, and the parishioners would expect James to take his place, or he hoped. They could imagine the ghost of the past preacher, still fresh in the grave, lurking behind the door, not wanting to give up his ministry.

James brought the lantern inside the house so they could see their way around. Emma

stepped up onto the squeaky porch, noticed two rocking chairs, one on each side of the door, and followed James into the house. It was cold in there. James put the lantern on the mantle of the fireplace, put logs on, adding sticks and old newspaper. He took one of the sticks, lit it from the lantern, and transferred the fire to the newspaper. He placed a chair from the kitchen near the fireplace for shivering Emma, and after a few minutes, she was warming herself by a blazing fire.

The house looked fully furnished. It even had the pastor's books on the shelves to the left of the fireplace and against the adjacent wall. A couch with end tables faced the fireplace. Two large windows sat on the wall behind. James walked around and found a bedroom on the other side of the fireplace, a smaller bedroom behind the kitchen, and behind the bedrooms, a large workroom with a long table in it. It was actually a screened-in back porch with a screen door to the outside.

The kitchen had a large black Franklin stove set against the back wall, and a sink with a pump next to a nice large window. James was glad Emma wouldn't have to go out to the well to get water. There was plenty of counter space by the sink to make dinner and a large pantry and cupboard on the adjacent wall. There were enough plates, cups, and saucers in the cupboard for the whole family. He opened one of the drawers and saw silverware. Of course, he knew what would happen. The parson's relatives would come over and take everything away. *Well, if that happens I will preach a Hell-raising sermon about it the next Sunday. No, I wouldn't. I will be kind and ask for donations.*

James took Meriwether and put him in the back yard which had a fence around it. There was a small carriage house where he could push the wagon in. *In the morning.* He

went to work unloading the baggage and trunk, and while rummaging about the wagon found a bag of flour and a side of bacon. There was even a basket of eggs neatly packed in straw.

That Maggie is an angel. Of course, it could have been Mother Presley. Either way, an angel did it. Now, we can have breakfast.



That morning as James was headed for the outhouse, he saw on the back porch several baskets of food with blue, purple, red, and white ribbons on the handles. He had to take his hanky from his pocket and wipe the tears from his eyes. When he returned, he could smell bacon on the griddle, coffee, and biscuits in the oven. He had been gone a long time, for the baskets were missing, and Emma was in there making breakfast.

Opening the back door, he said, “Mornin’, wife of mine.” He kissed her neck.

“Mornin’, husband of mine,” she said as she moved the griddle to the table. “Wash up an’ I’ll put a couple plates on the table.”

After James blessed the food, she said, “I never heard of food as a weddin’ present, but I am surely thankful.”

“Must be the Welfare Ladies from the Church.” James took a sip of coffee.

“Someone’s been spyin’ on us fer sure. Must o’ seen us come in last night.”

“Yup. Ya got nice neighbors ‘round here.”

After breakfast, James announced, “Got to spend time today preparin’ a sermon fer

tomorry.”

No help for me today. Emma thought. All this work to do, an' he has his own work.

God bless'im.

After James left, Emma remembered seeing a box of laundry soap in the pantry. She took that and set it on the worktable on the back porch. She looked around and spied a bucket. She didn't see a washtub until she looked outside. She went out there, turned the tub on its side, wiped out the trash that had accumulated inside it, and then rolled it up the steps and into the workroom. She lifted it onto the table, took the bucket, went back into the kitchen, and pumped water to the brim. Carrying that to the table, she emptied it into the tub. Doing that several times until the tub was almost full, she stoked the fire in the Franklin stove and heated up water in the bucket. She did that a couple of times to warm the wash water. Then she poured in soap flakes and stirred it around until she got suds.

The bedclothes were the first things she washed and then the curtains. By that time, the wash water was completely black. *I guess he has never washed these things since his wife died.* After pouring out the water, she started all over again, and got all the soap out that she could, hanging the bedclothes and curtains outside on the clothesline.

She tackled the kitchen next, scrubbing down the stove, counter tops, table, and sink. She looked out the window, saw how dirty it was, and went to wash all the windows with ammonia she found under the sink. After she ate lunch, which consisted of biscuits and gravy with bacon thrown in, she took the rugs outside and replaced the bedclothes with them. She batted the rugs for a while, went in to rest, read scriptures from her Bible, and then scrubbed all the floors in the house.

When James came back from the woods, having finished his sermon, his appetite took hold of him. He found Emma asleep on the couch and no food fixed for supper. Walking over to the pantry, he discovered collard greens and turnips and smoked ham, things that the parishioners had brought the night before. He put that into a pot he found, pumped water in it, stoked the fire, added more firewood, and placed the pot on to boil. He took plates out of the cupboard and found they were dusty, so he filled the sink with a little water and rinsed them. A towel hung on the cupboard, so he grabbed it and dried off the plates, set them on the table, and looked in the drawers for silverware. He found that and completed the table by making fresh coffee.

Emma groaned. Every bone in her body must have hurt by the way she got off the couch, steadying one hip and holding up the rest of herself by grabbing the back of a chair at the kitchen table.

“What did you do?” she asked, taking a deep breath to smell the coffee and collard greens. “You tryin’ to show me up? Oh! I’m a miserable housekeeper.”

“Now you jus’ sit down at the table. I seen all yer good work, and you done enough. It’s a wonder what ye did with the place. I’m right proud of ye.”

“James. I am not gonna be a good wife fer ya.” She took a deep breath. “We jus’ got ta get a maid.”

“Yeah. The thought had crossed my mind.” He sat across from her. “I’ll look into that tomorry.”

Emma rose slowly with a wince.

“Now you sit right back down. I’ll get the supper.”

“I’m gonna serve my husband, so you sit right thar an’ let me.”

“Okay, okay.”



The next day was the Sabbath. James had to go early, about seven o’clock, to set up and make sure the place was clean and had songbooks for everyone. Sarah followed him. She didn’t want to walk down there alone.

The chapel used to be the local school but was taken over by the Baptist Church when the new brick school house was built. It had benches separated by a central aisle. They had moved the heater from the center of the room to the back corner, and that didn’t work very well, so the chapel was usually cold in the winter.

It smelled musty, like old paper and rotting wood. The *painted* stained glass windows, though, lit up the place better than any lighting could. The flowers from Parson Hodgkin's funeral were still there. James wondered who officiated. Maybe it was one of the deacons.

Although the Church Council hadn’t contacted him, they all knew he was getting married, and some attended the wedding. If they hadn’t chosen a preacher, he was more than happy to step up to the pulpit. He was all ready with a sermon.

As soon as Emma swept the floor, and James distributed the hymnals, Sister Woodard marched in, swinging her elbows. She was quite plump, wearing a pink cotton dress with bows around all the edges. She wore a flowered hat with old style ringlets hanging over the left side of her neck. James recognized her as the secretary of the Church Council.

“Oh!” James exclaimed. “Sister Woodard. So happy to see you this bright Sabbath day.”

He went to shake her hand, and as he did so, she said, “Brother Singleton! Am I so happy to see you. I’m glad yer back. I so enjoyed yer wedding. As you know by now, the Reverend Hodgkins passed away suddenly. I’m sure my brother would be glad to take his place, but since you are here ...” she paused. “Could you do the honors? I hear you are always prepared with a sermon. Then we will take the time this week to hire a new pastor.”

“Oh, I would be honored,” James said cordially. “And yes, I am prepared as always.”

Now everything was set, and while Emma waited in the pews, watching people drifting in to take their seats, the Church Council met in the back room with James to take care of the affairs. They read the minutes from the last meeting, and discussed things like which songs to sing, they wanted to know the subject of the sermon for their approval, who would be the ushers, how to take care of the widows and other poor, and a few other things.

Sister Woodard was also the song leader, so she started the meeting with *God, How Great Thou Art*. Brother Simmons gave a cue from the piano.

Emma seemed to be thrilled by the song, as she sang louder than usual.

James gave a prayer to bless everyone with open ears and hearts close to God. After that, they sang about five more songs to get their blood rolling, and James went into his sermon. He read several scriptures to show the love of God through Jesus and several that showed where people ended up if they didn’t live by His sayings. Then he expounded on each one and gave examples of people he had seen or met who had lived terribly hard lives, but had come to God and had been saved. He reminded the congregation of how blessed and

happy are those who are saved and go to Heaven.

As he finished the sermon, Bro. Simmons, a tall thin man in a black suit an inch too short and with a close-cut gray mop of hair, played a dirge soft and soothing. It was James's cue to call people to the altar.

"Will any come to the altar?" James asked quietly.

He waited for a while. No one came. Then he saw his wife come to the altar, and was startled, but he smiled and came down from the stand to help her pray, but she winked at him and motioned him to go away. He didn't get a chance to ask her what she meant because another woman came to the altar and he had to attend to her. Then other people got the courage, and members of the Church Council helped James attend to them. While this went on, the ushers passed the plate for donations.

After the church service, James gathered the tithes, had conversations with others to get to know the parishioners, did a lot of handshaking, and then retired to his office in the back. Emma met a lot of people who came up to her to congratulate her on her marriage and welcome her to their church. After everyone left, she went to join her husband. When she opened the door to his office, she found him gathering up papers, putting them into boxes and a few he was about to carry out with him.

"Oh, Emma," he said, surprised. "I had completely forgotten you. I talked to a few people and found that if I am hired, we will indeed have a maid assigned to the parsonage."

"My. You sound jus' like a preacher." She smiled, kissed the pastor, and said, "I'm not used to housework. It almost killed me to clean up that place yesterday."

"You won't have to worry anymore. They say she is a good cook too."

“*If* we get a maid.”

As they left the building through the back entrance, she remarked, “I know how to cook. I was taught by the best.”

“You mean Maggie, of course.”

“Yes, I do,” she said curtly.

“Don’t worry. *When* we get a maid, just tell her what you want done, and she will do it.”

“You so sure they gonna hire you?”

“We’re livin’ in the parsonage aren’t we?”

“Who told you we can move into the parsonage?”

“It was up for sale, and I bought it.”

“That’s nice to know.”



Chapter Six

Emma Gets Settled

Having a maid freed Emma from being bound to the parsonage. She could go visit friends and acquaintances, shop, and travel back to the plantation. On one visit, she found that aunts, uncles, and cousins were visiting and having a dandy party. Grandma and Grandpa Presley were there entertaining all their grandchildren. It was a regular family reunion. She hadn't told James this because, when she had received the invitation, she had decided to go there alone. It wasn't that she was ashamed of him, she just wanted to feel part of the family. If James had come, she wouldn't have felt at home, referring to the home she had grown up in before she met James. It may not be a normal way of thinking, but that's the way it was.

The foyer was a busy place with all the family gathered talking and eating. Emma went around greeting everyone. Then there was little ten-year-old Tennessee. She was small and thin. She pulled on Emma's sleeve.

"You remember me?" she said, anxiously.

"Well, Tennie," Emma said with surprise. "How are you doing?"

"I remember you. Can I see Toby again?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Will you come with me? You came with me last time." She stood there smiling sweetly in her dull blue dress with bows on the sleeves and four more on the bottom of her skirt.

Emma thought a moment. She looked around at the crowd and said, "Sure, let's go."

Ira, another cousin who was about James's age, stopped her at the door with a flask of Kentucky Bourbon in his hand. He had become an orphan when he was eight and raised by their Uncle Tom. "Hey, cousin. Where ya goin'?"

"We're goin' ta see Toby, an' you can't come!" Tennie said sternly.

Ira winked with a smile. "See ya when ya return."

As they walked away from the house, Tennie said, "He's a bad man."

"Now what right do you have to call'im that?" Emma said.

"Jus' 'cause he is!"

Emma thought she ought to leave well alone, smiling with one end of her mouth.

"Come on. We'll go see how Toby is doin'."



Toby could smell Emma a mile away and started howling. The other hounds took up the call. Maybe it was time to go hunting. When they approached the fence, Toby jumped against it, barked, and whined, wagging his tail vigorously.

"Toby!" Tennie cried out. "Oh, can we let'im out?"

"Come on, boy," Emma said, turning right and walking over to the gate. She opened it carefully so as not to let the other dogs out. Toby slipped out as Emma carefully clicked the gate shut. He jumped onto Emma, whining and licking her face. Tennie and Emma hugged him. They all had missed each other.

The three of them ran back to the front yard where they chased each other, screaming

and barking until they were exhausted. Emma and Tennie plopped down under Emma's favorite tree only to giggle as they fought off Toby licking their faces. He finally plopped down onto their laps, panting.

Tennie fell asleep on her shoulder, so Emma sat there petting Toby. After a few minutes, Emma became bored and left Tennie dozing against the tree. She took Toby and rejoined her family inside the plantation. Of course, a lot of the children were now playing outside, and when six-year-old Oscar saw Toby, he had to come and hug his neck and talk to him. When the little boy saw they were going back inside, he left and returned to play with the others.

Ira was still by the door but slumped in a chair fast asleep. There were not as many people in the foyer now, so Emma decided to find her parents. She found her mother in the kitchen giving Maggie instructions.

"Where's Daddy?" she asked, taking ham off someone's plate and taking a bite.

"Hmm. I love cloves."

"He's upstairs on the bed. He had to take a nap."

"Poor Daddy," Emma said, inspecting other foods on the table, looking for something spicy. "He's growing so old. Can't stay awake."

"He just doesn't like crowds," Sara Jane said as she whipped cream that would go onto the cake. She licked her finger to clean the whipped cream off.

Emma threw Toby her slice of ham.

"Get that dog out o' my kitchen," Maggie commanded, waving a wooden spoon.

"I gotta go," Emma said, kissing her mother's cheek. "Have to get back 'afor dark."

“Ya won’t make it,” her mother said, putting dried fruits on the whipped cream covering the cake. “Yer room is still livable. You don’t want to miss a slice of this wonderful cake.”

“I can take some with me.”

“Not until after dinner.” Sara Jane stared at her daughter.

“You temptress.”

“You don’t visit much.”

“Shoo! Shoo!” cried Maggie.

“I think I’ll go take a nap too.” She grabbed Toby before he put his paws on the table.

“Let’s go. They don’t want us here.”

As she left the kitchen, she called back, “See ya at dinner.”



When Emma came down for dinner, she was met by her dear husband at the bottom of the stairs. “You missed the party,” she said.

“I wasn’t expected.” He offered his hand, which she accepted. “I just got lonely. Thought I’d see if you got into any trouble.”

“Is that all you think of me?”

There was a long table set up for the dinner guests. Some couldn’t stay. Those who remained were close relatives. Most of them had taken naps that afternoon, lounging on the divans and chairs. Some lay outside on the grass and enjoyed the breeze and the laughing

children.

“Your mother said you behaved yerself,” James said as they approached the table.

“I’m glad she thought good of me.”

James pulled out a chair and seated her. The table was made of planks of wood and saw horses, but there were enough sheets on the table to hide the fact. It was the expensive tableware that caught the eye of the guests.

Pheasant was served, but when James said, “There is a distinct flavor of chicken here,” Emma kicked him without giving any indication that she had heard him.

The pleasant conversation almost put James to sleep, but he woke up when he was served the fruit and nut cake covered with whipped cream and decorated with dried fruit meats. He ate his cake fast and then asked in a whisper, “I wonder if there will be seconds.” He immediately moved his leg as if he were going to get kicked again. He could see that Emma was thinking about it. He winked at her, but as soon as he relaxed, she stomped on his foot. They smiled at each other.

There were visiting and soft conversations long into the night. All the news that anyone had read or heard was passed on. Emma didn’t care about such things, so she went off on her own and sat under her favorite tree.



James interrupted Emma’s reveries. “Mind if I join ya?”

“I would be su’prised if you didn’t.”

“The parties will be gone in the mornin’,” James indicated with his hand. “We should sleep in the guest room.”

“It’s occ-u-pied.” She lay her head on his shoulder. “Let’s you an’ me sneak out ta-night an’ go home.”

Toby put his nose on Emma’s lap and whined.

“Dang dawg,” James cursed.

“You leave Toby alone,” she said as she petted her first love.

“Is yer bed occupied?”

“I guess you would like it to be.” She turned to Toby, continuing to pet him.

“Smoochy, smoochy. Mommy loves you.”

“If we go ta bed now, we can get up early. The ride back will be refreshin’.”

Emma relented, and when she woke up in the morning, she put her arm around James.

“I feel different today.”

“Yeah. ‘Twas quite refreshin’.”

“No. That’s not what I mean.” She sighed. “I feel like I’m gonna have a son come next year.”

James jumped out of bed and got dressed. He glanced at Emma. “You pregnant?”

“I don’t know.” She lingered in bed. “Maybe it were a dream. But I feel more alive.”

“I know what made you alive.” He sat down on the bed to put his shoes on, and Emma swatted him.

They didn’t stop for breakfast, but Emma said goodbye to her father who was also up.

“Goodbye, Daddy.” She kissed him on the cheek.

“Come by again,” he said.

When James helped Emma into the carriage, she whistled, and Toby ran and jumped into her lap.

“Emma!” James exclaimed.

“Don’t say a word, James. I’m takin’ my dog.”

“Gall dern dawg,” James said under his breath as he ascended the carriage. “Gatty up,” he commanded the horse. Down the road, he looked at the dog. “You know he’ll be wantin’ to go a huntin’.”

“My daddy can come an’ get’im if he has a mind to it.”

“Okay, okay.”



It was nine months to the day that Emma delivered little James. It was his father’s and his grandfather’s name, so it seemed natural. It had been a hard labor, but when the midwife, Miz. Tuttle handed little James to her, all wrapped up in a soft woolen blanket, she felt settled. She had her own family now.

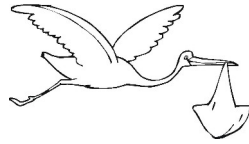
Miz. Tuttle, a well-respected negro nurse during and since the Civil War, now gaining weight and showing wrinkles, opened the bedroom door and invited James in. “It’s okay ta come in now.”

James peeked in.

“It’s okay,” Emma said. “We’re not havin’ a funeral. Jest a baby.” She hugged it to her

head. She sniffed him. “He smells so good and wonderful.”

James walked to the far side of the bed, pulled down the blanket a bit, and whispered, “I got a son.”



Toby whined at the door. Emma thought he might want to see the baby. They had kept him outside for a couple of weeks until Emma and little James could bond and Emma could rest. But now she missed Toby and let him in. He immediately ran to the bedroom as though he knew exactly where the baby lay. James had built a little crib for the baby with rockers instead of legs, and in the few seconds it took Emma to get to the bedroom, Toby was licking the baby’s face and trying to pull the baby out of the crib. Even if it were gentle, Emma was shocked.

“Toby! You git away from ‘im.” She whacked his nose. “Bad dog! Bad dog!” She grabbed Toby and put him back outside, never mind he barked all the rest of the day and scratched at the back door and the front door, trying to get in.

Emma didn’t think this day would ever happen, but with tears in her eyes, because she had to make a terrible choice, choosing little James over Toby, she wrote to her father:

“Daddy,

Please come get Toby. He so wants to go hunting again. He misses you all. I think it would be best to be with the pack and the rest of the men. I can’t be with him as much as I would like, taking care of little James. Love you all,

Emma.”

Charles rode down to the house himself on his horse. He had wanted to see his newest grandson anyway. Emma greeted him at the door and gave him a great big hug.

“Daddy. I didn’t know how Toby would react to James.” She let her father in, and she ushered him into the bedroom where little James lay on the bed goo-gooing, slobbering, and looking everywhere, kicking his feet. It had been raining outside, so he left his hat and coat in the living room. He carefully picked up the baby and goo-gooed back at little James while holding him in the air. He gave the baby a bit of a hug and gave him back to Emma.

“Mighty healthy lookin’, he is,” he said giving his daughter a side hug and kissing her on the cheek. “It makes a grandpa mighty proud.”

James had seen Charles ride up to the house from the backyard. He had to shoo Toby away from the door as he scratched the door and barked. “Git, you hound dawg!” It seemed he had to say that several times a day. Toby must have had some kind of dog compulsion with that baby. When James came inside, he greeted Charles with a firm handshake and a warm hug. “We’re might proud of this little’on.”

“He’s gonna be a great contribution to the family,” Charles said with a wide grin.

Emma held little James closely. “Daddy’s come to take Toby. He’s a goin’ huntin’ and needs’im ta lead the pack.”

“I told ya so.”

“Ye told me one too many times.” Emma almost stamped her foot, but she glanced at her father and smiled at him. “We just knew ye would come one day. We’re sorry to see Toby go. You gonna stay fer supper?”

“No, darlin’. We got company stayin’ over. Got ta git back as soon as I can.” He

kissed Emma and shook James' hand again. "Love ya both. Ya know what these hunters 'er like."

"Yes sirree," said James. "I experienced that on our weddin' night. It were fun."

"Fer one night!" Emma bounced the baby, who was starting to cry.

"Well, I'll grab Toby an' be off. You two behave."

Charles went out back and visited with Toby for a while. Then he put a collar and leash on him and wrapping it around the saddle horn, leaped onto his horse and was off up the road, Toby running behind.

Emma sobbed on James' shoulder and then sighed with relief.

Chapter Seven

James Gets His Own Church

James was appointed temporary pastor by the Church Council, so they got the parsonage and the maid. Legally, though, James had bought the parsonage from Reverend Hodgkins. It was a complication for the church like a pit in a cherry pie. If he hadn't been such a scriptioner, always ready with a sermon, plus the fact that he was living in the parsonage, they would have chosen Sister Woodard's brother, and that would have been a disaster. According to James, that lazy dog didn't know a thing about the scriptures, but he could raise a storm politicking.

James kept busy visiting the parishioners. If there was food needed, he contacted the sisters in the church. If there was a fence needing repair, and the old man couldn't cut the mustard, he contacted the brothers in the church. If someone was sick, and a crop was ready to harvest, the men in the church did it. If there was a barn raising, James made sure his nail was the first one in. The sick were tended to, and the poor relieved as much as was in his power, and that was just the first week. Emma wondered if she was going to be a pastor's widow, and would have to raise baby James by herself, but Mary kept reminding her, "Miz. Singleton, I is always he'ah. You don't need to fret yo'self none."

"That's right, an' I am grateful, but you ain't no husband o' mine," she remarked, bouncing baby James gently to help him sleep.

Supper lingered on the stove, cooking too long, trying to keep it warm for James, but as soon as the sun settled down behind the hills, Emma knew he would be coming home. He couldn't read in the dark.

James raced into the house. “Woman, I am as hungry as a bear wakin’ from its winter’s nap.” He sat at the table. “Couldn’t get by the smell of hot coffee an’ stew. Makes my stomach growl.”

“I won’t say what my stomach is doin’,” Emma said, handing the sleeping baby to Mary. When she sat by her husband, she said, “I can’t stand the smell neither.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say about Mary.”

Mary started serving the beef stew, also placing a loaf of freshly baked bread on the table.

“I like Mary.” She looked up at Mary and smiled. “But I don’t like her cookin’. If I weren’t so busy, I’d cook the food myself, but all I can do all day is nurse, nurse, nurse. I’m tellin’ ya. That’s the hungriest baby I ever had.”

“That’s natural.” James laughed. “He’s the *only* baby you ever had.”

Halfway through supper, Emma asked, “I guess yer ready fer the sermon tomorry?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be, though it troubles me.” James sipped his coffee.

“What is it, James?”

“Why is it that the congregation aren’t scriptorians? How can they not see their lives would improve if they would read the Bible and believe it.”

“You know they can’t all read like you an’ I.”

“A lack of education could drive a person straight to Hell.”

“James!”

“It’s true. Moses said, when the people accused Miriam of prophesyin’, he said, ‘I wished to God that all the people were prophets.’ Well, I wish all the people were

scriptorians.” He chewed on a piece of gristley beef, swallowed it, and continued. “I’m gonna have to add to my sermon. I’ll ask’m, are ye readin’ yer Bible?”

“But that’s what yer for. Ta bring the Bible to them.”

“That’s what I’m aimin’ to do.”



Sunday, James gave the congregation Hell Fire and damnation. He upbraided them for their ignorance, their laziness, and their unwillingness to learn on their own the things of God. Not many people came to the altar that day, and the plates held a minimal allowance for the week.

At the Dinner table, Emma reprimanded James. “Don’t ya think a bit of kindness might do more savin’?”

“A soft voice don’t stop a runaway horse.”

“Well, I think the runaway horse was you, this time.”

“Yes. I think I was a bit harsh.” He sipped some coffee, thought about it a while, and said, “Ya know? That Reverend Hodgkins could preach. He would have the whole congregation at the altar, down on their knees repentin’.”

“Well, yer not Reverend Hodgkins.” She ate another bite of leftover stew and said, “Ya gotta find yer own voice.”

“True, true.”

“How did you preach to those ani-mules out’n the woods?” She pointed at him with a

cube of beef stuck onto her fork.

“I see what cha mean.”

James practiced each day of the week out in the woods. He used a different voice each day, copying different preachers he had heard in the past. By the end of the week, he was totally confused. Saturday evening he came home, skipped dinner, went into the bedroom, slammed the door, and fell to his knees at his side of the bed. He didn't know the words to say, but he had a heartfelt burning in his breast. Tears came, and then he thought Emma had come in and placed her hand on his shoulder. He felt great peace. She said, “It comes when you are humble.” When he turned around, there was no one there, but there was a faint remnant of light that faded away.

When James didn't come out, she went to the bedroom door and peeked in. He was kneeling at the bedside praying. She closed the door and went back to the kitchen.

“I don't know, Mary, she said. “I guess we'll go ahead an' eat.”

James entered the kitchen ten minutes later and sat next to Emma. “I know my callin' now.”

As he sat down at the table, she asked, “Does that mean you found yer voice?”

“No, darlin'. It means I found the voice of God.”



Sunday morning, the congregation sat in nervous anticipation for more Hellfire and damnation. Some loved that kind of sermon, but mostly, they waited for a lashing. But when James rose and walked up to the pulpit, his demeanor was different, and when he started

preaching, some wondered who it was up there. He had the face of Pastor Singleton, but the voice was what they imagined what Jesus would sound like. He was loving and kind, but he told you the truth and the truth that can cut to the heart, leading several people to the altar. Even James was surprised. After Church, Emma sat in her seat with tears streaming down her cheeks. She sat there for a time before she used her little flower-covered hanky.

There was a hushed silence in the chapel. People noticed the streams of light coming through the stained-glass windows. James stood at the door to shake their hands and say “Have a good day.” Everyone was telling him, “Nice sermon.” Instead of telling people to read the scriptures or else, he had expounded the scriptures in a way they could understand. Everyone walked out of the chapel on air.

But there were some, like those who killed Jesus, who felt threatened. Their authority might be in question. The church elders wondered if he was teaching true doctrine. Did what he said match up with the scriptures in the Bible according to the canons of the Church? Was he interpreting the scriptures according to previous pastors? There was one thing for sure. He was not teaching the assigned topic that was decided on by the Church Council. That had to stop. They would send Miz. Woodard to speak with him.

James was awakened from his Sunday afternoon nap by a rap on the door. He heard Mary talking with Miz. Woodard.

“I’m sorry, but Massah James is havin’ his nap.”

“Then wake’im up. I have somewhat of importance to discuss with him.”

James heard a scuffle, and then Mary said, contemptuously, “You can’t jus’ ba’ge in he’ah like this.”

“Git outta my way!” Miz. Woodard commanded.

James burst into the scene, putting his suspenders over his shoulder. “Ladies! Ladies! Please be civil. You don’t do this in church. Don’t do so here.”

Both women said together, “She’s no lady!”

“Mary. Show Miz. Woodard a seat.”

“Yes, Massah James.” Mary waved her hand toward the divan. “Won’t choo please?”

Miz. Woodard lifted her skirts and tromped over to the couch. James sat across from her in his favorite chair.

Emma was in the kitchen holding her hand over her mouth, trying not to laugh. She kept hidden. She wanted no part of what was going to happen, whatever.

“Now, what can I do fer you, Miz. Woodard on this fine Sabbath day?”

Miz. Woodard unruffled her feathers before settling down to an almost comfortable position. “I will not be treated this way. You must restrain your maid.”

“I will talk to her for sure.” He looked at Mary and winked. She turned with a huff, going back to the kitchen. “Now, what can I do fer ya?”

“What have we talked about? The Church Council appoints the pastor of our little church. We need to approve or disapprove of your sermons ahead of time so no one gets embarrassed, and you stick to the doctrines of the church. It was a marvelous sermon you gave today, but ...”

“Thank you, Miz. Woodard.”

“But it was the wrong one.”

“I’m sorry, Miz. Woodard. I had a bit of confusion as to what I was to talk about, so I

did as James directs, and I asked of God.”

“That’s very well and said, Pastor Singleton, but why didn’t you come and ask me? I could have told you what subject to preach on.”

“But Paul asks us to follow the Spirit, an’ that’s what I did, an’ it turned out marvelous. As Isaiah says, a marvelous work and a wonder.” James looked at Miz Woodard. She had a blank expression on her face. “We had so many come to the altar this day that we couldn’t pray with all of them.”

Miz Woodard seemed to have a lump in her throat. Her face was a little pale. “But you ... you need to respect the Council, you know. They hire and fire the preachers.” She almost cried, but she cleared her throat, stood, and said, “I have to go now. Have a pleasant day.”

“I will, Miz Woodard. I will.” James ushered the woman out the door. “You have a good day too.”

She turned and said, “You should have asked me.” She turned back around and left.

He went back inside, scratching his head. “Woo wee.”

Mary came to the kitchen door. “Dat woman’s a wile-cat.”

“She sure is, Mary. She sure is. If’n anyone else comes in, I’m out like a light.”

“Yes saah!”

As the weeks progressed, James was sure to check with the Church Council before he prepared a sermon, and the sermons he gave were never as great as that wonderful day when he found his voice. They were good sermons, but never as moving as when the Lord gave him that marvelous work and a wonder.



The Church Council found a solution to the problem Pastor Singleton gave them. He had continued to dissatisfy them. As they sought what to do, Reverend Matthews came to visit from the Baptist Council of Churches. They learned from him another church in Simms, Bowie County, Texas needed a pastor. After consulting with Reverend Matthews as to what to do, in a meeting that excluded Pastor Singleton, it was decided that the pastor would be sent to Simms. They telegraphed the church in Simms and told them to expect Pastor Singleton. Then it was Miz. Woodard's job to invite Pastor Singleton to go to Texas. When she heard that, her pride puffed up, and she said, "I will be glad to."

When Miz. Woodard thought about it, she should have a letter from the Baptist Council, so she wrote up the letter and had Reverend Matthews sign it. She thanked him and left immediately for the parsonage.

James was watering the flowers under the front windows and admiring them. He gave himself a pat on the back for having done such a good job of growing flowers, but then, he remembered the Great Creator. He took his hat off and said, "I'm sorry. Thank you for such beauty." He didn't know that Miz. Woodard was walking up the sidewalk toward him.

She walked up to him. "Thank you for the compliment, but you may change yer mind when you read this letter." She handed an envelope to him and waited for him to open it.

James took the envelope, opened it, and scanned the letter. "Hmmm." He looked up and smiled. "I will give this some thought an' pray about it an' let ya know."

"There ya go again. God's word is in the Bible, not in yer head."

“Okay. But I’ll let ya know my decision.” He put the letter back into the envelope and stuck it in his back pocket. “Emma has to have her say.”

“We will be needin’ the parsonage for the next parson.”

“No doubt. I’ll see what I can do. Good day to ya, Miz. Woodard.”

“Good day,” she said, turning. She leaned her head as though her face wanted to stay and look at the flowers, the way it looked back.

James went inside. “Emma?” he called.

“Yes, James?” Emma came in from the bedroom. She took the letter James handed her.

“What’s this?”

“It’s from Miz. Woodard. It seems if I want to keep preachin’, we will be goin’ to Texas.”

Emma stood reading the letter. “Lots o’ people go to Texas,” she said slowly. She looked into James’s eyes. “What should we do?”

“It comes as an inspiration to me that God has his hand in this, don’t ya think?”

“We just got settled.”

“It comes with the territory. I guess this is what cha get when ya marry a minister.”

Emma touched her mouth with the tips of her fingers. “I guess so.”

The baby started crying, so Emma went back into the bedroom.

James returned to the outside to manicure the lawn. *I hope someone will appreciate the work I put in today. Was gonna grow some vegetables out back. I’ll have ta sell the place.*

Chapter Eight

Way Out West in Texas

The sign said, “Simms Baptist Church.”

“Wrong punctuation,” James said as he halted the horse. He stepped out of the wagon.

“I just want to take a look. Maybe there’s a caretaker somewheres.”

“Well, hurry up. My tailbone aches.”

James turned around and helped Emma out of the wagon. “Might as well come with me.”

Emma took a peek into the wagon. Little James was in his basket sound asleep. The cover over the wagon provided enough shade to keep the sun off. It was a little warm in there, but not as hot as direct sunlight. She stepped down and followed James into the chapel.

The church didn’t seem much different from the church in Senatobia. It also looked like a school, but a bit newer and wider. There was a bell tower above the front door. As James entered, he could see the bell rope wound around a headstock on the wall. *Otherwise, people might hang themselves as they entered.* The pews went all the way across the chapel with aisles on either side. The heater was in the left-hand corner of the chapel with the piano on the right. The stand had choir seats as well as a podium, opposed to the church in Senatobia.

Emma could play the piano some, so she followed James and sat down on a cushioned seat and played a few lines of *Rock of Ages* until a man came through the back door near the heater.

“I just wanted to see who was playing the piano,” he said. He was short and stout with a balding head, clean-shaven, wearing a black suit and red tie.

James greeted him, offering his hand. “Hello. I am James Singleton, yer new pastor.”

“Tex Williams,” he said, shaking James’ hand. “We received a telegram. Said you was comin’.”

“We’re here.” James gave the man a wide smile.

“Yes, you are.” Tex placed his hand on James’ back and stretched his right hand towards the door. “Let me show ya where the parsonage is.” He ushered James out the front door. Emma followed.

“Ya see that corner house down a ways?” He pointed with his hand. His voice was a bit raspy. “On this side of the street.”

“Yes, I see it,” James said, stepping down a step.

“It’s just two houses down. Closest Baptist in town.” He chuckled.

“I’ll walk,” Emma said, rubbing her behind.

“You folks have had a tough road here. It’s well worn, but takes a couple weeks, don’t it?”

“Yep. We could do with a rest.”

“I’ll go tell the sisters to come over an’ help, if you don’t mind?” Tex accompanied James to the wagon. “We’re mighty helpful around here. So if ya need anythang, you just hollar.”

James ascended the wagon. “Thank ya a lot. Come on, horse, gitty up.” *Wonder what the man was trying to hide, ushering us out like that.*

James passed Emma who walked lazily along the wooden sidewalk. He waved, turned the corner, and parked next to a giant elm tree.

The house had a small front yard, about thirteen feet to the street stretching around to a picket fence that bordered a square back yard. The clapboard house was also a square, including a nice raised porch with rocking chairs. Above the porch roof was a second story with enough room for a bed and an office (which James proved to be true when he went up there). Everything was white-washed. It looked like heaven to the weary travelers.

James handed little James down to Emma. He was awake now, and as soon as he knew he was in his mother's hands, he started crying.

"I'll take'im in the house an' nurse the poor fella. Now, now. Don't ye worry yerself to death. You'll git some ninny bye and bye."

Soon, the sisters of the church and a couple of brethren, including Tex, were emptying the wagon and putting things away under Emma's guidance. She bounced James in her hands while pointing here and there to where things were to be put away. It seemed only a few minutes before everything was in its place, the house swept, and James and Emma sat on the couch alone. The noise and hustle and bustle were gone. Little James was put to bed, and the house was quiet except for the breathing of the tired couple.

"Well, how's yer tailbone now?" James asked, holding Emma's hand.

"Would the good Lord strike me down if I fall asleep in the middle of the day?"

James chuckled. He patted her hand. "I'm sure he won't, Honey."

"Okay. Then ..." Emma lay her head on his shoulder and started snoring.

"My my," James said. He rose slowly, taking care not to wake her, and placed Emma

in a hopefully comfortable position on the couch.



When Emma awoke, she stared at her surroundings, trying to remember where she was. Oh, yes. A new house, a new town. She got up off the couch and said, “Gotta make dinner. Wonder if we have any groceries.”

The house was divided by a hallway with stairs to the second story. The living room was on the left side with a bedroom in the back. The dining room was on the right side with the kitchen behind it.

Emma wandered into the dining room and then into the kitchen. The sink was against the right wall below a window. The Franklin stove was against the hallway wall with the pantry between the two, just like in the last parsonage.

She went into the pantry and found food in there she and James didn’t bring. She found some salt pork and smoked ham hanging from the ceiling. There were beans and peas, turnips, potatoes, and carrots in small barrels on the floor to her left, and there was a bin with lids for flour, sugar, and corn meal to her right. That was general in all homes.

“Well,” she said to herself, “here’s some pork an’ beans, an’ I’ll make some corn bread.”

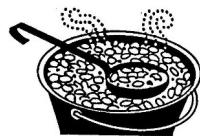
She turned around and there were bottles of jams and jellies and some fruits and pickles on the shelves, most likely from the last parson or his wife if he was married. She took a deep breath and thanked the Lord.

After Emma started the beans cooking, Little James woke up, so she wiped her hands on her apron, went to the bedroom and nursed for a while. James decided he was through before his regular time and started pulling on Emma's nipple with his gums. Emma pulled him off and he laughed at her.

“I’ll have none of that, you little mongrel.”

She took him to the kitchen and sat him in his high chair. Spooning some beans into a bowl, she took them and a colander to the sink and washed the beans off with cool water until they were room temperature. She tried to feed James with a spoon, but he had a different idea. He put both hands into the bowl, grabbed some beans and stuffed his mouth with one hand, mashed up some beans in his mouth and then stuffed some more beans in with his other hand.

“Willlll, be that way if’n ya have a mind to it.” Emma rose, wiped her hands on her apron and said to herself, “I guess there goes nursin’. Okay, maybe ever now an’ then.” *Now I gotta buy a bottle.*



James came in from putting the horse and wagon away and cleaning up the yard. “My oh, me. What do I smell? An’ you made a cake too?”

James was going to swipe some icing off with his finger, but Emma was on to him and slapped his hand with a wooden spoon. “Keep yer gall darn hands off that cake. You’ll get plenty of that later. Help me set the table. Everthang’s ready. You washed yer hands?”

James passed little James in his highchair and ruffled his hair, went to the sink,

pumped some water into it, and grabbed a bar of soap. “God’s greatest gift to man. So my mammy said.”

“Never mind ‘bout yer wife.” She caressed her baby’s head. “Huh, little James. Took no notice he’s eatin’ beans now.”

Baby James looked up at his ma and stuffed another handful of beans into his mouth. His mouth and hands were covered with mashed beans.

“We got us a happy baby, ain’t we Ma?” he said as he set the table.

“I’m not yer mammy,” Emma said as she brought the pork and beans to the table.

After the prayer, James filled his plate with cornbread and covered it with beans.

“Ma, yer cornbread is the best.”

“I’m glad ya like it. How ‘bout them beans?”

“Yep, them too.”

“Somebody left a whole pound o’ salt pork.”

Conversation was small talk, no great thoughts. James and Emma spent the evening on the porch in the rocking chairs just listening to the crickets and staring at the moon until they both fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, James woke Emma and got her to bed. The next day was Saturday, and they spent their time getting ready for Sunday.

“I’ll get out one of my old sermons,” James said, looking through his leather folder.

“Easy to memorize.”

Chapter Nine

A Farming We Shall Go

After a month of preaching, James had the same trouble with the Simms Baptist Church. He didn't preach according to the wishes of the church council. He was a man of principle, and he wouldn't preach any other way.

"Well," James said after church, the last Sunday he preached a sermon. "We don't have any money. Not enough to buy a farm, at least. I'll write a few letters to family and friends. See if we can get a loan."

He and Emma walked home hand-in-hand.

"Now you listen ta me, James. You write my daddy. He'll loan ya the money or my name's not Presley."

"Sorry, darlin', but you is a Singleton from now on."

"You very well know what I mean." She made that wrinkle between her two eyebrows that James liked so much. "We Presley's stick ta-gather."

"So's we Singletons," James remarked quite reasonably.

As they approached the steps to the parsonage, she said, "Now you listen ta me, James Samuel Singleton or I'll iron those pants a' while yer a wearin'em."

"Okay. Okay." He kissed her on the cheek and patted her on the back. "I'll get my pen and paper out immediately."

James went inside and up to his office, and while Emma fixed lunch, he retrieved his writing materials. He wrote:

"Dear Charles,

How are you and the family? We are doing well. I lost my job as parson. I asked around town, but everyone is satisfied with the preachers they have. Little James is growing up like a weed. Emma is always busy with James and the neighbors. She helps out the women of the church when she can. We aim to get a farm by homesteading. I have some money, but it won't last three months. I have been helping out at different farms in the area, but they don't pay much, but we will get along. Emma sends her best.

James”

James walked the letter over to the post office at the general store, paid the man two cents to mail the letter, and walked home. He couldn't outright ask his father-in-law for money, but he hoped the good Lord would smile at him and Emma. He knew, for a fact, that if Charles knew his daughter was in trouble, the old man would help. After two weeks of living hand to mouth, James received an answer from his father-in-law. He wrote:

“With all the love of my heart for Emma and James.

We feel deeply about your plight. Sending some money by stage to tide you over until you can return home and work for me. There is plenty of work on this plantation, and I will deed a part of it to you two to work on to support your family. Otherwise, because I know my Emma, if you decide not to come, I pray the Lord you can get established there.

Charles and Anne.”

James and Emma waited patiently for the money, but they decided to settle there in Simms. There was plenty of room to grow. (Except for the big ranchers who thought the free land was theirs.)



Emma had to move again. This time, it was into a little shack outside the town limits. The land was a wind-swept, dried-up piece of sod full of tumbleweeds. Emma sighed.

“Here we go again. From the pan into the fire.”

“Don’t say that, Emma. The last place we were in was a temple compared to Old Hodgkin’s place.” James slipped down from the wagon, walked over to Emma’s side, and took Little James from her hands.

“I can git down myself. I would call this place inhumane.” Emma dusted herself off with the palms of her hands. “Let’s git busy. We won’t have help this time. No one wants to come out this way.”

“You take the baby,” James said, “an’ I’ll start unloadin’ the wagon.”

“Ya think I’m a weak li’l woman?” she asked. She walked to the back of the wagon and unhooked the tailgate. “Well, ya got somethin’ comin’.”

“I’ll go see what we got inside.”

“Ye go ahead. Let a woman do all the work.”

James sat Little James down on the ground. “Now, let me git that.” James arrived just in time to grab the end of the tailgate as Emma let it down. It may have slammed down onto Emma’s arm or hand if he hadn’t interfered. James took a deep breath. “It takes two, ya know.”

“I thought ye wouldn’t come an’ help.”

“I did come an’ help.” He started carrying out the first box.

“Yeah, an’ ya left Little James ta fend fer his self.”

“He’ll be fine. We can keep an eye out fer’im.”

Emma and James lifted all the boxes and a bed they had bought secondhand and carried them inside the little shack.

They bought that shack for a hundred dollars and the land that went with it. It was only twenty-five acres, but they figured they could farm enough hard-to-get items to save up for more land and build a better house. They wanted to homestead outside the town limits where no one owned property. It was all government land, but everyone told them if they did homestead out there, the ranchers would burn them out as they had other homesteaders. They considered it theirs since they grazed cattle on it and drove cattle through it on their way to market. James, being a pacifist, had looked for a cheaper place and wound up with what Emma called a “Hell hole.”

“Don’t worry,” he had said, “We can fix it up.”

Tex showed up to help.

“Yer a right good Christian,” James said.

“I didn’t want cha ta think we kicked ya out or nothing,” Tex said, standing there looking like a dandy.

Emma picked up Little James off the ground. She bounced him as she took a break. There was an old rickety chair on the porch. She sat in it carefully. It didn’t look as though it would hold her, but she was light enough that it held.

“Where’s yer missus?” she asked Tex as he came out the door.

“She went to find another sister from the church,” Tex responded, scratching the back

of his neck. "If she finds someone, she'll be bringin' up the buggy."

"Weeel, that just about does it," James said, bringing Emma a glass of water.

"Everthangs put away, well, mostly."

"Ya need anythang more?" Tex asked.

"No, we can put the other things away," Emma said from her chair.

Tex noticed she was nursing Little James. His face flushed. "Well, I'll go see if the missus has got any help comin' fer ya."

"Thanks, Tex." James extended a hand.

They shook hands and Tex jumped onto his Indian pony and rode away.

"He won't be back," Emma commented.

"Got our work cut out fer us. I'll go in thar an' give it some elbow grease."

"I thought ya put everthang away." Emma saw the back side of her husband disappearing into the house.

"All the big stuff," James called from inside.

Emma listened to the buzzing of the flies. She had to wave her hand ever-so-often to keep them off the baby.

By the time the sun settled behind the horizon, throwing red clouds in its wake, James had most of everything put away and was fixing bacon and eggs and toast when Emma came in. She went into the bedroom in the back and then out to the kitchen on the right-hand side of the house.

"Put James ta bed," she said.

"Thought we might use some o' those old eggs." He smiled as he waved the spatula

over the eggs.

“Anythang is okay in *my* condition.” Emma sat at a rickety kitchen table and wiped it with her apron.

“You got a condition?” James’ jaw dropped.

“I al’ays got a condition.” She sat her elbow on the table and rested her head in her hand.

“We ain’t been married long enough for you to always be in a condition.”

Emma waved as though she was swatting a fly. “Don’t worry. I’m a strong woman.”

James didn’t know what to think or to say. “Hope ye enjoy them eggs.”

“They better not have a red spot in’em. I don’t think I could eat anythang that’s been fertilized.”

James’ head jerked as he sat down and blinked his eyes several times.

“You gone looney, er somthin’?” Emma asked with a scowl on her face.

“Naw. Let’s pray. Thank thee Lord fer these good eggs an’ bacon, an’ bless the babies.” James popped one eye open, and looking around, he giggled. *Babies!*

Their first night there didn’t seem real. Maybe everything would be bright and new when they woke up in the morning. But when they did wake up, it was with aches and pains and wanting a good night’s rest. Little James woke them several times, but they were not sore at him. It was the devil they cursed.



James hitched up old Meriwether to the plow and harrow the 25-acre backyard. He planted alfalfa and some truck vegetables and berries. At harvest time, the alfalfa sold for a large bank note, but half the fruits and vegetables landed on Emma's table, and she canned them for the next three weeks. Some of the canned foods sold in the general store along with eggs from the chickens.

After the canning, Emma was proud of the wall-to-wall full pantry. At the end of all that work, her happy condition ended with pains in her belly. She tried to lie down and rest but felt something coming and raced to the kitchen. She took the big tub and sat in it. After a while, the pain went away, and she sobbed. She buried the baby in the backyard and didn't say a thing about it to James.

It took James two months before he noticed she wasn't getting big. Then he remembered how she had grown sullen, not very talkative. He would have kicked himself if he could. He knew something had happened but couldn't figure it out all that time. Then it dawned on him. Maybe she had a miscarriage.

Coming in out of the snow, he walked into the kitchen where Emma was cooking supper. He put his hand on her shoulder and said in a low tone, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Don't know what yer talkin' about." She kept on stirring the stew.

"About the baby."

"There was no baby!" She stiffened and didn't look at him.

"But you said, ..."

"About my condition. I know."

Emma set the table without looking at James.

“You could have told me.”

“How could I?” She looked at him square in the face. “Yer always workin’. Buildin’ somethin’, repairin’ the house, working out’n the field. If yer not doin’ that, yer prayin’ an’ readin’ the Bible!”

Emma put the pot on the table along with the coffee. “Sit an’ let’s eat.”

She sat down and waited for James. He sat down slowly, blessed the food, and then stared at it.

“It won’t leap out at cha,” she said, disgruntled. “You gotta spoon it into yer bowl.”

“I’m sorry. I should’ve known.” He spooned some stew into his bowl.

“Too late. Eat yer supper er I’ll toss it.” Emma chewed fast as if she were in a race with James.

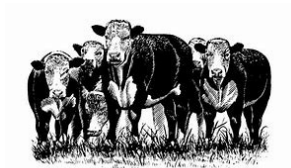
James ate in silence. He didn’t know what to do or what to say, except, “Sorry.”

Later that night, just before bed, James confronted Emma. He grabbed her shoulders and was about to say something when she started beating on his chest with her fists.

“Damn you ta Hell! Damn! Damn! Damn!”

James embraced her, and she sobbed for the longest time. When she stopped, she waited a couple of minutes and said, “A wife gits lonely, ya know.”

James felt a multitude of emotions, and all he could think of was, “I’m sorry.”



Emma and James stayed in Simms. They had a number of good years and made good money. One of the things that contributed to that was an idea from Tex.

“Ya know,” he told James, “Texas is a long-horn state. We raise most o’ the beef in the nation. It would only be right if’n you were to join in and raise yer own beef.”

“Now I think that is funny, Tex.” James chuckled. “I don’t see a vast expanse of land to graze cattle on.”

“Well, that’s the thing,” Tex said. “It don’t take no land a’tall. It’s a new idea, ya see. You raise alfalfa, but keep some fer yerself, an’ with the money ya git from sellin’, ya buy some calves, ya see.”

“I think I’m gittin’ yer point.” James stood there with his hands on his hips.

“Sure. Ya fatten’em up and sell’em fer a higher price.” Tex rolled and lit a cigarette. “People are hankerin’ to git their hands on a veal steak. A chicken-fried veal steak is the best. Calf livers come in second. They spend a lot of money for this voriety of meat.”

So, Emma and James raised calves. They were doing well enough to start a nice house with extra bedrooms. That was mainly because Emma was pregnant again after four years of raising James Benton. Their second child was Claude Lee, and when he was born, Emma was in tears. James joined her in her joy and celebration. They went against good business sense and slaughtered one of their calves.

Emma fixed some chicken fried steaks with a side dish of Rocky Mountain oysters. They even drank a bottle of wine they had saved from the first time he was preaching. It was to be used for the Lord’s supper, but they were so excited at Claude’s birth that they made themselves merry with a real drink and a toast to God’s blessings.



Emma’s time was spent nursing, changing diapers, washing diapers, hanging them out

to dry, waking up several times at night, and taking naps during the day. Little James Benton didn't like that. He took out his frustrations on Claude by struggling to get into Emma's lap when she was trying to nurse, waking Emma by slapping her arm if she were to nap, taking the baby's toys away, and bawling him out while shaking his crib. He got his bottom slapped for that. He also got his bottom slapped when he took Claude out of his crib, holding him by his head in an arm grip. He would have taken him outside without Emma's intervention. There was no telling what he would have done with him out there.

When the boys grew an inch or two, James bossed Claude, telling him what to do. James would bop him on the head with his fist if Claude didn't obey. This was done because, when Claude was born, Emma had put Claude in James's crib, displacing him to the couch. James never forgave.

For years, Claude was the baby brother. James would chase him around the yard with a bucket of water, or when it was winter, it was snowballs. James would tell him tall tales, such as:

"If you go out alone into the field, eagles'll come ta carry you off to feed ya to their young'uns." James pointed up to the sky where Claude could see the buzzards flying around in circles.

Another time, he said, "You need be careful, Claude, when you gather up wood f'om the wood pile fer Mommy. There's an old man livin' in thar with arms like snakes, and he'll reach out an' bite cha."

"You better watch out, Claude," he said another time, showing the whites of his eyes. "There's a boogy man hidin' in the shadows of our bedroom waitin' to carry ya off, an' you

won't see hide nor hair of Mommy or Daddy evah again.”

James would laugh when he could make Claude cry.

Emma was sorely vexed by Little James and Claude. Whenever she asked her preacher husband, he would say, “Leave’em alone. Everthang’ll smooth out on its own. Pray fer’em and the Lord will show’em the way.”

Sure enough, after Emma became pregnant with their third son, James and Claude were in a fistfight, and this one thought stopped James. *When Claude grows up ...*”

When Claude beat on James’s chest, and James just stood there and let him, Claud asked, “Why you stopped? Put up yer dukes and fight back.”

“Not anymore, Claude. Not anymore.” James patted Claude’s back. “We gotta be friends. Ya see what’s in yer crib? Now ya don’t have no place ta sleep. No more.”

Claude stood there, thinking. “I’ll be yer friend, James. Let’s go outside an’ play.”

When Emma peeked around the corner, she saw James and Claude walking out hand-in-hand. “What’s gotten inta those boys?” She said out loud.

At supper, Emma announced, “Pa, ye were right. Them two criminals ‘er becomin’ friends.”

“Told ya, now, didn’t I?” James smiled as he looked at his boys. “The Lord bless’em.”

After dinner, Little James told Claude, “Better not mess with the baby. Not right now. Wait ‘till he grows a bit an’ then we’ll wham’im.”

Chapter Ten

Sarah Jane's Funeral



Emma received a letter saying her mamma had died. Her new baby, George Edward, was not even a year old. James had stood by her side as she read the letter.

“I’m goin’ to the funeral, hon’,” she said to James with a tear in her eye.

“I’ll take you to the station in Texarkana where you can catch a stage.”

James arranged with Tex Williams and his wife for them to take care of the kids while he took Emma to Texarkana, and he would be back in a couple of days.

Emma and James had not been separated like this before, but James had to stay and run the farm. With Emma’s mental state, she couldn’t take the kids with her, and she wouldn’t be gone for over a month, or she hoped.

“The children will be fine, Emma,” James had said as she boarded the stage to Senatobia. “I’ll take good care of them.”

Emma sobbed on James’s shoulder until they heard, “All aboard!” She stepped up onto the stage with James’ assistance. The door was shut, the stage lurched forward, and Emma waved out the window with her handkerchief.

James’s heart felt heavy as he saw the love of his life leave. Now, he was crying. He sniffled and blew his nose. He went back to his wagon and drove home.



Emma's trip was hot and dusty. She fasted the first day out. She had forgotten food and drink and brought only a couple of changes of clothes. She was jostled all the time, and the dust blew through the windows for several days. She covered her nose with layers of a sheer silk scarf in order to be able to breathe.

One woman, Beth Bledsoe, sitting across from her, took pity and shared what food she had brought with her. She was the auntie type, a middle-aged woman, wearing a black dress with a veil raised up over her black hat when she wanted to talk, covering its white flowers, but she would bring it back down when she finished talking. She carried a carpet bag full of fried chicken, bread and cheese, and potato salad. Her utensils were carved from oak. She said carving was her husband's hobby and hers was traveling. When they arrived at Senatobia, Emma accompanied her to the general store where she replenished her, now friend's, bag of goodies.

Emma was surprised when her tall, thin, clean-shaven, brother, Doctor Thomas E. Presley, walked into the store, calling her name. He wore a gray suit and tie with the collar sticking straight up.

"Emma! Emma! Oh, there you are." They hugged each other, and he said, "I was looking for you at the station until I saw you coming in here."

"Oh, Beth," she said, placing her hand on her traveling companion's shoulder. "This is my younger brother, Thomas."

“Hello, Ma’am.” He tipped his hat.

“Oh, to be sure.” She put her hand forward. He took it and let it go. *A very handsome specimen*, she thought.

“He’s come to take me to the funeral we talked about.”

“Ah, yes. Your poor mother.” Beth touched her mouth with her fingers.

“I came from the plantation,” Thomas said, rather anxiously. “We’ll have the funeral there. We’ll need to hurry.”

“Not until she has some fashionable attire, my dear sir.” Beth led Emma away in a gentlewoman’s way with an air of aristocracy.

After about an hour that seemed like all day, Emma approached Thomas with several packages she put into his hands.

“I’ll come with the buggy,” he said, using his chin to help hold the boxes.

Thomas was quick and drove up with the buggy in no time.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get to know more of each other,” Beth said, and helped Emma onto the buggy.

The two women said goodbye and Thomas turned the buggy north.

They arrived at the plantation by the time the sun hovered above a bed of trees.

As they pulled up to the house, Thomas said, “I hope you bought something *snappy*. We are going to have our pictures taken after the funeral.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I’ve been wanting to wear something *snappy*, as you call it, ever since I left this place.” Thomas helped her down,

She was met by her three other brothers, John and George, with William, the other

doctor, standing at the door, smiling. He wasn't social or affectionate, but he did wave his hand and held the door open for everyone. As Emma passed him, she asked, "When did you get such a fat mustache?"

William just winked. His black suit matched his black hair and mustache.



Emma found her mother lying in state in the library. She was surrounded by book cases, but there was one window with the curtains open through which the sun shown right into the dark mahogany coffin lined with white satin. Sarah Jane was lit up with a large ray of bright white light. She lay there like a sleeping angel. Emma thought if she could just touch her hand, her mother would wake up. But her hand was cold, and the bright light vanished as the sun lay upon its bed. A ray of red light touched the coffin and then blackness. It was as if death had taken her mother a second time, and Emma was so shocked, that all she could do was back away in horror. She turned and walked quickly out the door, shading her eyes with her arm as though she had seen something macabre.

Elijah, the butler, was trimming the candles and lighting the oil lamps in the foyer and around the table. An eerie glow filled the foyer as did low echoed tones of conversation. The family gathered around and sat in their appointed seats. There were some cousins present with their parents. Aunt Jane nodded her head and whispered, "Hello." Tennessee, her cousin, sat next to her, a grown woman already. She waved to Emma. Everyone surrounded the white table in dark clothing, a stark contrast.

Emma's father, with his halo of white hair amid the shadows, remained standing. "What's all this fuss and whispering? Hum?" He grabbed the back of his chair to support himself. "I grieve at my wife's death. too. Your mother, and sister to some. We all do, but let's have a moment of good cheer. She has gone to a far better place and has found joy in the bosom of our Lord. She has suffered and died, but the good Lord said, I am the resurrection and the life. She has gone to live in His Glory."

Everyone said, "Amen."

"Now, I am no preacher," James continued, "But I have read the scriptures, and what does the Lord say when he comes among us? He says, Peace be unto you and rejoice. Doesn't he? Well then, let us rejoice. Let's give a toast to Sarah Jane, a beloved wife, a mother, a sister, and a daughter."

They all raised their wine glasses and drank a toast, and there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

They ate a simple meal consisting of chicken soup, bread and cheese, and smoked ham. Their conversations were still modest and quiet, remembering Emma's mother.

After hearing all the news from everyone, Emma spent the rest of the evening by her favorite tree petting her dog Toby, revisiting her memories of growing up on the plantation. She wondered why her mother hadn't spent more time with her. Maybe the answer lay in her mother's tender health. Maybe that was all. She was sick a lot, and now, she has died young. She didn't have many children. Perhaps she couldn't. She had grown up thinking her mother was selfish and unloving, not spending time with her children, but thinking back, yes, it was her health. It could be why two of her sons became doctors.



The next morning, when people arose for breakfast, coming down from upstairs or in from camping outside, they found the servants setting up chairs for the funeral.

Breakfast was short, and everyone moved into the foyer.

There was a podium at the back of the room occupied by a Reverend Willoughby, with all the chairs in semicircles facing him. He gave the agenda, and then the coffin, now closed, was brought in by the brothers and one cousin, Ira. Emma didn't think he would have come. He couldn't stand sadness unless he were drunk, but he looked completely sober today. After the coffin rested on a made-up table of saw horses and planks covered with dark purple velvet ... *what is that*, Emma asked. *A robe? It must have been done in a hurry.*

By what people were telling about her mother as they got up to give their several remembrances, Emma heard the oddest things. She was always taking laudanum and being delirious. She would pretend she was a dog or a cat and have to sleep in the barn because Granny Gray told her that's where animals sleep. She would swim in her knickers and not tell Mother (Granny Gray). She would sit with her friends in the dark, holding a candle, and tell ghost stories. All this was very strange for a bookworm who always complained that she never got to go to college like her sons did. *Well*, Emma thought. *Maybe I wanted to go to college too.*

The next thing that took place was having a photographer take photos. Before the funeral, he took pictures of Sarah Jane lying in her coffin, and then he took a picture of the

pall bearers around the coffin with flowers on each side. The last picture he took was of the four children. The ivy on the side of the house made a good backdrop.



The burial took place on a little grassy knoll in the woods not far from the house, on the breakfast side of the house. It was very peaceful there.

That night, there was a coon hunt, and Emma and her cousin Tennie joined the men, chasing the dogs with Toby still in the lead. The two girls followed the single lantern and had to suffer all kinds of scrapes and scratches from briars and limbs. They laughed all the way through, having the best time of their lives. Then gunfire. For half a second, Emma thought someone had killed the coon until she heard the sharp howl of a dog. She knew that voice. It was Toby!

“I thought it was the coon!” one of boys called out.

“You bastard fool!” someone else shouted.

Emma and Tennie ran through the crowd of men. She screamed when she saw Toby laying on his side with his eyes all glassy. She scooped him up into her arms. He yelped and went limp.

It was too late to say, “Wait!”

Emma lay her head on Toby’s head and sobbed uncontrollably. Tennie tried to

comfort her, caressing her shoulder and laying her head on Emma's, wetting Emma's hair with her own tears.

One of the boys left to get a shovel.

James tried to tear his daughter from the dog, but she screamed and fought him off. Tennie stood beside her, not knowing what to do except caress Emma's head.

Emma became very weak, and the body of the dog fell from her grip. William announced that she was in a swoon, and the two doctors took her back to the plantation.

The boy came back with a shovel, and James buried Toby along with the raccoon. "He would have liked that," he said.



Emma slipped into a deep depression. Her pa, James, wrote her husband, James, to ask if she could stay a little longer and told him the reason. Meanwhile, waiting for a response, Dr. Presley and Dr. Presley consulted with each other on a treatment for their sister. They suggested showers every day, walks with a friend, fresh fruit and vegetables, and reading Mark Twain. She should not have to be surrounded by children. That was thought to add to depression. She should be isolated and not allowed to experience much. A simple life would return her to her senses.

Emma's father wrote to her husband every Sunday to keep him apprised of her progress. The first week she stayed in her room and sobbed. She wouldn't eat the first four days. She was given laudanum to keep her quiet. By the end of the week, she was not

responsive to talking, but she was taking a little soup. The second week she was ravenous and would eat anything she was given. She went for short walks from her bedroom to visit her father and to peer down into the foyer to see who would pass by. Sometimes Tennie would wave, and she would wave back. Most of the time, though, she watched at her bedroom window hoping she would see Toby. The third week she was allowed outside. She and Tennie would stroll the grounds and sit at her favorite tree which now had a bench for her. She and Tennie would sit there for hours, it seemed, just talking about Toby and growing up with him. Then she remembered she had a previous puppy that had died. She couldn't remember its name, and said, "Nothing ever lasts."

"Not in this life, Emma," Tennie said. "It's not supposed to. William Wordsworth wrote:

'Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
 The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere it's setting,
 And cometh from afar:
 Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,
 But trailing clouds of glory do we come
 From God, who is our home:'

And Jesus said that all the things that matter go with us back to that home. Love, family, friends, and even Toby. You'll see him again."

"Where does it say that?" Emma said, tilting her head.

“Well, He raises all in the Resurrection, doesn’t he? And from what I have read, Christians believe that all good things that we love, and all the people we love will follow us into Heaven.”

“You think so?” Emma asked, peering intently into Tennie’s eyes.

“I feel it in my bones.”

They held each other’s hands and smiled into each other’s eyes.

“I need to read more poetry,” Emma said wistfully, looking off into space.

In the fourth week, Emma made plans for returning home, asking Aunt Jane and Tennie to accompany her. They agreed, but until then, Emma retired like an old woman to recuperate. She slept a lot and talked with Aunt Jane and Tennie for long hours, talking about every philosophy known to the new Victorian Age.

Chapter Eleven

Back Home



James received a telegram from Aunt Jane telling him she and her daughter, Tennie, would escort Emma home. They would arrive tomorrow in Texarkana. Could he meet them tomorrow afternoon at the station?

Going to Texarkana seemed routine now. He had to go there to get supplies to build the house and to get groceries once a month. Now he was able to take Emma to the station and pick her up without much ado.

When he picked up Emma, she seemed to glow. She was a new person and acted more refined. She seemed to have copied her aunt. They acted like twins. Compared to her, it made him feel like a hick from the hills of Tennessee. He wasn't far off, his father was from the backwoods of Virginia.

The ride back was pleasant. He had acquired a buggy that provided room for four people. It wasn't his, but he didn't tell anyone. Emma rode in the back with her aunt, and Tennie rode shotgun next to him. He had a long one-sided conversation with Tennie, learning all about Emma's recovery.

James had finished the house, and so when Emma returned, she was greeted by a fresh pine-smelling home with a nice feather bed where she could recuperate. The bedroom was full of light and clean, something that raised her spirits. She thought she was coming home to a ram-shackled shack. *Goody, goody. No shack.*

As Emma strolled through the house, she took deep breaths, saying “Oh, James, it’s lovely, simply divine.”

The layout wasn’t new. The living room was to the left, the dining and kitchen to the right, the master bedroom in back, and the kid’s rooms, upstairs. What was miraculous was that it was new and completed so fast.

The next day, James went to the Williams and collected the rest of the family.

When the boys were given a bedroom with their own beds, they celebrated with cheers and hoorahs.

“Calm down, children,” Aunt Jane scolded, holding up her hands and pounding the air. “Your mother has been sick and she needs lots of rest.”

Having stayed at the Williams’s for more than a month, they were used to having another woman tell them what to do, but having Aunt Jane come and stay with them was a bit of a shock. They became shy and tended to stand around. Tennie came to the rescue. She read them stories, played board games with them, and gave them baths.

Tennie had her hands full with three boys. The baby had just learned to walk and got into all kinds of trouble, taking things out of drawers, bringing baby skunks home, climbing the counter and getting into the molasses jar, etc.

Because the new baby, Edward, could walk, James and Claude had forgotten that the baby was the adversary. They had fun playing with him.

The next day, James took one of Ed’s hands, and Claude took the other, and they walked him out to the corral to see the calves.

“Say cows, Ed,” Claude said, pointing to the calves.

“Cow-oos,” he said with a long, low, drawl. He patted the lower fence rail with both hands very fast as though he were excited about seeing the calves.

“Say cows run, Ed,” James said.

Little Edward tensed his little body and said, “Cows run.” He laughed, pounded the fence again, jumping up and down an inch off the ground. It startled one of the calves who backed away.

Big James came walking by. “You boys skedaddle. Come with me, and ye can see the little kitties in the barn.”

“Kitties!” they all yelled, running after their pa.

Inside the barn, behind the door, there lay a small mound of hay where the mother cat had made its nest. When she saw the boys, she started slapping the ground with her tail and growling. She pulled her ears back with annoyance and started carrying one of the kittens who had strayed from the nest.

Some of the kittens stalked each other or swatted wagging tails. When Ed tried to pick one up, it stuck its ears back and hissed.

“Careful, now,” Big James said. “They’re wild. They’ll scratch ya.”



The boys didn't see their mother often, never at breakfast, and rarely at dinner. Sometimes they were escorted by Tennie into the bedroom to say hello to their mother. She would tell them she loved them and to be good, and then they had to leave.

They were never allowed to play in or around the house to keep it quiet for their mother, so they played near the barn and corral or in the fields. There were no woods per se, but there was a clump of cottonwood trees on each side of the creek that ran through the east side of the property in the springtime. At any other time, it was dry. Yet, if you dug down a couple of feet, you could always find mud. That moisture was what the trees lived on.

The mud was supposed to stay under the ground, but when the older boys brought Ed back to the house covered from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head, no one could do anything but laugh. Daddy James laughed so hard he cried.

They never showed his mother, but she found out, and when she called them to her side, all she could say, was, “I can’t strangle you. I’d have no children left. Please be careful. I love you.”

They promised they would, and they each hugged and kissed her.

This affected Emma so much that she decided she was through recuperating. She got up, got dressed, and tied her apron on. Aunt Jane tried to dissuade her, but she was adamant.

“This family can’t do without me!” She walked into the kitchen and said, “I’m back home, and home I’m gonna stay.”



When the kittens were grown and had become good mousers, they became targets to some overzealous and high-spirited boys. They loved throwing rocks at them, but no one

laughed at this. All three were swatted on their backsides and told to straighten up. Yet, they found the old mother and decided her life was done and strapped some black powder to her. It must have been an angel that visited James because he had this overwhelming dread come over him. Just before they were to light the dynamite stick, James found them on the far side of the barn, rushed up to them and yelled "Stop!" They had a hard time chasing that cat and taking the dynamite off.

"I guess she got a sudden rush of life in her," little James said.

"What were you thinkin'?" big James asked, placing his hands on his son's shoulders. "I am just shakin'. Please! Come to yer senses. Don't do no harm to anyone er anything. Be God fearin'!"

"I'm sorry, Pa." Little James grabbed his father and cried.

The other two also grabbed their dad. They hugged each other and promised to do no harm anymore.

When Emma found out what they were doing, she had to sit down and fan herself.

"They will be the death o' me yet."

Aunt Jane said, "Well, maybe we should stay here a while longer."

"I love ya both to death," Emma said, grabbing her hand and squeezing it. "But ye have a family too, and they need ya more'n I do."

Aunt Jane and daughter Tennie had stayed the summer, but the next day, they were gone. Emma was left with only memories, even if they were the fondest of memories. She didn't know when she would ever see them again.

With the boys in check, their father preaching to them every night, reading from the

Bible, singing a hymn before bed, and Emma in her right mind again, the family settled down to their regular routines.



James was called into town on some business. He was gone a whole day. When he came back, he didn't have a pleasant expression on his face. He looked worried. He gathered the family together.

"It seems that we have been swindled," he said, falling into his soft lounge chair as though he had been thrown into it. "I'm sorry to have to say this, but we will be moving out and going to Texarkana."

"What-a-ya mean?" Emma asked. "Ye jest build us a nice home. We got us a nice business goin' here."

"I know. I know. But somebody else wants our home and our business."

"Who in the tar-nation is that?"

"The bank." James took a deep breath. "There seems to have been some mistake made in the deed or somethin'. We were payin' for the land and the calves fer sure, but accordin' to the bank, not enough. Now, we're fifty hundred dollars in debt, and they're foreclosin'."

Emma almost fainted and fell into her chair. She started crying, and blurted out, "They're not gonna get the best o' me!"

"That's the attitude!" James smiled.

“But where’re we gonna live?”

“Now there’s a goodness in some Texans. Mr. Crank at the bank ... crank at the bank!” James laughed hard. No one else did. “Anyway, he said there is a small farm outside Texarkana he owns. We can pay rent to him until we get back on our feet.”

“Harr we go again!” Emma covered her face with her hands. She was wishing she had Aunt Jane there to rub her shoulders, but James stepped in and did it. “The Lord help us,” she said.



The new house wasn’t much different from the shack they started in at Simms, except it was a long ranch house affair in which you had to walk through every room except the end ones to get anywhere. There was a corral out back instead of a backyard and a cotton field behind that. There was no barn to speak of. The room on the left end was used as a tool room. The kitchen was to the left of the front door, and the living room was to the right. Beyond the living room to the right was the master bedroom. The other bedroom was between the kitchen and the tool shed.

James said, “Don’t worry. We can fix this place up too.”

“I don’t like it,” mumbled Emma.

The boys had to sleep in one bed. It took getting used to again. After a couple of weeks, they could go to bed without fighting.

There was another door to the outside through the kitchen, and most of the eating was done out there.

Chapter Twelve

Finally, a Girl

Agnes was born in Texarkana when Ed was eight years old. Everyone celebrated having a little sister. When Agnes was old enough to talk, she always asked James, who was fifteen, to take her potty. It was one of the most uncomfortable things he was asked to do. He would say “Ahh, Ma. Do I have ta?”

“It was you that wanted a little sister,” she answered. “Now ya got’er, ya need ta take care of her.” Emma laughed. “If’n you were a girl, you’d like it.”

“I don’t recon I would,” he said. “You know Mary Chalmers? She has a li’le sister, an’ she hates it.”

“Some girls git ta be a mother a’for their time.”



Before Agnes could say ‘britches,’ Emma’s dad died. This time, the whole family climbed into the wagon and went to the plantation near Senatobia. On the way, Emma talked all about her dad. He was a good Christian. He was kind and understanding, very patient. He was stern at times, very stubborn, not changing his mind when he had made it up to do something or not. He was that way to friends and children, but not with Mother. He let her have her own way.

The trip took almost two weeks to get to Senatobia. They were camping out every night. Emma made Dutch oven bread at night and pancakes in the morning. They lived on

salt pork and beans with some dried apples and peaches to snack on. A couple of times, Emma made those dried peaches into Dutch oven peach cobbler. That was the only memorable part of the trip.

When they arrived at the plantation, the atmosphere was casual, almost like a circus. Emma's brothers and cousins were recalling funny times, like when the old man fell off the roof he had been repairing, got up, and went back up the ladder to work. Another time, he was chased by the neighbor's bull through the cotton field and into the gin house. That bull was so upset and scared when it found itself cornered that it tore up the place. They were able to wrangle him to the floor with one man on the tail, one man on each leg, and old James wrapping himself around his throat.

"I remember," Emma said, interjecting herself into the conversation, "when we were little, he came home with old Boss with the coon between his teeth, and they were both covered with mud." Everyone laughed. "Maggie, there, had to shoo him out of the house with a broom."

"I sure did, Missy. I sure did." Maggie's hair was white, but other than that, she hadn't aged a bit since Emma was a little girl.

"How're ya doin', Maggie? Emma went over and hugged her.

"I been doin' great since all you got married." She giggled. "No mo' chasin' little girls an' boys anymo'." She laughed and slapped her thigh.

"What'cha doin' in the kitchen?" Emma asked as she took off her hat and shawl. She handed it to a new butler, Adam. "Can I come an' help? Would do me good."

Maggie shook her head. "Any help'll make my life easier. Come on in."

The kids had scattered to go exploring except Agnes. She clung to her Daddy's leg. He picked her up and joined the men as they smoked pipes and cigars and shared some moon-shine. Of course, James refused anything but coffee. James bounced little Agnes on his knee as he listened to the men.

While the men relaxed, the women servants and Emma, prepared dinner. The men-servants (there were only two) set up the chairs and tables.

The wives ate separately, saying they had enough serving their husbands for a while. They would have their own party. It was no more pork an' beans this time. Everyone had pheasant and hog's head. Emma enjoyed a side dish of pickled pig's feet and some homemade pickled vegetables. The men had to have their roast beef and potatoes.

Emma spent the evening gossiping with the women, and James went with the men into the woods. When James came back, he found Emma in her old bedroom. He took his clothes off and said, "Move over." She just grunted and turned onto her side. When James woke up the next morning, she was gone. He quickly splashed water onto his face, rubbed his wet hands through his hair, and dressed. He found Emma and the other women occupying the breakfast table. They were all laughing. (They were probably making fun of the men.) The servants must have been taking care of the children. They were nowhere in sight.

James found a hand on his shoulder. It was one of the doctors in the family. "Don't worry about Emma. We just gotta let'em go at times like this."

The funeral began the same as Sarah Jane's funeral, but there was now an air of hope and realization that James and Sarah would be together in the arms of Jesus. Even though

there were many speakers, including Emma herself, the funeral was soon over. James was buried, and the family was on their way home back to Texarkana.

Agnes Grows up

Chapter One

The Calf Rider

After five years of working in the cotton field in Texarkana, the Singletons had enough money to buy some calves. Eight-year-old Agnes got an idea after attending a Fourth of July rodeo, and seeing children riding calves. When she got home, she decided to grab one of those calves in the backyard and ride one herself. She was teased by her brothers, James, Claude, and Ed, bitterly, and that got her dander up. She may have failed the first time, but that didn't stop her. She dusted herself off and ran after another one. She wrestled that calf into the dust, climbed on top of it, held on to its neck, and rode it all over the corral until it ran out of breath.

“We know where she's gonna wind up,” James said.

The three boys on the fence shouted halloos and clapped as Agnes approached them.

“In the damn rodeo!” she yelled.

Their pa wasn't too far away when he heard his daughter cuss. He didn't know if he should slap her bottom or congratulate her. So, he did neither. But the next day, he did come to her and said, “Girl, you gotta watch yer tongue.”

Agnes agreed. She had her bottom slapped many times before.

“Thank you, Daddy.” Her dirty face smiled, and she wagged her bottom with her hands held behind her, making her dress shake back and forth.

James rolled his eyes, sighed, and walked away.

Agnes indeed rode the calves at the next Fourth of July rodeo and won a blue ribbon.

But that was not all she brought home. Three days afterward, she started getting red spots all over her body.



Agnes came to her mother after getting dressed that morning. “Ma! Look what I got.”

Emma stood horrified as Agnes extended her arm. “Dad blast it! You got the measles.” She grabbed her wrist and led her back to the bedroom.

“You get back in bed. I’ll get James to go fetch the doctor.”

James went from the doctor’s office, from one house to another, and out to a couple of farms before he found him.

Doctor Miller was a rough character who grew up among pioneers whose lives were hard. They worked day and night, suffering many privations. They had to cut down the forests to plow their fields. Use the logs to build their houses, or if they went out to Texas into the plains, they made dugouts and sod houses. They had to make thread and weave their cloth from wool, cotton, or flax. They ate what they could shoot or grow and sometimes it took all day to fix supper. They had days when they had nothing but a loaf of bread and cheese or a piece of meat. They ate the same thing for several days, like beans and bacon, or deer stew. Their lives were fleeting. Many babies died young. Their parents worked themselves into an early grave or died of smallpox or cholera.

Doctor Miller had gone to college because he wanted to relieve some of this suffering, and when he couldn’t do that most of the time, he became hardened. He wore a black suit and vest, a thin black bow-tie, and a black hat. He appeared to be dressed for a

procession of funerals. His grizzled face had a thin gray mustache that matched his short gray hair.

When James caught up with him, he said, “Boy, that’s all I’ve done all day, attending to children with the measles. It’s rampant. Burn the child’s clothes and bedclothes. I’ll be there directly or as soon as I can.”

When Agnes learned they were burning her clothes, she screamed because a couple of her dresses were beautiful. Nothing was sacred, not even her bed. They stripped that and burned everything but the mattress, springs, and bedstead. She thought she was going to be left naked on the mattress, but her mother gave her clean sheets and pajamas that belonged to Ed. Emma covered her daughter with a blanket from her bed.

When Doc Miller rode up, he looked tired and withered. Emma gave him a cup of coffee. He sat down with her for awhile and told her how to keep Agnes isolated from everyone. No one was to go in and see her without gloves and a scarf over their face. They should wash thoroughly after they left the bedroom.

Emma didn’t understand, but she tried to do that. Doc Miller put a mask over his mouth and nose and donned white gloves. After he came out of the bedroom, he said, “Feed her only chicken soup, and wash yer gloves as well as yerself.”

“I can’t take a bath just to see my daughter.”

“Up to the elbows. That’s all you need.”

“Oh.” Emma sighed.

“Keep her temperature down with cool water. Wash the rag also. And dump the wash water down into the seat of the outhouse.”

“Will do.”

“Make sure only one person sees her until her temperature breaks.”

“For sure, Doc,” Emma said, pressing her hands together against her heart.

For several nights, Emma sat by Agnes and kept her cool with wet rags on her forehead, chest, and arms. One night, her son, James, crept in and found his ma sleeping in her chair. Agnes was moaning. He lifted Emma, took her into the master bedroom, and put her to bed. His pa was lying there snoring.

James spent the rest of the night tending to Agnes. He had no gloves on or scarf around his mouth and nose. In the morning, Emma came in and scolded him.

“You haven’t any protection. Don’t ye know how dangerous this is?”

“I’m sorry, Ma. I just wanted to help.”

“Go on. Git. Go wash up,” she said with some consternation. “An’ burn them pajamas!”

Emma sat by her little girl. She removed the rag from her forehead and squeezed the water into the bowl. She was about to dip it into the cool water when it came to her to refresh it. So she rose from the chair and took the water bowl towards the door.

Agnes stretched, opened her eyes, and asked sleepily, “Where’s James?”

Emma sat the bowl down and rushed to the girl’s side.

“Emma! You all right? Let me feel yer head.”

The fever was gone.

“I thought James was here,” Agnes said slowly.

“He’s washin’ up right now.”

“I had a marvelous dream. I was walkin’ with Jim, that’s James, only shorter, ya know. Anyway, I was walkin’ with him and he was glowin’ like fire, but not like fire, only whiter, and we were talkin’, though, I can’t recall what we were talkin’ about now.”

“You just git some rest. I’ll bring in some chicken soup.”

“Ma, can I have somethin’ different? How ‘bout oats er pancakes?”

Perplexity contorted Emma’s face. “My darlin’, it’s past time ta make oats.” Then she thought, looking out into space. “Well, I guess pancakes it is.”

After three days, James was expecting his oldest boy to be with him out in the field. “Tarnation!” He said out loud. He stared at his other sons. “Claude. Go to the house and see what’s hold up James. We got work to do.”

“Yes, Pa.”

Claude ran back to the house, taking a shortcut through the calves in the backyard corral. He came through the back door huffing and puffing.

“Ma. Have you seen James?”

She was pouring batter into the skillet. “I expected him ta be with you.” She put the pitcher on the table. “I’ll go see.”

When she went into James’s bedroom, he was sound asleep. She shook him. “You sick er lazy?”

“What? Ma? Oh,” he said groggily. “I don’t feel so good.”

Emma drew back the curtains and peered at James’s face. There were red bumps. “Oh my golly!”

Claude was right behind her. He said, “I’ll go tell Pa.”

When James heard, he said, “Well. I’m not retirin’ just because someone’s sick. He’ll git over it.”

“Yeah,” Claude said, grabbing his hoe. “Agnes is feelin’ better. I expect James’ll do the same.”

They continued weeding, breaking up the sod.

Agnes took care of James for three days straight. Big James took care of the farm and the children. He put each one to work and fed them two meals a day. They spent their nights reading from the Bible and singing hymns.

Emma wasted along with James. He died several days later. Emma cried herself to sleep, and her dear husband, with tears in her eyes, placed her in her bed.

James burned his son’s clothes and bedclothes. He went out to the new barn and built James a pinewood coffin. He laid his son in it and nailed it shut. He helped Emma bathe and gave her clean clothes. He burned hers and his clothes along with their bedclothes and blankets, bathed himself, threw the wash water down the hole in the outhouse, washed his hands, and then dressed.

There wasn’t much talk at supper. James said, “I’ll go down to the telegraph office tomorra and let the family know.”



There were a lot of cards of condolences, but only Aunt Jane and Tennie showed up for the funeral.

James said, “And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges,

and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.” He misquoted the scripture, but it made him send invitations to church members in the area, and those who knew him came. Some of James’s friends from school and their parents were there. Still not many came. It was only a graveside affair, James himself dedicated the grave. He wore his black suit and tie and held his small Bible in his hands.

“James was only eighteen y’ars old. We all loved him. He was a hard worker. He made good grades in school. I don’t know where he got the time ta study. Sometimes he had ta take care o’ his little brothers an’ sister, especially when they were sick. His mother has been sick a lot, an’ he would take her place, makin’ sure ever’body behaved, got their baths, an’ got plenty ta eat. He would teasin’is ma so, sneekin’ up on’er an’ give’er a kiss on the cheek. He outgrew most of his youthful rambunctiousness. He was a fine young man. He may have married an’ have a good wife an’ childern, but who knows the mind o’ God. We can only try to obey his will an’ leave ‘ar lives in his hands.”

James noticed Emma was not the only one weeping as she sat there in a kitchen chair. There was a girl on the far side of the open grave. She and her mother leaned against a thick old tree. The mother held her close to her breast as she cried.

James said a prayer after everyone sang *The Old Rugged Cross*.

People came and threw a handful of soil or a flower onto the coffin after it was lowered into the hole. After everyone left, the workers shoveled the dirt piles back into the earth.

James went up to the mother whose daughter had been suffering so.

“I’m sorry, but we don’t know yer name,” James said demurely.

“Frances Churchill,” she said. Her daughter ran back to their buggy. “My Annie was a close friend of James. I think they were closer than I understood.”

“I see. I’m so sorry they had to be separated like this.”

“She’ll get over it. I had to. She lost her father two years ago. We all have someone we love and lose to death, or know someone who has.”

“That’s true.” James looked up as though he were praying. “I’m sure there’s a better life fer us all waitin’ just beyond them clouds.”

“I’m hopeful. That’s what lets me breathe and go through life without a lot of sorrow.”

“God bless ya, Miz. Churchill. Thanks fer comin’.”

James went back to Emma waiting in their wagon.

“First thing you do is go a gallivantin’ around with a beautiful woman while yer sufferin’ wife has to wait hare in humiliation.” Emma pulled her shawl closer to her.

After checking that the children were all settled, James climbed aboard. “Seems James had a girlfriend we didn’t know about. That was her ma, Frances Churchill, a real fine lady.”

“An’ I guess I’m not a fine lady? I don’t deserve yer fine attention? The mother o’ yer children. I’m a no-account. I just live here. Never you no mind! I’m unseen an’ unheard.”

“That’s enough,” the Preacher within James said.

Emma folded her arms and pouted as James slapped the horses and the wagon started on its way back home.

James didn't say anything. No one else did either. Why was it not okay to be kind to someone who came to the funeral? It wasn't the woman he went to comfort, but the girl who had run away as he had approached.

Agnes sat in the back of the wagon sobbing. Claude wrapped his arm around her and held her from one side while little Ed held her hand with both of his hands.

"Don't worry, Aggie," Eddy said. "He's gone ta Heaven." That's as much comfort Ed knew how to give.

Agnes remembered when James was stacking some small china plates. He placed a round piece of felt in between each one of them. "We don't want to jar them," he had said, packing them into a box. This is what she felt from her other brothers.



When the family returned home, Emma immediately went to bed. They didn't have a sheet on the bed, but James covered her with a light blanket they had in storage.

The children complained they were hungry, so James fixed them some pancakes. They shouted hooray, and Emma didn't even stir. They all were done with the sadness that colored the funeral. Healthy children are resilient, and James let himself be distracted by their joviality as they enjoyed the syrup and butter on hot pancakes.

Emma stayed in bed for three days until she tired of it. She realized she had abdicated her realm and needed to take up the work of tending to and feeding her family. The children shouted when she arrived in the kitchen ready to take care of their every need.

"Okay children. Now go wash up, and I will get breakfast started."

Chapter Two

Agnes Goes to School

Emma made sure six-year-old Agnes had her writing tablet, spelling book, and pencils in one hand, and in the other, a box with a sandwich and cookies inside. Agnes wasn't thrilled about brushing her hair, so Emma had braided it so she didn't look like a wild girl out of the woods. Her straw hat had yellow daisies in the band. (They weren't real.) Her blue dress with the white flowers was ironed and looked clean. It had a little burnt scent, but that was normal. Her coat was a sheep skin turned inside out and would keep her warm. Her shoes were laced up and covered her shins. She wouldn't get mud on her legs. Emma kissed her little daughter on the cheek and sent her off down the road to school.



When Agnes arrived at the little red schoolhouse, she stood to the side and peeked in the door. A boy behind her said, “Go on in. They won't bite. We're all friends here.”

The tall boy's voice was warm and kind. Agnes looked up at him and smiled. He was quite handsome with blue eyes, a Roman nose, and clean shaven. She went in and took an empty desk on the left of the aisle in the back. The boy walked up to the blackboard and wrote, “Mr. Thompson.” Agnes blushed. He was the teacher. Her mouth dropped open. *Oh my goodness!*

The rest of the day went fast. Agnes daydreamed mostly, staring at the teacher as he presented words to be remembered, how to spell and pronounce them. He also read fairy tales which Agnes enjoyed. The younger students were sent home with addition and

subtraction tables to memorize.

In the time Mr. Thompson taught the older students, Agnes had to copy the cursive letters of the alphabet from the card-boards positioned along the perimeter of the room starting above the blackboard. Each page in her tablet was dedicated to one letter she wrote dozens of times. She wrote slowly and carefully, so when it was time to go, she had only done up to the N's and only capitals. She started on the small letters tomorrow. That took four days to finish. In the meantime, she copied the addition and subtraction tables from the chalkboard for homework. She had to memorize them.



Emma watched Agnes as she practiced her numbers at the table. “You got that five backwards. The flag goes in front, not behind.”

“I try, Mommy, but it don’t work out, an’ what’s the flag?”

“That’s the top of it.”

She stepped behind Agnes and said, “Write the five without the flag. Now start at the top of the pole and move yer pencil to the right. You do know left and right?”

“Left foot, right foot. Left hand, right hand.” Agnes examined each foot and hand.

“Now push that pencil to the right.”

Agnes made a perfect five. She tightened her whole body as she clapped, grinning

from ear to ear.

This is how Agnes learned things, step by slow step when it came to school things, but when it had to do with farming and animals, she was a natural, as if it were an instinct she was born with. She would get up early in the morning, feed the chickens, and help feed the calves. During the summer vacation, she also helped with the weeding, keeping the cotton field clean, and then picking the cotton at harvest time. She was always a hard worker.

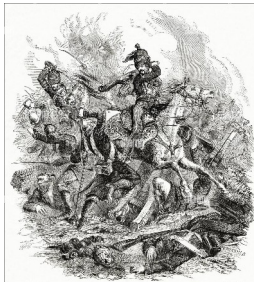


Agnes found a schoolmate on the second day. Her name was Nancy Carey. She was the same age as Agnes but slighter of build. She sat behind Agnes at first, and then, on the second day, they sat next to each other. It was a natural attraction, and when they started talking that first day, they didn't realize class had started. Mr. Thompson addressed them. "If it is all right with Miss Singleton and Miss Carey, we will start the class." Nancy and Agnes stiffened and became silent. "Well, is it okay?" he asked. They said simultaneously, "Yes, Mr. Thompson." Agnes reached her hand back secretly. Nancy grabbed it, and they giggled. Mr. Thompson gave them the eye and they both blushed, putting their hands in their laps.

Agnes and Nancy sat outside on sunny days, shared their lunches, talked about boys, and what other girls thought. They tried memorizing nursery rhymes and participated in jump rope and hopscotch.

The memorizing was part and parcel of a class effort directed by Mr. Thompson. He would read a stanza from a poem and the class would repeat it “omnes simul,” as he would say. It means all together. To begin with, the older students memorized Tennyson and Emerson. Agnes thought less of herself when she was only allowed to memorize Mother Goose.

Throughout Agnes’s first year, she heard *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* by William Wordsworth, *Sonnet 18* by William Shakespeare, starting with “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” There was *The Tyger* by William Blake, which had a nice rhythmic quality, *Ozymandias* by Percy Bysshe Shelley, and *Charge of the Light Brigade* by Alfred Lord Tennyson.



Agnes and Nancy grew very close as the years went by. By the time both were sixteen, even though Nancy grew more beautiful and Agnes remained plain and simple, their friendship made them inseparable. Whatever a girl did in those days, whether it was birthday parties, school outings, attending Church, or just walking in the woods, they were together. Naturally, people talked behind their backs. Agnes was not a nice girl; she rode in the rodeos. She was a cowgirl. She was low class. Nancy’s family was refined and rich. Agnes’s parents didn’t worry about riches and position. They had good meals on the table, clothes on their backs, and they were happy. A friendship like Agnes and Nancy was a thorn in society’s side.



Agnes had another friend. She met her when her mother took a meal to a poor family who lived in a dugout. The father was down on his luck and had a tendency when they did have money for food, to drink it away. Their girl and boy never had a full stomach. The father would whip his children if they didn't bring home food for the family. That meant they sometimes had to steal. They were at the bottom of society's ladder. The father was a Mexican, and the mother was a displaced Cherokeew. They had no friends.

James Singleton, still a preacher at heart, cared about people. He sent Emma and Agnes out to help others with food, birthing, or if they were sick. James and his sons would help with farm work, and building houses or barns.

Agnes approached the girl, named Taylor. She was sitting on a stump under an overhang of a shed. Long thick braids accentuated her long brown face. Her dress was made from printed flour sacks. She was constructing a doll out of corn husks, tying the pieces together with a cord.

"I wish I could make her pretty," Taylor said without looking up.

"It looks great!" Agnes said. "Can I see?"

She handed Agnes the doll. It had a round head, arms, and a full skirt. It reminded Agnes of the dresses they wore at square dances. The husks were stacked around the doll's center and tightened at the waist to make the skirt flare.

“How did you do this?”

“My mother taught me.”

Agnes was wearing a silk scarf. She removed it and wrapped it over the the skirt of the doll. “Will that work?”

“Oh! That looks beautiful!” Taylor said excitedly. But then she looked sad. She took the scarf off and gave it back.

“Don’t ya like it?” Agnes asked with a puzzled look.

“My daddy won’t let me have it.” Taylor held the doll out at arm’s length and twirled around.

“Why not?” Agnes put her hands on her hips.

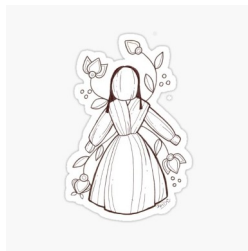
“I don’t know.” Taylor grinned on the right side of her mouth.

“Well, take it anyway. You can hide it. Just don’t let him see it.”

She dangled the scarf in front of Taylor who grabbed it and ran away.

Agnes didn’t think much about it but returned to her mother who was ready to go. As they rode away in the buggy, Agnes looked back to see Taylor dancing away in the woods.

Silly girl. Her father’s bound to see her.



Agnes went with her mother downtown to the general store to pick up the new month’s supplies. After she tied up old Meriwether, she glanced at a man walking across the dusty dirt road. He staggered across the street, and blew his nose with Agnes’s old scarf!

She walked right up to the old man. She was angrier than a hornet's nest hit with a stick.

She screwed up her face and stamped her foot.

“Where'd you git that scarf, you old man?”

“Huh!” said the old man, wiping his nose with the flowery silk scarf. “Oh. This here?” He dangled it in front of her. “Oh, I must've grabbed it by mistake. It belongs to my lovely wife.”

“That's my scarf, an' I want it back!” One thing people noticed about Agnes was that she had a temper that would go off from the hip without a thought.

“Git!”

The old man had said the wrong thing. Agnes spied a rope in the back of the wagon. She grabbed it, ran at the man, and kicked him in the shin with all she had. He toppled over onto his face. Within two seconds, she had him tied like a calf in a rodeo, yelping. She put one foot on his back and shook the scarf as though she had expected to be congratulated.

“Yeah!” she yelled. “All in two seconds!” In her imagination, she thought she was at the rodeo.

The sheriff thought otherwise. He went over and grabbed her wrist. “Where's yer mama, you little pup?” His suit used to be white. It matched his white hair and mustache. He seemed to be a big man picking on a little child, but when she kicked him in the shins, he slapped her bum.

Emma came out of the store, directing the boys where to put the supplies. She saw the sheriff holding Agnes.

She shot a question at him. “What 'er you doin' with my girl?”

The sheriff pointed at the man on the ground hog-tied.

“Agnes!” She stood there dumbfounded.

“He had my scarf. The one I gave to Taylor.” She waved it at her mother.

The sheriff handed her to her mother. “Ye can have’er if ye lock’er up an’ throw away the key!”

Emma took Agnes home. The sheriff scared her, and so she bawled Agnes out all the way home.

It took the town three days before the gossip about Agnes died down. When the Coreys found out about Agnes they forbade Nancy to ever see her again. There was a place where two paths came together in the woods that led directly to the school. Nancy and Agnes met there one morning by accident. They both froze, not knowing what to do, but as they looked into each other’s tearful eyes, they knew what they must do. They ran to each other and embraced.

They each said, “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

“Nothing will separate us,” Nancy said.

“Nothing will separate us,” was Agnes’s response.

“But we must not be seen together,” Nancy pleaded.

“You go ahead. I will follow at a distance.”

“Okay.”

Nancy went down the trail a bit, turned, and waved. She continued her journey alone.

Agnes wept. She dried her eyes with her handkerchief and then felt in her pocket. It was the scarf she had given Taylor.

When she arrived at the school, she saw Taylor standing about twenty-five feet away leaning against a tree. She mouthed the words, “Thank you,” and ran away. Agnes’s heart almost broke when she noticed that Taylor had a black eye. *God-forsaken devil of a father.*



Agnes entered the school and sat directly in front of Nancy. After a while, when Mr. Thompson’s back was turned, Agnes reached her hand in the back of her towards Nancy who grabbed hold of it. They giggled as they had when they first met. Mr. Thompson turned and stared at the girls. They straightened up, and he went back to writing on the blackboard. Both of them had to cover their mouths to dampen more giggles.



Agnes and Nancy met secretly in that clump of trees where the little stream wound through the Singleton’s farm. They did their homework together. One lazy afternoon when the August sun was hot and there was a buzz of insects in the air, they sat in a little boat tied to the shore and read from Tennyson’s *The Lady of Shalott*. They had to memorize a part of it:

“His broad clear brow in sunlight glow'd;

On burnish'd hooves his war-horse trode;

From underneath his helmet flow'd

His coal-black curls as on he rode,

As he rode down from Camelot.

From the bank and from the river

He flash'd into the crystal mirror,

'Tirra lirra, tirra lirra:'

Sang Sir Lancelot.

She left the web, she left the loom

She made three paces thro' the room

She saw the water-flower bloom,

She saw the helmet and the plume,

She look'd down to Camelot.

Out flew the web and floated wide;

The mirror crack'd from side to side;

'The curse is come upon me,' cried

The Lady of Shalott.

...

In the stormy east-wind straining,

The pale yellow woods were waning,

The broad stream in his banks complaining,

Heavily the low sky raining

Over tower'd Camelot;

Outside the isle a shallow boat

Beneath a willow lay afloat,

Below the carven stern she wrote,

The Lady of Shalott.

A cloudwhite crown of pearl she dight,

All raimented in snowy white

That loosely flew (her zone in sight

Clasp'd with one blinding diamond bright)

Her wide eyes fix'd on Camelot,

Though the squally east-wind keenly

Blew, with folded arms serenely

By the water stood the queenly

Lady of Shalott.”

Reading the part where The Lady of Shalott’s boat floated down the river to be spied by the knights in shining armor, Agnes got the idea to lay Nancy on pillows in the middle of the boat, surrounding her with long grass and wildflowers. After she settled her crown of woven flowers, she pushed the boat off, and downstream it floated. Agnes laughed as she followed and read two more stanzas:

“Under tower and balcony,

By garden wall and gallery,

A pale, pale corpse she floated by,

Deadcold, between the houses high,

Dead into tower'd Camelot.

Knight and burgher, lord and dame,

To the planked wharfage came:

Below the stern they read her name,

The Lady of Shalott.

They cross'd themselves, their stars they blest,

Knight, minstrel, abbot, squire, and guest.

There lay a parchment on her breast,

That puzzled more than all the rest,

The wellfed wits at Camelot.

'The web was woven curiously,

The charm is broken utterly,

Draw near and fear not,—this is I,

The Lady of Shalott.'”

Agnes ran along the bank of the stream, laughing, enjoying this little skit until the boat hit a big rock and dumped the Lady of Shalott into the water. Then there were screams of horror and excitement as Agnes waded into the stream to rescue her friend.

“We should not have read *Anne of Green Gables*. It came to pass just as described in the book!” Agnes cried as she helped Nancy to stand.

“It sure has!” Nancy spit water from her mouth and then laughed.

Agnes laughed as she helped Nancy onto the shore.

“What shall we do?” Nancy asked.

“Run. Run,” Agnes cried. “Dance. Our dresses will dry faster if we assist the wind.”

So they spent their time that afternoon running and dancing.



Nancy didn't show up for their secret meetings or for Church, and school was another month away. Red-headed Rodney, Nancy's little brother, the one with the freckles and a Cheshire Cat smile, slipped her a note one day as Agnes stood at the fork in the road, pining over not seeing Nancy. She didn't get to talk to him. He ran away too fast like a sprite that didn't want to get caught. Agnes quickly unfolded the note. It read:

“Darling Agnes,

My heart is wrenched. Mother has caught on to us. She has forbidden me to see you anymore. If we see each other, we must turn the other way. Tears and more tears.

I love you so much.

Your dear beloved,

Nancy.”

Agnes heaved a sigh. Instead of crying or pouting, she became angry and tore up the note, throwing it upon the ground. She stomped off, turned, came back and picked up the pieces of the note, depositing them in her apron pocket.

She went home, borrowed one of her brother's blue denim trousers, and hopped on her borrowed pony to practice her stand-up trick riding. The rodeo would be coming at harvest time just before school started, and she wanted to be ready. The neighbor, whom she called Farmer Brown, said that if she won the blue ribbon at the rodeo, she could have the pony. She already named him Tom Houston.



The Saturday before the rodeo, Agnes was shopping with her mother. She had brought Tom Houston, thinking she would ride him when it was time to return home.

The town was growing. The old clapboard buildings were being replaced with brick. They had gay windows showing all their goods and sale items and fancy signs hanging over the sidewalks, but the streets were still dirt and mud. Upon these were both horse-drawn carriages or wagons plus a couple of newfangled automobiles, machines that carried passengers without any horses attached. Agnes was hoping to see them that day. *What a wonderful time to live in*, she thought.

Agnes heard talk about the new conveyances in the general store. People complained that horses and automobiles could not exist side-by-side.

“They should keep those dad-blasted machines away from the city.”

“Don’t let ’em on the roads at ’tall. They’ve already scared a dozen horses outside of town.”

It wasn’t long before Agnes saw one pass by the store as she helped load purchases into the wagon. It must have been going twenty-five miles an hour. It rushed right through the regular traffic. At the same time, she saw Nancy with her mother, Mrs. Carey, driving by in their fancy black carriage. She couldn’t catch Nancy’s eye, but she waved anyway.

Suddenly, the automobile turned around and scared the Carey family’s horse. It reared and kicked and raced down the road out of control.

Nancy had seen Agnes. She turned and screamed at her. “Agnes!”

Agnes hopped onto Tom Houston, grabbed the reins, and galloped away. As she neared the runaway carriage, she stood, approached the racing horse, and stepped onto its back. She grabbed the reins from Mrs. Carey and pulled on them, and as the horse and carriage stopped, she bowed, smiled, jumped down, and rode away on Tom Houston.

“Who was that remarkable girl?” Mrs. Carey asked. She fanned her face with her fingers as she caught her breath.

“Why, that was Agnes, Mother.” Nancy just grinned, holding her gloved hands in her lap so politely.



Chapter Three

Three Peas in a Pod

Jared Carter almost attained six feet and was a couple of years older than Nancy and Agnes. He had rusty brown hair which went back into place when the wind blew it. His brown eyes seemed to look right through you as though his mind was someplace else, but when he talked to a person, he was all there. He was a friend to everyone unless they were totally off the track. If someone said something mean, his lips became thin, his eyebrows sank slightly, and his fists shook, but he would move on. Upon meeting a neighbor, if they greeted him with, “Hey Jay!” he would smile and laugh.

The first time he walked into the school, all eyes were on him. Mr. Thompson told him to take a seat across from Nancy and Agnes who almost swooned at his appearance.

After school, he was cornered by the two girls who had to know who he was.

“What’s yer name?” Agnes asked.

“People call me Jay.”

“Where you from?” Nancy asked.

“Been drivin’ cattle fer Mister Charles Goodnight.”

“You don’t look like no dern cowboy, dressed up in this fancy brown suit,” Agnes spouted off.

Nancy smiled and said, “You look mighty handsome in that suit.”

Jay fought with the knot in his tie, moving it back and forth as if it was choking him. He smiled. “Now, ladies, I have to get to my chores, if you will excuse me.”

The girls let him go and giggled as he left.

Nancy and Agnes faced each other and almost squealed as they stooped down, put their hands in their laps, and said together, “He is so cute!”

Jay found the boys at school too rowdy for his liking. They were boisterous, rude, foul-mouthed, and non-inclusive. They shunned him when he wanted to join their games, making fun of his clothes. Therefore, he joined his newfound friends, Nancy and Agnes, for school lunches or whenever students gathered outside before and after school.

Sometimes, Jay would walk the girls down the trail from the school to where the path parted. Nancy’s home lay at the end of one path and Agnes’s down the other, but it so happened that to get to his farm, he had to go past Nancy’s house. That left Agnes out unless she took a half-hour longer going home. She tried that one time, walking with Nancy and Jay, but her mother scolded her when she arrived home. Jay became acquainted with Nancy more than Agnes, so it was natural that they would become closer to each other. Still, Agnes had hoped he would like her just as well.



Jay was late for the picnic. Agnes and Nancy sat by their table spread on the ground with different meats and cheeses and plenty of bread. There was a bowl of boiled eggs. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and there was a general background humming in the air. It was cold in the shade, but the sun burned warm. The bees in the bush next to them minded their own business, and there were no ant hills around. The two girls were not talking and almost dozed off; then Jay arrived.

“You girls miss me?” he asked as he sat down beside Nancy. “The ox was in the mire, that sort of thing. I had to straighten some things out at the bank for my dad. He wasn’t feeling so well.”

“Your ma takin’ care of him, is she?” Agnes asked, straightening her heavy skirt.

“Yes,” he said, grabbing a boiled egg and cracking it on a rock. “She’s a fine nurse.”

“Heard you had a row with the Taylor boy,” Nancy mentioned as she made herself a sandwich with a bun, ham and cheese.

“Yeah. He’s just as good as his dad.” Jay reached over and helped himself to some lemonade he poured into a glass from a canning jar. “I don’t think he drinks, but he’s a nasty fellow, always trying to prove something or another.”

“For some reason,” Nancy added, “Their pa won’t let Jannie come to school. I’ve seen her peeping her little head out from behind the trees at lunch time, just watching us.”

Agnes thought a moment. “I know a girl named Taylor that does the same thing. I’ve seen’er.”

“Taylor’s their last name,” Nancy announced to Agnes’s astonishment. “You ask any of them in that family and they’ll tell you their name is Taylor.”

“Oh!” Agnes exclaimed as her face reddened. “Now I understand. I thought it was a funny Christian name for a girl.”

“There’s no understanding that family,” Nancy said, grimacing.

“All that Taylor boy wants to do is make fun of people and fight,” Jay said, trying out some salami.

The clouds covered the sun and Agnes and Nancy had to don their jackets. Just as

they finished a slice of apple pie, the sky started dripping on their picnic. They gathered their things, the birds sought shelter, and the bees scattered.

“We’ll make it another day,” Jay said, helping put the last basket in the back of the carriage.

“You walked didn’t you?” Nancy asked.

Jay nodded.

“You can ride with us,” Agnes said, stepping into the carriage. “Have a girl on each elbow.”

“That’s okay. I walked here. I can walk back.”

“Not in the rain you don’t,” Nancy exclaimed.

Agnes poked her head out and said, “We’ll kidnap ya if ya don’t.”

“I wouldn’t want that.”

Jay offered to help Nancy first, but she insisted he sit in between them.

“Okay, here I come.”

Agnes pulled Jay in close beside her.

“I think we’ll all fit snugly in here.” Agnes smiled.

Nancy climbed in next to Jay. It was a tight squeeze but everyone thought it was pretty jolly, and they laughed. Jay took the reins, and with a flip of the whip, they were off.

The rain poured on the poor old horse. As they rode along, they sang a happy song:

“Late last night when we were all in bed,

Mrs. O’Leary left her lantern in the shed.

Well, the cow kicked it over, and this is what they said:

"There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight!"

When you hear those bells go ding-a-ling,

All join 'round and sweetly you must sing.

And when the verse is through, in the chorus all join in:

"There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight!"



Halloween was the school's greatest focus during the October harvest season.

Everyone prepared for the party the school put on at the town hall where they had dances or played basket ball. Decorations were made, skits and songs were rehearsed, and donations were solicited.

Agnes busied herself making decorations in the Hall. She had glued several black sheets of construction paper and was cutting out a life-sized silhouette of a girl when Nancy showed up with Jay.

"There's plenty to do," Agnes said. "We need more boys and girls to go around the walls and some giant pumpkins with big smiles on them."

"I'll get started on another girl," Nancy said, picking through the silhouettes already done. "It looks like you have enough boys already."

"I think if Agnes has a lot of boys," Jay said jokingly. "All the boys must like her."

"I doubt that," Agnes said, not looking up.

Jay picked up some orange construction paper from the long table where Agnes

worked and said, "I'll start on some pumpkins."

There were a lot of students from the school helping out that day. They made crape paper stringers for the ceiling along with different colored lanterns. They pinned sheets to the drapes to form spooky ghosts, set up an apple dunking stand with a barrel of water and decorated the bandstand with scalloped drapery with construction paper bats pinned to them. Afterward, they took the time to clean up after themselves.



Agnes sat in her window seat and stared at the lengthening shadows. The horses in the corral and the barn seemed to stretch along the ground. She imagined she saw the buggy pull up to the house in the snow. It was late, and Jay kissed her goodnight before she jumped down and ran into the house. He had just proposed. With excitement, she told her folks, and they hugged her with congratulations. Snowflakes started drifting down from an ever-darkening sky. What a dream.

Agnes turned away. Her room was now dark, reflecting the feelings in her heart. She hadn't even decided what she was going to wear for the Halloween party. She lit the lantern just as her ma came to the door.

"Goodness, Agnes. Ya haven't even dressed yet." She came in and looked through the armoire. "You have such a habit of daydreaming' lately." She turned back to Agnes. "What do you want to wear?"

"You got an old sheet?"

Emma took an old sheet and cut a hole the size of Agnes's head. She didn't have time

to make a proper hood, so she hemmed around the hole and fit it around her daughter's face.

“There. Ya look like a proper ghost, an’ yer face isn’t hidin’ from folks.”

“Thank ya, Ma.” She kissed her mother and put her coat over her ghostly sheet.

“Ya got yer po’ m you wrote?”

They walked to the door together.

“Yes, Ma. It’s tucked away in my pocket.”

“Have a swell time,” Emma said as Agnes walked out the door.

Her dad waited in the buggy. She climbed up, holding onto his outstretched hand.

“Here’s yer blanket, Darlin’. You wrap up nice an’ cozy-like, an’ we’ll be off.”

Samuel cracked the whip and old Meriwether trudged along. The snow started sticking, but the old horse had his blanket covering his back.

“How old is this horse, anyhow?” Agnes wrinkled up her nose. “Didn’t you have this horse when you were a kid?”

The snow blew sideways as they left the trees behind. Agnes wrapped the blanket a bit tighter.

“Oh, this here is the second Meriwether,” her pa said, always looking straight ahead.

“The previous horse died when ye were a little tot.”

Agnes wondered how many things she didn’t know about that others took for granted.

When they arrived at the Hall, Agnes said goodbye to Daddy and Meriwether, and she was greeted at the door by Nancy and Jay. The two girls gabbed for five minutes, laughing at the decorations and the costumes, their own included.

Jay was dressed as a pirate, and Nancy as Little Bo Peep, wearing a short dress with

layered petticoats. Her ruffled bloomers stretched down to her ankles. Agnes thought, *why didn't I think of that?* It was another demerit against her intelligence. Inside, she sighed, but outwardly, she said, "Oh, Nancy, I think it's co cute!"

To Jay, she said, "Very handsome."

Modern ragtime music came from the band, and several people were already dancing.

Nancy asked, "Shall we eat something or dance first?"

It was clear to Agnes that Nancy wanted to dance with Jay. "You two go ahead and dance. I'll get us a table and some refreshments.

Nancy and Jay walked away to dance, and Agnes walked over to see what people brought to eat. The eatery was to the right of the bandstand with dancing to the left.

There were cheeses of all kinds, sliced homemade white bread, dark rye, molasses bread, and large buns for sandwiches. There were plates of different sliced cold meats, pates, plus deviled chicken or ham, and roast beef. The next table displayed chocolate cake with chocolate icing, white cake with raspberry icing, bonbons, black licorice candies with Halloween themes, and other candies. Near the cakes were also Danish pastries. They didn't last long.

Agnes filled three plates up, set them on a table and returned for some raspberry lemonade and saw the Danish. She thought of getting some but saw only two left, so she quickly grabbed one and stuffed it into her mouth. It took three large bites to finish it off. She then took three cups of punch back to the table.

When Jay and Nancy returned, they found a feast waiting for each of them.

"Great job, Agnes!" Jay said as he helped Nancy with her chair. "Looks delicious."

“You know I like raspberry cake,” Nancy remarked.

“There’s mustard and pepper sauce*,” Agnes pointed out.

Jay drenched the inside of his sandwiches with the pepper sauce. “Mmmm. Delicious.”

After eating, Jay and Nancy continued to dance. Agnes pulled her ghost costume over her head and tried dunking for apples. After the third try, she got one, and everyone who stood by clapped. She smiled and slipped away into a corner to eat her apple.

When it was time for entertainment, the band stopped playing and everyone returned to their tables. One of the school teachers, Miss Christy, a middle-aged spinster with her hair up in a knot, wearing a full-length gray dress buttoned down the torso, covering her skinny arms, and having puffy shoulders, addressed everyone from the stage. The microphone was nearly as large as her face. It squealed as she started speaking. She stepped back and started over.

“For tonight’s entertainment, we will have musical numbers and readings from several students who will recite poems. Some of these have been written by the students themselves.”

Everyone clapped.

“Thank you for coming. Our moderator will be Jimmy Silverstone. All of the performers are from our little school here in Texarkana.”

Everyone clapped again.

“Now I turn the time over to Jimmy.”

*green Tabasco peppers in vinegar

The boy looked quite adult, but short, about five-five. His face was round, but the rest of him was well-built. He pulled down the microphone to his height. “Ladies and gentlemen, it is our pleasure to present Jeffery Madison, playing Debussy’s Clair de Lune on his violin.”

The audience clapped again as a thin boy in a black, shiny tuxedo came on stage bowing several times. He put his violin to his chin and screeched out Clair de Lune. He bowed again, and everyone clapped.

There were several other musicals including choirs and barbershop quartets. Agnes said she liked the quartets the best. Then, in a moment, it was time for Agnes to quote her poem. Where did the time go? She wasn’t ready. She was still sitting at the table with Jay and Nancy. She rose and walked swiftly to the stage door behind the eatery.

Walking onto the stage, Agnes bowed a little bit, took her paper from underneath her sheet, which got some laughs, and proceeded to read.

Tears drip down;

Tears drip down.

My constricted throat

Holds back a cry.

I stifled a cry

and sniffled a bit.

I know there is something

Under the bed.

Tears drip down,

And I place the covers

Over my head.

She bowed. The microphone had magnified the soft voice of Agnes into the macabre. There was a soft clapping from the audience. Agnes turned and left the stage. She had been the last.

Miss Christy returned to the microphone and asked for a second applause for all the contestants. She announced there would be prizes for the best poem and musical number. The audience clapped loudly. Some hooted and whistled.

The band started up again, this time with a waltz.

Agnes passed the eatery grabbed the last Danish and brought it back to an empty table.

No one asked Agnes to dance, so she left the table and leaned against the wall as though she was one of the silhouettes decorating the Hall. She felt like one. Jay and Nancy seemed to have abandoned her. After an hour, she went outside.

There was her father's carriage waiting for her. He was not there, so she climbed in and covered herself with the blanket.

Agnes didn't know how long she slept, but the jiggling of the buggy woke her. Her father was sitting next to her, and they were driving home.

"How was your party?" he asked, staring straight ahead.

"It was all right. They had good food, and the music was new. Hadn't ever heard it before."

"Had a good time with Nancy?"

Doesn't he know about Jay?

“We had our laughs for a while, but she got lost in the crowd.” Agnes pulled her blanket close and snuggled up to her dad.

Samuel wasn't one to be very affectionate toward his girls, but he would talk and probe to see how they were doing. Then he would go off and pray for them.

“Is there somethin' come between you two?” he asked, trying to speak above the wind.

Is there?

“She seemed to be enjoyin' herself with her other friends. I got tired of waitin' an' came out.”

“Maybe when you grow up ye get different interests.”

“Yeah. Maybe that's so.”

What does he know? What a wedge Jay makes.

Agnes started sobbing onto her dad's shoulder.

“That bad, eh?”

“Yes, Pa.”

Agnes didn't want to talk about it. As soon as she arrived home, she ran upstairs to her room, threw herself onto her bed, and cried herself into that silent sleep that became sweet oblivion.



For several days, there was a strained relationship between Agnes and Nancy.

Whenever they talked, they didn't say much except to acknowledge each other with polite hellos or see you later. When Nancy saw Agnes after school Nancy said she was going somewhere with Jay. Agnes had to walk home alone. The next day in class, the two girls looked at each other. The expressions in their eyes said, "I know you love him, but so do I." At lunch, Nancy and Jay walked away from Agnes and sat under a tree, leaving her to sit on their bench against the school building to eat alone.

Are we breaking up? she asked herself.

She wiped her tears with her fingertips and continued eating her butter and sugar sandwich.



Nancy decided it was time to talk to Agnes. They didn't look at each other in class. As they walked out to lunch, Nancy approached Agnes, but Agnes walked out the door and turned left to go to her bench. Nancy gently put her hand on Agnes's shoulder. Agnes froze.

"Friends for life, remember?" Nancy asked.

Agnes sniffled, turned, and embraced Nancy. "I thought you didn't care anymore."

"I have always cared for you. I am so embarrassed at what has happened. It is the saddest thing and the most joyful, all at the same time."

They sighed, held hands, stepped back, and stared at each other.

"I thought ..." they said simultaneously. They laughed, still holding hands.

"You go first," Agnes said.

"It's very difficult to explain, that is, why Jay and I just naturally paired together. We just feel so comfortable together, and that it's the right thing. We didn't mean to hurt you."

Nancy paused, looked seriously into Agnes's eyes, and asked, "Can you see that?"

"I can see that," Agnes said. "I understand, I just wished it had been me. I know that sounds a bit selfish. I don't want to lose you two as friends. I was just daydreaming, wanting a boy to like me the way Jay likes you. I guess I was jealous."

Nancy put her arm around Agnes. "You have no need to be jealous. I'm sure there is someone out there just waiting, no, just dying to meet you."

They embraced again and kissed each other. Still, Agnes's heart was broken, but she wouldn't tell her best friends that. She would keep that to herself.



When Agnes arrived home, she leaned on her pa's arm as he escorted her through the door. When she saw her mother, she took off the ghostly sheet and gave it back to her. She grabbed her mother and sobbed on her shoulder.

"Now, now," Emma Jane said. "There will be none of this. Yer a young woman now, not a child no more. Someday there will be a man come into yer life you can call yer own."

Samuel smiled and nodded in agreement. Agnes stopped sobbing, went to bed, and hoped it was all true.

Epilogue

Nancy says Goodbye

It was springtime; the blue sky was clear, the cool air smelled like freshly cut grass mixed with fumes from cattle who moaned from far away, and the birds sounded their little chirps of joy. There was a small park north of town called Table Stone Park. It was an excellent place to have a picnic. Nancy, Jay, and Agnes, now graduated from school, took a carriage there for their last hoorah. They realized they may never be together as a threesome again. Nancy and Jay were soon to be married, and they wanted to say goodbye to Agnes. They were moving to central Texas. They picked the perfect spot where they didn't have to sit on the ground. They could spread their food and dishes on the stone table, and there were plenty of other stones set in a semicircle in this outcrop to sit on. The spot was next to a little stream shaded by elms.

There were no signs to tell the trio where the park was, but as soon as they crossed the little arched bridge, they could see the rocks. They parked near enough so that it was a pleasant walk to the table of stone. Jay opened the trunk attached to the rear of the carriage and took out two baskets. Nancy and Agnes took the tablecloth and a third basket and brought them to the table. Since they planned on being there for a while, Jay unhooked the black horse and tethered him near the stream so he could have both water and grass to eat.

As the food was uncovered, the smell of warm fried chicken filled the air along with the yeasty smell of fresh bread. There was also potato salad, green beans, and smelly cheese. The beverage was a fine wine instead of lemonade or coffee because it was a special occasion for the two love birds. After filling their plates, they filled their wine

glasses and gave a toast to their everlasting friendship and a long life.

“To us all,” they said in unison.

“And to a long life,” Nancy added.

They clicked their glasses together and drank the blooms of exotic fruits and spices.



“Remember when,” Nancy said, drawing her feet alongside her stone stool, “we discovered that little glad in the woods?”

“Yes,” Agnes said, clasping her hands. “It was the perfect place to make a small lean-to to hide in when we wanted to be together.”

Nancy turned to Jay. “We often did our homework there.”

“And you didn’t show me?” Jay complained, drawing his eyebrows together.

“It was secret,” Agnes said, sliding her knife through her potato salad to make an “S.”

“I feel left out.” Jay turned his back to the girls in jest.

“It was before we knew you, Jay.”

Jay turned back around, smiled, and grabbed the girls’ hands.

“You’re not a girl,” Nancy said, squeezing his hand. “It was only for girls.”

“What other things did you two do together?” Jay asked, making himself another chicken sandwich.

“That’s secret,” Agnes said, chomping down on a chicken leg.

“We don’t have to tell about that.” Nancy grimaced. She smiled and said, “We went skinny dipping at a secret spring.”

Agnes's face flushed. She folded her arms and said, "I thought that was secret."

"I'm not talking about, you know, the other thing!"

"You have another thing?" Jay asked, smiling as wide as his face.

Agnes pointed at Nancy. "Don't you dare tell anymore!"

"Well," Nancy said. "I guess we have different ideas of what is secret."

"I guess we do!" Agnes said with disdain, turning her head.

"Ladies, ladies," Jay said calmly. "We came here to have fun. Tell me some of the fun things you two did."

"Well," Agnes said slowly. "There was that time we found this little deer in the bushes."

"A fawn. It was a fawn," Nancy explained.

"Okay, a fawn," Agnes corrected herself, making fun of Nancy, raising her voice and saying, "It was a fawn."

Nancy touched Agnes's shoulder. "I'm sorry. You have such soft feelings."

"I remember," Jay interrupted, "when I first met you two. I was a bit shy and embarrassed to be with two such beauties."

"We know!" the girls said smiling and giggling.

"You were so cute that way," Nancy said. She walked around the table, sat on his lap, leaned up against him, and kissed him.

Agnes had to hurry and sit on his other knee and kiss the other cheek. "Are you embarrassed, yet?" Agnes asked

Jay put his arms around both girls. "Like a pea in a pod." Jay kissed each girl on the

cheek. "I love you both. I want you girls to love each other. Remember. You are friends for life."

The girls hugged each other. "Yeah, we know," they said.

The rest of the evening was spent telling stories which included a couple of ghost stories.

At sunset, Jay hooked up the horse again. All the leftovers were put into the trunk. Agnes said goodbye to the two of them. She refused to go back with them, wanting to walk home. Nancy hugged and kissed Agnes.

"Goodbye," Nancy said. "I love you. You will write, won't you? I'll send you our address."

"I'll be sure to," Agnes answered.

They coupled their little fingers. "Friends forever," they said.

They kissed again and said, "Love you."

As Nancy climbed into the carriage, Jay waved.

Agnes whispered, "Love you."

She watched the buggy turn and go back across the little bridge.

The stars came out and escorted Agnes as she walked along the dirt road. By the time she was halfway home, the Milky Way was a waterfall of stars. The rest of the sky was so filled with stars that it seemed to Agnes like thousands and thousands of Christmas trees.

Christmas Tree Heaven, she said to herself. It made her feel as though she was walking on silvery clouds.

Continued in *Voyage to Roswell*