

Pearl

Fog on the Mountain

by Tatum Este'l

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Forward

My wife, Rene', and I met Pearl in Dumas, Texas. She met her first while exploring the little town. Pearl sat on her porch, and she and my wife said "Hi" to each other. Rene' approached and started up a conversation. This led to several meetings. One Sunday afternoon, Rene' took me to meet Pearl. She was very pleasant to talk with, and so we walked over to her house every Sunday, talked awhile and left, thinking we were doing a nice Christian service.

Pearl lived only a block and a half to the north of us. It was a small community. Everyone drove everywhere, even to the grocery store next to Walmart, which was only a block and a half to the south. When we wanted to carry our groceries home, the cashier was very surprised, for there were no sidewalks, and it was dangerous walking in the streets.

Pearl spent most of her time working in her garden. She definitely had a green thumb. She could take a cutting from a tree and start a new growth, and she grew her own vegetables. She also made her own soap which was being eaten by the mice in her home.

Most of the time, if not telling us her personal history, she would lay all of her complaints before us. The doctor she went to couldn't find anything wrong with her, but she complained so much that he put her on the operating table, slit her from her pubic bone up to her throat, looked at everything she had, didn't find anything wrong, sewed her up back up, and told her to take 800 mg of ibuprofen four times a day. I think he meant for the pain of the operation, but she thought he meant forever. She asked us if she should continue doing that, but we told her to consult her doctor. She didn't want to.

Pearl also wanted a lot of yard work done. My wife and I tried to do some, but we

needed help. We were able to have some of the members of our church help us. She wouldn't ask help from her own church. They had cheated her, she said, something about not letting her play the organ anymore and not paying her for the times she did. She complained so much to our church members they were not able to finish, and then she complained when they didn't finish. We wound up not going to visit her anymore. She was too angry.

Pearl had a daughter living in California. She told us several times that her daughter deserted her by marrying a local boy whom she did not trust. She told us that she wanted her daughter to come home and take care of her.

Her husband died about the time of her daughter's marriage and left her all alone. She appreciated the visits, but they turned into complaint sessions.

We did keep in touch with Pearl enough to find that her daughter, who lived in California, made plans to have Pearl live with her and her family. They would send for her in a month. We never went back to see if that happened. We can only assume.

The story portrayed is only a representation of Pearl's life. She did tell of her mother pining over the death of Pearl's brother who had drowned, but I made up who Pearl's mother was. I thought it beneficial that I had already written a story that fit, called *Bowmountain*. I hope you enjoy the tale.

I must make a note as to the lady on the book cover. Since we do not have a picture of Pearl, I used one of my dad's aunts.

Tennessee

from Bow Mountain
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Chapter One

Evergreens covered the mountains like a warm comforter, and the mountains lay across the sky like a bent bow. Events would happen in these mountains that would loose that bow string and send a soul shootin' up into the starry night sky like a fiery fallin' star goin' backwards, back to where it came from. I saw it all happen, and I wish a boulder could fall down from a high cliff and crush the stones in the stream-bed of my soul and let out all my blood to flow back to Mother Earth. My body would lay there in the creek and become all see-throughy like the water and dissolve back into my mother. My spirit would join the creek like the one near our home and flow down to meet the world. My daddy says to me,

"Tess, thar's a missionary heer what wants ta marry ye!"

But I says to him, "Let Lizbeth marry him. She's purtier than I be."

I know what he wants, and what I want is that a boulder should come down and fall into that creek bed and break a hole in it ... break a hole in my world so's I can escape out of it. You see, that missionary would never ask for my hand straight out. He has to come sneak around here and talk to my daddy as though I were a prized hen he's spotted and wants to buy. He wouldn't ask for my hand if Jeffery were here ... and now, as the situation is, I am stuck here with the choice of marryin' him or runnin' away.

* * *

Jeffery Dawson ... that was his name, the one I saw on that dreadful day, and I am in

love with him. His family has moved over above our holler on that nice piece of shelf-land. They think they are goin' to be *farmers*! What do they know about farmin'? Mama says that they come from the *city*.

She comes in here all excited, sayin', "Ye gotta come see this! Somebody's movin' over to the ol' Jameson place! They's a comin' up the road now, makin' the biggest dust cloud!"

Grabbin' me, Lizbeth and Todd, we all go out to the road through the trail in the brush. We almost choke on the dust. Sure enough, there is this old black truck filled with boxes and bags. I can make out some farmin' tools. It's turnin' around the bend into the old place.

Mama's old hound dog follows us up there and barks a mite and trails off somewhere. He never follows daddy and the other hounds on account that he's too old and can't run ... has stiff legs. He can't follow the hunt nor go up with daddy to the still and get drunk.

"It takes us women folk ta keep thangs neighborly," says Mama. So she shoos us outside to pick berries and then home again to bake a pie for the new neighbors.

"Why," says Mama, cuttin' in the flour, "thar won't be no news git around if it t'weren't fer the neighborliness of us women." What Mama really wants is to know what the people have and how they live so she can tell everybody else.

After the pie is done, Mama marches us back outside and up the road to the new neighbor's house where they're unloadin' their truck and immediately starts introductions.

"Howdy neighbors!" Mama rings out, offerin' them the pie and then her hand. Shaken hands, she says, "Sary McClair's the name. My chillen's is Tess, Lizbeth, and Todd. What be yer names?"

Mama starts gabbin' away as I look about. The man's name is Witherford Dawson. I

see such light and intelligence flowin' from his eyes, and such a smile as I've never seen in these mountains! His wife Mary looks humble and sweet, and seems so thankful for a friendly welcome. She looks so soft, and seems to care about all the thangs comin' out of the truck. Their furniture is so rich and velvety, and there are the shiniest chest-of-drawers.

It bein' their turn to introduce their children, the ma point to Dade, small and thin, and white-lookin', like a ghost. Then I shake hands with pretty Nancy with her blond braids and dimpled chin.

I tagged along just to learn how to be neighborly, as I am gettin' on in years. I am sixteen already. Well, I wished I hadn't. When they turn to introduce their oldest, they call him, he not bein' here. I turn as they call out "Jeffery!" towards the house. When I see this tall lanky kid with the deepest blue eyes, my heart sinks clear into the ground and is buried there. I hear this buzzin' in my ears. I imagine a honey suckle vine grow up around my feet and legs and come up to replace the heart I lost. Song birds come and nest there. My tummy turns a flip-flop, and I squeeze my hands together. Mama is shakin' me. I wake up. She apologizes to everybody, sayin' how much of a dreamer I am. Then I notice how better dressed they all are and I cross my legs in shame, like a dog puttin' its tail between its legs. I feel naked in front of them, me in a hand-me-down cotton sack dress ... got it from Flora who just got married. It's white flowers on faded red.

I glance back at this Jeffery and notice that he can't take his eyes offen me. I can't take my eyes offen him neither. I want to scream an' run up the hill and go hide and sing at the top of my lungs!

Mr. Dawdson is no farmer. He is a school teacher. He has opened up a school in one of the sheds near the road, and now, I go to school with Jeffery. We sit beside each other and

giggle mostly, instead of listenin' to his daddy. His poor daddy tries to break us up, but he's too fond of us, I reckon, but he's smart. He puts us to teachin' the younger ones. That controls our shenanigans a bit. Some days, he lets Jeffery take over while he sets his hand to plowin' the ground. He's doin' a pretty good job of it too, for a city feller.

I'm doin' pretty good at my readin' and writin', but figurin' with numbers doesn't come naturally. I figure, but in my own way, not like how they show it in the books, but how my Mama showed me. It's done with the fingers, and with the tongue stickin' into the cheek.

I sometimes can't concentrate on my schoolwork, not just because of Jeffery, but because of these visions I have, sittin' at the window, daydreamin'. Oh! I know I'm goin' to be the cause of his death! I wish I could turn away from Jeffery, but I am bound to him like the mountain is bound to the earth. I can't help myself. I figure, maybe, I can do somethin' to persuade Death to stay back and let us live a happy life. I am always lookin' for a way, but it seems to me more than likely, I can't.

People die of two things in these mountains. There are seasons where a lot of people get sick and die of either the consumption or fever, and then there are seasons where it seems that people go mad and get all riled up and start shootin' each other. Mr. Dawdson will die of the fever and Jeffery will die of a bullet. Mrs. Dawdson will be left all to herself. I'm sure her daughter Nancy will get married up pretty soon. I know she's almost my own age in a couple of years, anyway, but we get married young in these mountains. They have too. They die so young.

Look at little Dade Dawdson. He's lame, and he's just wiltin' away like a plucked flower. There are some that die that way too, I reckon. They just dry up like the branch of a tree that gets no nourishment. I feel my soul will dry up that way and die if I stay around

these parts much longer.

Jeffery is like one of those aggressive little hound puppies that's always shovin' and pushin' to get his ninnie, even if he has to shove and push out one of the runts to get his. He has so much rambunctious energy in him that he seems to be stealin' it away from Dade. But Dade loves his brother, and doesn't care if he is wild.

Jeffery grew up in the city. He tells me all about his escapades with all his friends and the wild drinkin' parties he would go to. He was always in trouble with the law for somethin' just tryin' to have a good time. His folks thought that livin' out in the country would slow him down and cool him off, but the mountain boys are just as rowdy and always drinkin' and shootin' up thangs. There is no real difference between city boys and our mountain boys.

Jeffery isn't bad. He's just hungry. He's hungry for life. He wants to experience the whole of it. I don't mind him bein' a bit wild. That's what these mountains grow, is wild thangs. But I can see somethin' else that's growin' up inside of him, somethin' in him that's reachin' out to these mountains and trees and water and the animals as well as the people. The mountains are growin' up inside of him as if he were born here. These mountains are speakin' to him as God speaks to a Bible prophet.

At first, Jeffery asks me where the nearest city is. I say to him, "Why the nearest city is a hunderd miles away." He's smart. He next asks me where the nearest town is.

"Well," I say. "The nearest thang we got to a town is the Corners." And I direct him there so he has no desire to leave. He doesn't know where he is anyway, so I have the upper hand.

Pa's away with the boy's again either huntin' or moon shinin', and Mama's down at the creek doin' the wash, so I take Jeffery for a little stroll down the mountain to show him the

Corners.

I tell him, "If'n ye want to take to the road, ye won't get so torn up, but it's a longer way, but if'n ye want to go through the woods, we'll be there lickety-split."

He says, "Okay," and so we go straight down.

Jeffery can't keep his hands to himself. He wants to grab me every chance he gets, so I run ahead most of the time, screemin' and laughin', dodgin' trees and rocks and the underbrush. It's no use. He grabs me anyway when he catches up to me and kisses me and hugs me, and I feel it's so dangerous bein' out here alone with him. I want so much to marry him I could burst. But I push him away, and off we go again.

We reach the Corners and all there is, is the Church, the blacksmith's barn where all the dancin' starts, and the general store. The general store is big enough for a back-room bar, a post office, and a few extra rooms above to house the constable and a few guests.

The general store is what we come to first. The Church is catty-cornered to that, and the big barn is to the left of the Church. I look at that barn and remember all the Saturday night dancin' that goes on there. I want Jeffery to take me there some time. The general store is where all the socializin' and the drinkin' goes on, and Jeffery wants to investigate that first.

We go inside and run into a group of mountain boys who are trainin' to be drunkards like their daddies. I timidly introduce Jeffery to Tom and Bill and Clarence and Bradford and Jarom and Jack. I really don't want to loose Jeffery into this crowd. But Jeffery immediately takes charge of the gang, callin' himself the new kid on the block. They like him right off and change his name to Jeff. I like Jeffery better, but I can't talk to these guys. Anyway, Mr. MacIntire, the owner of the place, gets a hold of me and tells me I can't be in the back here with the boys.

"Not a place fer women-folk no how," he says, "not good Christian girls like ye. Naw, if ye want to do some tradin', then all right, ye can stay in the front. Otherwise, ye'd best be gittin' home."

I wait outside on the front porch for a spell, sayin' "hidy" to walkers-in. Then the whole gang comes burstin' out of the doors, yellin' and hollerin' and singin'. We all head up the mountain the way Jeffery and I came, with Jeffery in the lead and me on the tail end. Tom and Jack try to get me to drink, but I tell them, "I don't want yer ol' booze!" and throw rocks at them. Jeffery laughs and I throw some at him too, but I am not serious. Jeffery and I get into a scuffle, and they all woo-woo us. Jeffery makes them stop it. They all laugh. Jeffery laughs too, and I laugh, because Jeffery fits in so well with these mountain boys. He's so much like one of us.

When we get near Jeffery's place, comin' in from the holler opposite my own, Jeffery asks why everyone becomes silent all of a sudden. We hear the Great Falls fillin' up the holler with its thunderous music. You can't quite hear it until it's almost upon you. It's a mystery.

"Spooky Holler," Tom says in a loud whisper.

"What's that?" Jeffery asks.

"That's where them witches and devils live," Clarence says reverently.

"Witches, switches," I say. "That thar's whar Dan'l McDougale live."

"I've heard that you hillbillies ar' superstitious," Jeffery laughs.

All of a sudden, every boy runs off in a different direction whoopin' and hollerin' and laughin' like it was a joke. Well, the joke was suppose to be that they left us to the mercy of Daniel MacDougale's shotgun. Sure, Daniel will shoot at those boys by any chance they step

foot onto his property, because they only know how to tear up the place, but Daniel and I have always bein' good friends since the day I happened to stroll up to his front porch. I was only two years old, but was enchanted by his fiddle playin', and I still am. My mama and daddy had a time huntin' for me that day. They dare not go over to Daniel's place. He had to brin' me home himself. He left me there on my own porch in the dark as quiet as a summer's breeze.

Jeffery hears the strains of the fiddle music as if it's a part of the waterfall and the breezes in the giant oak trees. He's enchanted by it and walks towards it as in a trance.

* * *

There is a separation between us highlanders. There is a feudin' separation ... a social order no one ever crosses. This mountain has two hands. One hand holds the preacher Zacharey Taylor Davies, and the other hand holds Daniel McDougal. They call his kind witches, sinners, drunkards and gamblers. All the others are Christians. Some of the wives of the drunkards and sinners are Christians on account of the mercies and good grace of the Church. Some of the wives of the Christians are witches to the sorrow of the Church. I guess I stand somewhere in between. But mostly, there is a deep gully separation of Christian church goers and the witches. Now no one calls anybody a witch, but it is understood who is who. The lines are clearly drawn. The mountain is cut in half, and no missionaryin' is tolerated by either side.

That's where a strange thang has come into my life. It isn't right for Jeffery to come into these mountains and ask for my hand because us highlanders will have nothin' to do with lowlanders. Jeffery is a no-good-for-nothin' lowlander, and I love him. Mama was neighborly just out of curiosity and suspicion. I go to Mr. Dawdson's school on very thin

permission. You will see no real highlander in his school. They are all lowlanders or cousins to some.

Now, that lowlander missionary is Rowan Davies. He thinks he can come up here and weasel his way in by preachin' his religion and sayin' he's a part of us because we are all one body in Christ! He gets my daddy to the alter and then comes over here and asks for my hand all because of his religion. He thinks to increase the body. Well, if he's thinkin' of increasin' *my* body, he has another thang comin'!

* * *

Jeffery sees the high waterfall comin' down into the hollor where the creek is surrounded on both sides by giant oak trees. Down away, we come to an oaken bridge just big enough for a fat horse, but not a wagon. We were already in church, but crossin' that bridge brought us into Heaven. We only motion to each other to communicate. I keep Jeffery down in the bushes. He wants to see where the music is comin' from, so I show him, but I dare not let him get close. I take him down the trail only far enough to let him see the two oak trees that have grown together, and bein' so old, almost hollor inside, and that's where the old granddaddy MacDougle built his cabin ... right inside the hollor of the two oaks. One can't tell where the cabin begins and the trees take over. And there on the front porch, fiddlin' away, is Daniel MacDougle his self. I have to keep hold of Jeffery so he won't go bargain' in. I tell him, "One has ta be invited hear or ye git yer head blowed off ... or a curse put upon ye."

Later on, up near the shelf and Jeffery's house, I tell him, "Wait 'till I introduce ye at the dance Saturdee night ... if'n ye come. He'll want ta invite ye ta come an' visit fer a spell."

"Why can't we see him now?" he asks.

"'Cause we don't! It's not po-light. Besides, he may jes' decide ta blow yer fool head off," I say in a flirtin' way, tossin' my skirt and lookin' away from him.

"Who is he, anyway?" Jeffery asks, just as we spot his house comin' over the ridge.

We walk out of the trees. The fiddlin' stays mostly in the trees. Only a little bit can be heard up here on the shelf. It has become a faint melody like a ghost floatin' and singin' softly on the breeze.

"He's the fidd'ler in these parts. People only live whar they's a fidd'ler. Comes by it natur'ly, too. Never lernt it. He's just full of mountain music. His fam'ly's had that ol' fiddle ever since thar was fiddles, since the time they comes across the sea. His daddy was a fidd'ler, an' his daddy afore him. His daddy died young an' left his Injun mama with three little younguns. She's died now too. Only Dan'l an' his sister Idora left now. She takes care of the house. His mama lernt them the Injun way. When Dan'l was only three, he spied that fiddle ahangin' thar above that farplace an' somehow took it down an' started screechin' tunes out of it that would make a body go mad.

"He lernt how ta play that fiddle all by his lonesome out'n the woods where nobody bothered 'im. Most likely, they shoed him out thar so he wouldn't be a bother. Well, that fiddle, it soaked up the sunlight comin' through the trees, the blowin' of the wind through the hollars ... waterfalls ... chirpin' of the birds ... matin' calls of elk, deer, wolves cryin' out'n the night ... ye call it. He can play breezes whisperin' through the trees, water tumblin' o'er the rocks out'n the crick ..."

I sit on a rock, fold my arms around my legs and rest my chin on my knees. I love to look at Jeffery and talk to him. Then all of a sudden, I say, "... an' all the mountain music ye can dance to! He can do a jig 'er call a reel that'd turn yer heart inside out.

"Zach Davies preachin' can turn yer heart ta God, but ol' Dan'l can place that God right inside yer heart an' brin' all the goodness out outen the meanest creature alive an' show it to him, how good a parson he really is inside ... an' they call him a witch fer that.

"Whenever I walk in the dark woods an' smell the pine an' see them streams of light fallin' down through the high branches, I feel somethin' sacred. I feel the same when Dan'l an' I 're alone out'n the woods at his place an' he plays on his fiddle that mountain music. I could walk alone in the woods an' listin' ta his lonely and solemn strains ... all the same ta me."

Jeffery stares at me and I gulp down a frog that keeps tryin' to climb up into my throat from my heart. He says to me, "Gosh, Tess, your words are so pretty. You ... you're just like these mountains. You're so beautiful, but I can sense somethin' deep."

He sits down on the ground next to me and puts his arms around my hips. I stare off into the trees. He blushes and says, "I didn't know that mountains could be so beautiful or have such beautiful people in them. I like to have fun with the boys and all that, but with you, I just found somethin' ... don't tell anyone ..."

"Okay," I say.

"... but I feel like I'd just gone to Church or something ... you know ... learned something deep about the woods and the music."

"I know," I say, pullin' him to my breast. "I go ta Church an' warship the Lard. I love ol' timey religion an' love ta sing the hymns. I love the Bible. Zach ... will, he keeps my conscience a goin' ... give me God's comman'ments an' all ... gittin' me clear of sin, but Dan'l ... why, he makes everthang afar off come up real close an' puts everthang in the Big Piture."

"Puts everythin' in perspective."

"Yeah ... big city words. Dan'l makes my religion have a deeper meanin'. Not so most folks ... fer them, it's on t'other side a thangs. Most can't be enriched. They rather have ta be saved an' git the Spirit an' git drunk on the Lard 're drink spirits an' git drunk with Dan'l MacDougle.

"Zach Davies says Dan'l is a heathen half-breed sinner what knows no god an' ain't got no soul. Say's he makes them trees an' rocks his god, an' the animules an' the birds an' evarthang."

"What does the preacher know, anyway," he says, kissin' my breast. "Who is he to say, anyway?"

"Zach an' Dan'l grew up ta gather. When they were young boys, thay argued over which ways were the better, the Injun ways 're the Bible ways. Dan'l says Injun ways ain't too difernt from the ways of ore ancestors afore they was Christainized by the Normans. Thay all warshipped difernt gods, he said, but thay really amount ta the same Christian god as do Zach an' his people, only thay have difernt names like Weden an' Tor. That's where ore days come from in Wedensday and Torsday, ain't it? That's what yer daddy said, ain't it? Well, Zach, he claims he's a Christian an' ever body else's goin' ta hell just 'cause thay don't go ta Church. Dan'l says he gets enough church out heer'n the woods."

"I think I know what he means."

"Dan'l says that Zach comes ta his place often enough an' par-takes of his moon-shine, arguin' over religion. Thay love thar arguments. Will, when Dan'l plays, ol' Zach, he howls an' crys 'cause he love it so, but not when he's sober. Next Sunday come an' he's a preachin' 'gainst whiskey an' ol' Dan'l an' his music."

Jeffery laughs and pulls me off the rock. We embrace and kiss.

Suddenly I am yanked by my arm away from Jeffery. I see my daddy standin' over me with his shotgun. I scream and run. I brush up againt Mr. Dawdson. I run. I can't stand to see Jeffery killed. I can't see my way. The tears blur my way. I brush against trees and bushes as I stumble up the path. Somehow I make it up to the house and grab my mama. I bawl on her shoulder.

"Honey, Honey, what ever is the matter?" she asks as she holds me tight and rocks me back and forth as though she were in a rockin' chair.

"Daddy's gone an' kilt Jeffery! Daddy's kilt Jeffery!" I yell into her shoulder.

"Oh Tess!" she pulls away. "How could ye say such a thang?" and she pulls me back into her lovin' bosom and tries to comfort me.

Daddy comes into the house. I scream and run into the back room where I sleep. I jump into my bed and bawl into my piller. I catch patches of conversation from the front room.

"I caught that kid Jeff an' ar' daughter!"

"Oh Daddy ..." Mama.

"... hands all over her ..." Daddy.

"Ye treated me that way onct ..." Mama softly.

"Dawdson's boy ..." Daddy. I can't hear what he's sayin'..

"Visitin' Dawdson on the way back from ..." Daddy again, almost whisperin'. "Tolt me ta git off his land ... stood up fer his'n ..."

"... ye kilt 'm ... Tess said that ..." Mama again.

"Ma ... dang it Ma ... Tesses out'n 'er haid ... tetched the boy ... boy's all right ..."

Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! Oh Daddy! I thought!

I grab my piller and weep happiness.

Daddy raises his voice. "She's gonna marry that missionary fellar! I gave ma word on it!"

Chapter Two

When Saturday nights are warm, and all durin' the Summer, there is a dance at the Corners in the barn. Heaven and Hell stand side by side ... the barn on one corner, and the church on the other. Zach Davies attends each dance to keep the devil at bay, he says. He may mean Daniel MacDougle and his music. There is no other in these mountains.

Jeffery is here at the dance. I haven't seen him in a couple of months. I've been too scared. Also, my daddy has been makin' sure I get to know Rowan Davies, that missionary.

I found that Rowan and Zach are cousins. Rowan is up here from Nashville trainin' to be a minister like his cousin. Zach is teachin' him.

Jeffery has started comin' to church as well as to the dances just so he can see me. He grins at me in church and at the dances. I either stick my tongue at him or grin back with my nose in the air, whichever mood fits. He's grinnin' at me now, sittin' over there in the corner on a bale of hay.

Rowan doesn't miss all this. He grabs me up, and we start a reel. I see Jeffery grab up one of the McDaniel girls ... the bucktoothed one ... and he starts dancin' with her. The music gets wild and I get nervous, lookin' at Jeffery starin' at me over Rowan's shoulder. I stumble and miss my turn, and here is Jeffery dancin' with me, and Rowan is dancin' with that McDaniel girl. How he did that, I don't know, but I start laughin' so hard that the tears come, and Jeffery is laughin', and we reel right out of that barn and run away, laughin' our heads off.

"How'd ye do that?" I ask as we land ourselves behind the church.

He offers me a wooden crate to sit on and says, "It was only a little trick I picked up at

school. You had to be fast and tough there or you didn't stand a chance."

"Didn't stand a chance at what?" I ask, wantin' to know about him and the other girls.

"Oh, gettin' friends ... gettin' respect ... security ... bein' popular ... gettin' girls ... and all that," he says, lookin' away out at the stars.

I knew it! Girls! and I ask him, "What's all that?" wantin' to know if he'd been with a girl before.

"You know ... if you're not tough, you get wiped out ... and then you have no friends, no girls, no safety. You become a square, and you get run out of the neighborhood ... you even have to give them your lunch money to save your nose. Either take lunch money or give lunch money. That's the law of the jungle."

"Would ye take money from others?"

"Well, you have to sometimes ..."

"Ta save yer nose?"

"Well, yeah! ... You have to or get clobbered. It's clobber or be clobbered ... You gotta smoke on you?"

Jeffery's gettin' hot, so I don't push him.

"I don't smoke ... didn' know ye did neither."

"Back at school, we all smoked. Dad wouldn't let me around the house ... doesn't let me here either. But since I haven't been around you," He gives my hips a little squeeze.

"Around your divine influence, I took it up again with the boys."

"Them Badger Creek fellers?"

"Yes, the Tom, Dick, and Harrys."

I put my hand onto his chest and rub, puttin' my head on top of his, and I say, "Ye

know, the last time I saw ye, I heard the mountains call yer name."

"How's that?"

"The way ye felt so rever'nt out thar in Spooky Holler."

"Oh, that ..." and he turns red in the bright moon light and clears his throat. He's been hidin' his precious feelings in front of the boys. "Well, I got to admit these mountains have carried me away some. Somethin's gotten under my skin. It's all spooky like. I guess seein' Spooky Holler ... I mean ... now you've gotten me sayin' it ... It's Spooky Hollow, isn't it? Anyway, It's got the right name ... Spooky."

"O'course, Church is a different matter, ain't it?" I say.

"Yes ... I guess so. You certainly feel different vibes there."

"Vibes?" I ask.

"Vibrations ... er ... spirit. The woods have a different feeling altogether. It seems that I don't feel reverent at any church *I've* been to, except perhaps in a great big cathedral once on a school field trip. That was spooky just like in the woods ... or a great big library ... the old fashioned marble kind. I'd just as soon whoop and holler in church as at that square dance over there," he says, pointin' his thumb across the street to the barn.

Yellow lights dance out of the barn just as we had and throw shadows against the surroundin' trees. I notice that the music has stopped, but not the laughter and gaiety that twirls around in the yellow lights almost like spooks.

I notice someone big and round and tall like a giant walkin' over here to the back of the church. Moonlight sparkles in his grayin' beard.

"Band is takin' a break or we're late gettin' home," I say to Jeffery. Because if they are breakin' up and goin' home, I'm in trouble. "Come on, I want ye ta meet Dan'l

MacDougle."

I run and jump up onto Daniel and give him a big hug, and he squeezes back.

"How's ma lit'le darlin' tanight?" he says.

"Jus' full of moonlight an' love whiskey."

"Full of moonshine ar' ye?" he asks.

"No ... only moonshine we got is comin' from up thar in that heaven, an' we got plenty of it," I say, pointin' to the brightest full moon I've ever seen.

We walk over to Jeffery, and I introduce him.

"Jeffery," I say, "this hear's Dan'l MacDougle."

Jeffery jumps to his feet, dusts his hands off and offers a handshake.

"Dan'l, this hear's Jeffery Dawdson," I say to Daniel.

They shake hands and Daniel says, "Jeff Deadson, I believe."

"What?" he responds.

"Oh, nothin', nothin'," Daniel says quickly.

Jeffery blushes and I see the hairs on the back of his neck bristle up, but he backs down and treats the words as a joke, for my sake, I guess.

"er ... Jeff Dawdson," he stammers, trying to control his anger.

Daniel pats him on the back, still holdin' his hand. "We've met afore, I b'leive. It could'a been 'Dead Son' then." He turns to me and explains. "He an' that Badger Creek bunch a come traipsin' through my land as though they own it. I reach over an' grabs ol' Sure Fire Red Eye an' fill'er full of rock salt, an' I fire in thar di-rection. Har! Har! Ye shoulda seen 'em scatter! Har! Har!" he laughs.

My face goes white thinkin' of the time I led Jeffery through to see his house and

property. I have to tell. "it were ma fault, Dan'l, I ..."

"No it wasn't Tess," Jeffery butts in, and he turns to Daniel and explains, "I just admire your music so much Mr. MacDougle, I can't seem to stay away. I often hide in the bushes by your place so I can listen. I live over the ridge to the west of you. Your music sometimes floats over the trees, and I hear it just enough to be curious anyway."

"Har! Har!" laughs Daniel, and he sits down on the wooden box. "Ma music, ye say! Well, I'll be skinned an' fried!"

"The other guys just follow me," Jeffery explains.

"Not many a people likes ol' Dan'l's fiddlin'," he says with an air of satisfaction. "Well boy, if ye like it *that* much, ye might ought ta sit a spell on my porch next time ye come around." He looks in my direction and says, "and ye can bring *my* sweet-heart with ye."

"Who's ..." Jeffery says, but I interrupt him and say, "Who d'ya think, silly? It's me! I'm his sweet-heart, an' I can come anytime I please ...'cause he's sweet on me."

"Why Tess," Daniel winks at Jeffery, sayin', "She's just like my own. Been that way ever since she could walk an' stray from her kin ... Now, what's so special 'bout my fiddlin'?"

Well, that starts questions and answers from both sides.

Daniel learnin' what it's like to live in the city, and Jeffery learnin' what it's like to live in these here mountains. He learns all about Daniel and Zachary growin' up together, how Daniel learned Indian ways and Zachary learned Latin and Greek, havin' to think thangs out rationally, bringin' in the European learnin', while Daniel stuck to the spirit of his ancestors. Zach ended up goin' to Seminary, and Daniel took to fiddlin'. No two people were more learned in the whole of these mountains. Zachary took his learnin' from books ... Daniel,

from Nature and from his heart. Each of them was very observant, but Daniel observed real life ... men, women, children, plants, animals, the seasons, the stars ... Nature.

"One thang I lernt fer sure, son," Daniel tells Jeffery, "is that Nature is a hankerin' ta change. An' that change keeps everthang the same.

"People 're always a findin' ways ta keep thangs the way they ere, but remember this: an apricot will see April when ye an' thee ere old an' gone. Ever spring time is the same glorious moment. The world, it don't grow old with ye. Thar ain't flowers when ye're barn an' then fall leaves of ever color when ye die. If that were true, everbody would be barn at that same time an' die at the same time, an' that cain't be.

"Everone that lives beyond int-fantcy gets ta be-hold the ever changin' moods of Mother Nature, gettin' ta witness the changin' of thangs that always remains the same.

"Everthang comes back ta whar it was. Ye bend a bowstring back, let it go, an' it comes right back ta whar it started, after it twangs a bit."

My heart is "atwangin'" and the tears come, because I know what I saw in my vision-dream. Jeffery bent that bowstring back, not knowin' the two hands of the mountain folk, or he didn't care, bein' friendly with both sides, tryin' to pull two different peoples together within himself, and somethin' popped. Somethin' happened to let go that bowsrtng and send Jeffery right back to God ... and I ache so much wantin' to be with him! I can't help myself now, for if Daddy knew I was out here with him, he would tan my hide and hang it on the wall. But I can't help it. I have to be with him in his last hours.

Well, the band comes and gets Daniel, askin' what the hell happened to him. They've been waitin' like an old mule for the plow that never comes. Before he leaves, though, he invites us to walk back to his house after the dance.

Jeffery is sittin' on the ground now, askin' me, "You're crying. You know that?"

"Yes, I know that," I say rather loud, because I'm so disturbed. I don't want him to ask and wipe my tears on my sleeve and sniff.

"Did something Mr. MacDougle say ..."

"Call'im Dan'l," I say.

"Did something Daniel say make you cry?"

I plop right down into Jeffery's lap, and I grab him tight, and I cry, "Just hold me Jeffery, and don't ask me any dumb questions!" With that, he gently puts his arms around me as though I were goin' to break. I will break if anythin' happens to my Jeffery.

After the dance, we walk back with Daniel and enter his dark fairyland forest. The moon and stars peek through the darkened trees between the leaves and branches above us, lookin' like the fairy queen and her followin' of forest fairies. We call the fire flies fairies from the stories Daniel tells us ... all the fairies come down and dance around us, givin' us their gift of laughter. We can hear the roarin' of the waterfall to our right and come to a little clearin' where we cross the stream on a little wooden bridge. We feel the power in this place and go silent. The giants on each side of Daniel's cabin look like a castle in the dark with the moon paintin' it silver. It's the castle of the fairy queen.

We sit down on Daniel's porch with our feet on the steps. He hasn't any chairs to offer us except the one he sits in. He pulls out his fiddle from its case and makes it sing. ye'd think he would be tired of fiddlin' all night for the dance and come home and havin' to fiddle again just to entertain us, but what he played now isn't dancin' music. It's power music. It's the waterfall. It's the top of the mountain. It's the sunrise and sunset all wrapped into one. It's the life of these big giant trees. It's the life force of the green forest, and its power flows into us,

takin' away all our fatigue. We're wide awake in the middle of the night.

After a while, the moon settles down to nap below the mountain's edge. No need for it to be up there when Daniel's on guard to watch the forest.

Daniel stops playin' for a spell, and Jeffery asks, "What is this *power* I feel?"

Daniel answers with a question. "Is it the music, or is it the forest?"

He takes a swig of moonshine whiskey from his jug and offers it to Jeffery. Jeffery takes some and chokes and coughs. Daniel says, "it don't like ye," and he laughs. We all laugh. "Ye don't have the equal power *it* has. So it over-powers ye. Now take these ol' trees hear. They have *power*. They've been soakin' up the power of the arth fer so long, they shine."

I can see that Jeffery sees it. Even though the moon has gone down, the giant oaks give off a silvery sheen. The forest is alive with a light all its own.

Daniel continues. "It's a power place. The arth has old places full of beauty and power. This hear's one of them. That power ye feel is whar my music comes from. It don't come from me. It's got a life of its own. It's hear in the trees. It's hear in the arth. No need to suck it out of a parson ... no babe, no garl, no man, if ye gets it di-rect." He pauses and then says, "Most folk gets it from others by getting' them upset and arguin' or tryin' to sooth them or by squeezin' the life out of babes. ye know, huggin' babies and little chillens."

"How do you get this power di-rectly, as you say?" asks Jeffery.

"Ye *breathe* it in, boy," and he takes a deep breath. "Ye *breathe* it in."

Daniel continues his fiddlin'. Jeffery says that it's classical music like he heard in school. Daniel lays his fiddle aside and looks deep into Jeffery and says, "It's no composition, dang it!" And he says reverently, "it comes from the arth mother," and he

continues playin'.

About dawn, now, and we feel it's time to go. We stand up. Daniel looks like he is about ready to drop off to sleep. We start to go, but Jeffery turns and asks Daniel, "Why do you shoot at the guys?"

"They're trespassers. They do nothin' with the power God give 'em but ta lay waste an' destroy. They come heer ta git the power, all right, but they use it ta destroy. The path that lays behind 'em is waste an' destruction ... waste and destruction."

"But isn't that what you do to them?" he asked.

Daniel starts dozin' in his rockin' chair. I say to Jeffery, "Let's go. He's done and gone now."

"But why does he try to take a life when he sits heer and talks about the power of God?"

Daniel opens his eyes all of a sudden and says, "They 're the sons of the Ammonites an' the Philistines. They're in the hands of God when they come inta this hear land. Boy! Ye have seen the power of God tonight!" and then he starts snorin' as though he had been asleep all along. We leave quietly.

Goin' up to the ridge, up to Jeffery's place, we look back into the dark woods and see the silvery fairie castle made of ancient trees knarled together to make a cabin full of power.

Takin' a deep breath, Jeffery says, not quite convinced, "I still don't see how such an uneducated man can come up with such classical music."

"It comes from 'is heart, Jeffery. It come from 'is heart," I say.

We cross the corn field growin' green in the fadin' starlight and hear the cocks start to crow. Walkin' up to Jeffery's porch, I leave him there with such a passionate embrace and a

kiss that he has to peel me off of him. I don't want to leave, but I do, but I don't touch ground until I get back home, and then the sky falls upon me.

I crawl into the back window, not thinkin' of my daddy, not until I lay down on my bed and feel the crushin' blow of his fist in my face, and he starts yellin' at me. The power is still in me and I'm out of that bed in a lightenin' flash, but he's quick and catches me and gives me another blow to the face. Mama comes between me and him.

"Not fit'n ta be a preacher's wife!" he yells at me across Mama's shoulder. "Become a little whore, sneakin' out at night ta be wif that lowlander whose not any good but ta be fodder fer ma gun!"

I curl up into the corner of the room. I lick blood off my lips and savor the salty flavor. What a change of scene I came into! But the black eye and swollen lips can't shake the feelin' that's between me and my love. I can still feel the enchantment of the night.

A black eye doesn't bother me. I've given them and I can take them. But when Daddy start's yellin' that he's goin' to get his gun and go over there and kill that Jeff guy, slammin' the door as he goes, my enchantment flickers. I thought I should run to my Jeffery and warn him. I hear my daddy's footsteps trampin' outside. I rise to go, but my mama stops me.

"He's only agoin huntin' and drinkin'," Mama says.

She follows me to the front door and puts her arms around me. We stand there together and let the first rays of the mornin' sun touch our faces.

"We love ye, an' we stayed up all night worryin' where ye were," said Mama gently.

"We only stayed up with Dan'l after the dance ... at his place," I say.

"Ye an' that Jeff guy?"

"Yes'm"

"I wish ye wouldn't go over thar. He won't teach ye nothin' but heathen ways."

"Yes'm. But, don't ye thank that a guy what don't hit nobody is more saved than one who does?" I say, tryin' to defend Daniel.

My mama stiffens up and says, "Now don't ye get on that agin', all about yer daddy bein' a rough man. He may be a bit wild, but that's what ye an' me likes about ar' men, now ain't it?" and she smiles. I blush and whisper a "yes."

"Ye rile yer daddy 'til he's sick with worry ... an' ye expect him ta be nice? Besides ... he aint lazy like some men 'round hear. He's a good provider. He al'ays puts meat on the table."

"Yes'm," I say.

"Better wash up. I'll git ye some ointment."

Chapter Three

I go to church early every Sunday. A group of us get together and sing. They call it a choir. Jeffery says that it could become one if we had someone trained to lead us. I asked him if he were trained. He said no. "Then," said I, "how do ye know we're not a choir? It's the best one ye'll find in these mountains, and it feels good to sing today."

I can see Jeffery comin' in the front door. I know he'll fume when he sees my black eye. Everyone in the choir made such a big fuss about it this mornin'. I told them it was nothin', and bein' a good Christian, told them it was because I stayed out all night. Some of them agreed it was a fittin' punishment. I don't feel it though. I feel my swollen mouth more than I do my black eye just tryin' to sing. I sure hope Jeffery doesn't make a fuss with my daddy over such trifles.

He sees me, starts to smile, cocks his head and comes runnin' up to the choir seats.

"What happened?" he asks.

"I just had a run in with my daddy," I say, leanin' on the railin' in front of me with my elbows, "but everthang's alright."

Right then my daddy walks through the front doors, and I see Jeffery stiffen. He whips around and looks my daddy in the eye, but I grab him by the back of his shirt and say, "Ye leave my daddy alone ar' ye'll never see *me* agin." He looks back at me almost pleadin', but I say, "Ye jus' go on an' sit down, Jeffery Dawdson! I can take car' of myself."

He goes and sits down three seats back. My daddy sits on the last row so he can keep an eye on thangs. I look at him eye to eye and reflect his overly serious expression. I then look at Jeffery and try to give him a reassurin' smile. No black eye has ever taken *my* spirits

away. But I must look ridiculous singin' up here in the choir with a black eye. People are lookin' and talkin' and gigglin' if not out right laughin', but I sing the louder. My swollen lip doesn't stop me either.

We sing "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder" and then "Gatherin' in the Sheaves." The congregation joins in on "Rock of Ages Cleft for Me," and now, that they're all here, Preacher Davies gets up to pray.

I peek over at Jeffery, and he peeks at me. We smile, thinkin' of last night. I see Daddy starin' straight up at me, and I quickly close my eyes. I'm so mad at him tryin' to marry me off to that Rowen Davies, I could spit hell fire.

Daddy's stance tells me that he is goin' to beat me every time he finds me with my beloved Jeffery. He thinks to beat the devil out of me. I'm supposed to be Rowan's girl ... supposed to be married to him, but I have other plans.

Jenny McGafferty has sat down next to Jeffery. She's my dearest girl friend. She lives just over the next hollow. I haven't seen her much since I've been with Jeffery, but she understands, bein' married already ... and she loves her man just like I love Jeffery, but her man's a highlander. Anyway, she and I are in cahoots with each other on this plan of mine. I see she is shakin' hands with Jeffery. I smile at him as he looks so surprised. She is slippin' him my note. After church, we'll go our separate ways. Rowan will have dinner with me and my folks, and then I'll make some excuse to leave. I'll meet Jeffery on that knoll above his house and we'll run away together. Otherwise, I'm stuck with that no good lowlander Rowan Davies. I don't want any *missionary*.

Preacher Davies is preachin' up a storm. He has Mrs. Pritchitt rollin' in the isle again ... hands clappin' ... praisin' and hallelujahs everywhere ... and there goes Widow Banes

shakin' all over with her hands reachin' up and down in the air.

Now that old Zach has them rollin' in the aisles, he's givin' it over to Rowan to get them down the aisles all the way to the altar. He says to them, poundin' on the pulpit, "You come to a fork in the road of life and you can go only one of two ways. On the left, you can go to Hell and live with the devil and his angels who are experts in the tortures of Hell where there is everlastin' burnin's of fire and brimstone." There are a lot of Amens and Hallelujahs. "Or you can turn to the right and be on that straight and narrow road so often spoken of by the Lord and Master. Are you going to do what is right? Be on the Lord's side! As for me and my house, says Joshua who made the heathen walls of Jericho fall down with the blast of the Lord's trumpet, we will serve the Lord! This is the road, my brothers and sisters, which will lead you to Heaven and to peace and rest. Yes, brothers and sisters. Do you see the way to choose? The one way of sin and damnation will lead you to Hell. The other road will lead you to God and his rest. Do you want to rest, my brothers and sisters? Do you have enough trouble in the world? Then come and let the Lord take away your sins. Come down to the altar. Come to his love."

Then to emphasize his meanin', he slams the Bible on the pulpit and says, makin' one boom follow another boom with his boomin' voice, "The way is clear! Clearly mapped out in the Bible. Je-sus said, his sheep will he have on his *right* hand, and the old goats like Daniel MacDougle and all you worshipers of the devil will he have on his *left* hand ..." more Amens and Hallelujahs. "He will open the Pearly Gates of Heaven and let the bless-ed and the saved enter in to his rest," and he sings, with the choir joinin' in, "There will be pe-e-eace in the va-alley for ye-ee-ee, Amen!" Then everybody joins in the singin' while he does some more preachin'.

Everyone starts singin' "Savin' Grace ... what a wretch like me."

"Do we have someone here today," Rowan continues, and then Zachary starts singin' "I come dear Lard, I come." Everyone follows. And Rowan asks, "Is there not one soul here today that feels the hand of the good Lord on their shoulder? Isn't there one here today that feels the need to unburden their load of guilt and sorrow at the altar and say 'Lord, I'm sorry. I have sinned, and I don't want this burden anymore?'"

There is one woman that gets up and runs down to the altar and falls down on her knees, cryin', "Ah Lard! I need ye! Ah, Lard! I've sinned!" Some of the sisters get out of their seats and go and pray with her. Zachary prays, "Thank ye Lard, thank ye." Then he asks, "Now is there any other?"

I get all emotional and sorry for myself ... sorry for all the bad thangs I've done or thought of doin'. I start to get up and go cry at the altar when I see Zachary approach Jeffery. He lays his hand on his shoulder and grips it hard.

"Har's one," he cries. "Har's one what runs 'round with sinners, gettin' drunk and dancin' with the devil. Son, where's yar friends? Why did ye choose this day to be in the house of the Lard? Is it because ye feel the power of Salvation in this place? Do ye feel the power? Do ye feel the time is right ta become a Christian?"

I can see Jeffery blush and hold onto his hat really tight. He turns to Jenny and says somethin' to her. He seems so nervous. He has a few words with the preacher whose face turns red and wrinkled. There is a lot of commotion and talkin' and people gettin' out of their seats. Jeffery goes down the middle aisle towards the door. There, I can see my daddy grab Jeffery by the front of his shirt. He's surely givin' him a warnin' not to mess around with me. Everythang's breakin' up. The Sunday meetin' isn't supposed to end like this.

Zachary yells out, "Does this mean that ye cannot accept the Lard, and ye are taken the hand of the devil?"

Jeffery turns around and tells everybody, "I don't mean to offend anyone, but I have to find my own path to God. I heard God come out of a fiddle in the middle of the woods. I'm sorry, I really tried, but I can't feel the Spirit of God in this church." He turns around and walks away.

My daddy nearly flips onto his back. He sways as though he is about to pass out, and then he sticks his head out the door and calls out, "Goddamned devil worshipper!" But Jeffery keeps goin' right on I hope to our secret meetin' place above his house, and I hope I can get away.

Rowan goes up to Daddy and calms him down. He says, "Now Brother McClair, let's not have any name calling. There's other ways of taking care of the devil ..." and with a twinkle in his eye, he adds, "so as we can save the poor boy's soul."

Brother McCalley comes behind the young preacher, whisperin' in his ear just like the devil himself, sayin', "That kid's pa thinks hisself right down smart, he does. Thinks we is all come from monkeys, an' he teaches that ta ar' younguns."

"Well, Brother McCalley," Rowan says, "we'll talk to him about it."

Rowan looks out the door of the church with his hand on his mouth with a really bad worry look on his face. He stands there holdin' up the congregation which wants to get out. He turns around and appologizes, smilin', shakin' hands as the people leave. Everyone takes their turn as they shake Rowan's hand at sayin' somethin' bad about the Dawdson family.

"Upstart city-slickers!"

"If any one's come from monkeys it's the Dawdsons. Look at that littlun of thars ...

looks like one."

"Takin' my chilluns out'n that school if'n that's what thar teachin'!"

"That Jeff boy's a witch ... taught by ol' McDougle hisself."

"Saw Miz Dawson t'other day knitten hexes onto her clothes. I said she ought not ta do that."

"Dawdson's carn's so high, must be withcraft."

All of a sudden all the mountain's talkin' bad about Jeffery's family, and I've never heard anyone talk bad about them before. Everyone has always been so nice and polite to them, even behind their backs. I've only heard compliments. Everyone was so respectful of Mr. Dawson's knowledge and experience. That's why they put their children in his school. Now, that little spark, started by the devil himself, just a small blaze in dry grass, is spreadin' like wild fire. Their souls have all dried up, forgettin' anythin' the preacher said today, and they're burnin' up with the fever. I even heard someone say that Jeff gave me my black eye at the dance last night. Why all these lies?

They're gatherin' a little crowd outside, talkin' about runnin' those Dawdsons out of these mountains. Rowan is tryin' to calm them down with his sweet words as they leave, and I like that in him, for it's a kindness, but the people standin' outside are formin' a mob. At least, it could become a mob if the sun were to heat up a little more.

Chapter Four

Mama knows right how to fry up a chicken. When we all three (Rowan, Daddy, and myself) get home ... I smell it ... and the mashed potatoes and the gravy, the candied yams and sour greens ... My! I sure am hungry.

Rowan talks really sweet to me, tryin' all the small talk as if we were in Paradise and nothin' has ever happened. I act really shy around him. I *am* shy around him. I don't understand his kind. He's always polite and talks softly, like perhaps the Lord does. I don't trust him. He's like a snake-in-the-grass. He'd probably beat me as bad as any man around here, but here he is, puttin' on airs as though he were the kindest and gentlest thang! Is he or ain't he the wolf in sheep's clothin'? I don't feel right around him. I feel at ease and calm like he's just part of the family ... not all excited like I do around Jeffery. Jeffery makes me feel like a woman. He makes me feel like havin' his baby. I could have dozens of his babies and never flinch. Rowan here is more like a brother or a friend. There's no fire between us. I can't marry my *brother*!

"Howdee Rever'nd!" Mama calls out as we enter the door, wipin' the palms of her hands flat across her apron.

Now, the steps don't go straight up to the door, because of the location of the house, the way it faces away from the trail lookin' down into the hollow; they come up from the side of the house onto the porch. So, Mama has to show everybody comin' up the steps where the door is by stretchin' her left arm out the door. Then she says, "Come right on in an' make yerself at home!" The trail goes back up the road that leads up to the Dawdson place ... and my mind travels back along that trail and up the road a bit to where Jeffery is waitin'

for me.

"Tess!" Mama calls to me. "Don' stand thar a dawdlin' all starry-eyed. Come on in the house an' help with the Sundee victuals. The Rever'nd can't wait all day ta fill up that hole in 'is soul."

It's our turn to feed him. Everyone at church takes a turn feedin' the preachers (school teachers too, but the mountain folk don't take to kindly to Mr. Dawson, he bein' self sufficient). Mama takes it as a special occasion as if we alone thought of invitin' him.

Rowan takes my hand gently and wakes me up. He says, smilin', takin' his black broad-rimmed hat off with his other hand, "She's no doubt bewitched by the old forest spirits I hear comin' over the trees, and needs to be led gently away from them to God's own." There *is* strains of Daniel's soothin' music faintly heard on the breeze. Maybe he's referrin' to that.

"I'm sorry, Rowan," I say. "Been up all night at the Corners. Didn't git no sleep last night."

While Mama puts the finishin' touches on the table, my shiner comes up in conversation.

"And how did such a pretty lady like you come up with a black eye?" asks Rowan.

"Oh, ye know rough an' tumble me," I say, lyin' through my teeth, "I ain't no lady."

"Well, you are to me," he says, "and the prettiest lady around these heer parts."

Daddy is just soakin' up all Rowan's soft talk and compliments, just sittin' in his wicker chair just a beamin', not takin' any notice that I'm savin' his hide.

"Yup," he spits out. "She's the finest catch this side of the ridge."

"Dinner's ready Reverend," says Mama, and she comes in between us, tiltin' her head

towards Rowan and puttin' her hands together as if she's prayin' to him. It makes me uneasy to see her bein' so polite to him. I thought only Catholics worship the priest, and here she is worshippin' Rowan! He might as well marry her as me and ditch dear old Daddy.

"Will ye sit at the head of the table heer?" she asks so politely, directin' him to sit in Daddy's place. Daddy don't mind a bit, offerin' to push the chair in for him, just beamin'. He thinks he's goin' to get rid of me. He is, quicker than he thinks, and tonight, if thangs go right.

What am I talkin' about? Will I ever escape with a soul Heaven-bound? Surely, someone is comin' to kill Jeffery. I don't know if I can stop Mr. Death, but I have to try and get Jeffery out of these mountains and me with him.

Dinner's over and the conversation has gotten around to killin'.

"I say strike down the Philistines," says my daddy ... a little louder than he should with the preacher sittin' next to him. "Don't let'm take an inch ... ar' this land'l be turned ta idolitry."

"I know," responds Rowan, "that the Lord at times commands his people to destroy the wicked. But Brother McClair, don't you think that the word of the Lord is more powerful than a two edged sword?"

"Yes, by golly. But ye saw that bullheaded lad today! He ran right out o' the church sayin' he'd rather warship them false gods of the heathen, sidin' as he does wif that goddamned fiddler now!"

"That so?" Rowan asked, raisin' his left eyebrow a bit. "Still, the Good Book says that if a man has ought against his neighbor, he should talk to the man, not blow his head off. I'm sure that Mr. Dawson is level headed. I hear he's been teaching false ideas about man

evolving from monkeys. Our children may act like monkeys sometimes, yes, but," and he and my daddy laugh at this.

"Yeah, they shore do, don' they?" Daddy says, winkin' over at me. But then his face sobers up, and I know he's thinkin' of Jeffery.

Conversation has somehow come back around to the weddin' of me and Rowan. I dread talkin' about this and makin' up lies ... Lord forgive me, I don't mean to deceive. I just don't know how else to get out of a beatin'.

"An' when is this big day gonna come?" Daddy asks for the hundredth time as if he just can't wait. (Once, he said, "I jes' can't wait ta have a preacher in the fam'ly.") Women's lives are sold like cattle.

Lizabeth, who is always in the background blurts out, "She's gonna be big an' fat an' git all ugly like Ma when she gits in the preacher's bed, she is."

Ma raises her voice with a vengeance, sayin' in the little girl's direction, "Shush yo' mouth, girl! Yo time is comin' up soon enough!" and at the same time grabbin' the kitchen spoon and hittin' Lizabeth on the noggin. Lizabeth yells "Ow!" and that's the end of that. All the children are silent and in the background. That's the way Mama likes it.

"It will be another month, Zach tells me, before I get my first church," says Rowan, leanin' over with his elbows on his knees and his fingers intertwined and twisted like he's in deep thought, smilin' really big. He looks over at me, and I blush I'm so angry, but he thinks I'm just shy. "Then we'll get married," he continues, " at the Corners and just head over to our first little church. Zach says they already have a cabin built for the newlyweds. We'll have a sweet little home, won't we Dear?" Is he talkin' to me?

"Yes sir," I say, lookin' down at my toes which are more important than he ever will be.

"Don't need ta be so shy, Tess," Daddy puts on. "Why, she's thinkin' of havin' all those babies ... why that's only *natural*. It'll come real smooth like it does ta all the women folk. Ain't that right, Mama?"

"Ye don't know tha half of it, bein' a man as ye are," says Mama actin' as a wise old owl. "But it gits easier on the lovin' end at least."

Oh, I've got to get out of here! Now I *am* embarrassed! Them talkin' like that in front of Rowan, and him bein' a preacher, too. I rise, and Daddy asks, "Whar ye goin' daughter?"

"Ta the outhouse," I say, raisin' the singin' note of my voice so they can understand. "Excuse me all," I say as I squeeze between Rowan's and Daddy's knees, as there isn't much room in our little cabin.

"Well, why ye goin' to the bedroom?" Daddy asks so sweetly. "the toilet's outside."

I yell back in anger, "I gotta git a rag! I gotta git a rag!" All the while, I'm throwin' my thangs into Mama's suitcase. I throw it out the back window, and I follow after it.

I can almost hear Daddy laugh as he says, "she's in her womanly way."

As I go up the hill carryin' the suitcase to the road, not on the trail, but through the bushes so they can't see me, I can hear them singin' "Leee-ning, leee-ning, leanin' on the Everlastin' Arm." I start singin', and forgive me of my sacrilege, but Jeffery's the one I'm worshipin' right now, "Leee-ning, leee-ning, leanin' *in* his everlastin' arms." I can't wait to see Jeffery, my Jeffery. I just know he's up on that knoll above the hill in the rock cleff waitin' for me. Back at the church, I heard him thank Jenny. I know he got my message.

The moon has come at midday. The evergreens are greener. The autumn leaves are redder and crisper, like flamin' fires burnin' underneath my feet, liftin' me higher and higher to my Jeffery.

Now I am surrounded by the fire of his arms. We sink deep into the grass, and I want to become one with him so bad that I forget everythin' that is behind me.

I'm afraid that I have overwhelmed Jeffery. I feel the passion of his love enterin' into me ... the fire of the glory of the sun, moon and stars, and I meld into his soul. We are finally one, and that makes three, for surely, I know I'm pregnant. And that makes us married.

We lie here under the rocks without speakin', caressin' each other, huggin' and kissin' ... and then comes a dark shadow passin' over us. It sends chills up and down my spine and makes me shudder. I have made love to a dead man. I get up on my knees really fast.

"What's wrong?" Jeffery asks. "Did I do something wrong?" He comes up along side me and asks, "Are you having some regrets?"

"No, no," I say as I rush my fingers to his pretty lips. Then I turn and look at Mr. Death standin' there in the shadows of the trees. "No! No!" I cry! and hear the blast of a shotgun twice, and I'm all covered with blood. Jeffery's blood is all over me. "Jeffery!" I am screamin'! I am dizzy. I am numb. I reach over and give Jeffery one last kiss.

I hear my Daddy say, "Git on home or I'll blast ye wif him an' not regret it."

How, I don't know, but I find that I have run all the way through Daniel's place and am washin' myself in the creek below the waterfall. I know I am as blue as the sky above, but the cold water has washed all my feelin's away. All I know now is that I am where the music is ... where the beauty is ... down there in Spook Hollow. I am the water fallin' over the rocks down into the cold bubblin' pool where life has taken me. I stand in the waterfall and let it wash all the blood of my love away ... out of my hair, off of my face, out of my clothes ... and out of my heart. I see Daniel come, but I don't care enough to give him a mind.

"I heard a gunshot," he says matter of factly. "Then I see ye scamper down that

mountain thar."

That's all I hear him say. I lay myself down into the cold watery grave, thinkin' I will end it all here. My soul has gone to Heaven, and I am no more.

Then I find myself in a field of wild flowers. I see Jeffery. I run to him and my feet are lifted into the air. We try to embrace, but he's always ahead of me. There's just too much air or somethin' between us.

"Jeffery! Oh, Jeffery!" I cry. "Why can't we touch?"

I see a young handsome man all glowin' in white stand beside Jeffery. Jeffery says, "This here is my son. Our son. You have to go back so he can be born."

I turn around and see the black hole from whence I came underneath me. I turn back to Jeffery. I see others standin' there now, and they call me "Mama." I know they are my and Rown's children.

"It's all right, Tess," I hear Jeffery say. "I love you Tess, and I always will."

As I cry out "I love ye!" he gets farther and farther away, and I feel myself fallin' down into the sink hole. He becomes a star shootin' across the blackness amid myriad of stars.

"Jeffery, good bye," I say. "I love ye, good bye."

I am again aware of the cold blue water around me. It is so very cold, and I go to sleep. I wake up in front of a warm fireplace, wrapped in a bear skin and bare naked too. The pelt of my soul is just as bare.

"If ye gonna kill yerself gal," says grumpy old Daniel, "do it on yer own land."

I look at the fire and see my clothes hangin' down from the high mantel.

"I ain't gonna kill myself Dan'l. Not no more," I say, "I gonna git married to Rowan."

I stare into the rich orange flames and fall asleep, dreamin' of Jeffery.

Chapter Five

Rowan got his call yesterday. A full month has passed since that bloody Sunday. He's now a full fledged pastor, just like he said. He has his own church now. "We just have to get married and move over to Arkansas," he says. "It'll be a nice little country church like the one at the Corners."

It was too bad about Mr. Dawdson and his family. Rowan told me all about it. There was a committee that went up to talk to Mr. Dawdson ... caught him near the road in his corn field. Rowan said that he had taken after Daddy when Daddy suddenly got up and left the house with his shotgun. He came upon the committee talkin' to Mr. Dawdson. Someone had pulled out a gun and shot the man. No one seems to know who it was or they're not tellin'.

Rowan was the one who carried the body up to Mrs. Dawdson. He said it almost broke his heart. There was nothin' he could do. Mr. Dawdson was dead by the time he got him up to the house. The doctor came, but there was nothin' to do but pronounce him dead. When Mrs. Dawdson had to bury her two men in one day, her husband and her son, she went insane. She grieved so much, and she bein' a lowlander hadn't ever been in any sufferin' before, she disappeared into the mountains, they say, lookin' for her way back home, back to *her* mama. One of the McAllister boys took up with the little girl Nancy, and the little boy has been dead a year. I have been taken up with Jeffery so much, I never took notice.

Rowan came over to Daniel's cabin the Monday after the awful thang when Daniel went and told my family where I was. They went and told Rowan to go over and fetch me. Daniel said it was no surprise to him what happened, seein' that everthang in these

mountains happens to keep the status quo. "Everthang remains the same," he said.

If Daniel hadn't pulled me out of that water ... and I think of this quite often ... I would have surely let that creek carry me away down to the river that runs into the great Mississippi ... the one that Mr. Dawdson talked about in the school ... and that great river would have carried me into the wide ocean Mr. Dawdson said was out there ... like all eternity where sky and ocean join together all the souls of men. Then I would have joined my Jeffery, but seein' what Jeffery showed me, someone would have rescued me as they already did. Daniel did, and I love him like a real father ... that is, I wish he *were* my real father. I think I love him more than *any* man. I will surely miss him more than he will me.

Daddy has disappeared. They say he's livin' with one of Daniel's friends ... one of those king men who still live up in the high mountains waitin' for some future time when Scotts will have their own king ... probably waitin' for the resurrection of bonny Prince Charly.

Mama is worried now that Daddy is gone, wonderin' where her next meal is comin' from, but every time a killed turkey or possum or chicken shows up on her door step, she knows Daddy is still around. Funny thang is that one of the sisters from the Church has to come and clean it for her. Mama says it ain't hers and she won't touch it, but she winds up eatin' it anyway. She sits on the porch worrin' about her next meal and about Daddy. I think she has gone funny somehow.

Sister MacAllister is over havin' me stand here in an old weddin' dress that has been in my mama's family for a hundred years. She is sewin' it up around me to make it fit. My mama's folk use to be rich and own a plantation. Now, this is the only thang that's left of all their great riches. Everythin' got ruined in the war with the North. She's pamperin' me, sayin'

such thangs as "Look at the purty bride," and, "Ye is goin' ta make the purtiest bride."

She's finished. She helps me down off the chair I had to stand on and gives me a big hug and kiss. She says, "You's so bright and cheery taday ... like you's all forgotten that awfull thang about that lowlander ... what's-is-name? Pastor Davies is goin' ta have hissself a perfect bride."

"Yessiree," I say... and then I hear someone comin' up the path. I see Rowan out the window. I scream with excitement, not wantin' him to see me yet. It's bad luck. Then Lizbeth shouts, "Te-ess! Someone's come ta marry ye."

Missouri

Chapter One

My mama is going to have another one. She is reaching over her fat tummy to get to my hair. She says, “Ya got the purtiest hair, all golden like. Almos’ white. Tha’s why I named ya Pearl.” She combs it as if it's gold. It's so long it covers my shoulders. Mama made me put on my gingham gown, as we are going to church this morning to hear my daddy preach. They say my mama and daddy come from Virginia, but right now we live in the Ozarks of Arkansas. It is such a beautiful country. We live out in the woods, and the neighbors are sparse. Sometimes there are people that show up at the doorsteps, but I hardly notice anyone unless I am at the school house or at church. There is a little town nearby called “in town” or “out of town,” I don't know which, where we trade. I see the neighbors there also.

“Be still, Pearl,” Mama says. “Don't fidget so.”

“But yer pullin' my hair,” I say.

“I'm almos' done. Jus’ let me put the bow in yer pony tail.”

Before I know it, the pink bow is in my hair, we are out the door, with Mama carrying little sister Amelia and walking through the woods to the church. I keep looking at the picnic basket Mama is carrying in her left hand. I know Daddy is going to preach up a storm, but I like the picnic afterward. I take a sniff and smell the fried chicken.

“That there picnic basket is makin' me powerful hungry, Mama,” I say.

“Ya can't be hungry, girl. It's yer overactive imagination.” She looks down at me. “Ya

jus' had yerself a giant pile o' pancakes."

I watch that basket as Mama swings it back and forth. "I jus' imagine that I have a powerful hunger inside o' me."

"Woll, ya will jus' have ta wait 'till after church."

"I'm a growin' girl, Mama. I'm growin' mighty fast." I swish my hand across my skirt, and spy the church ahead.

"I know ya are, chil', but so is the baby. So is this baby. I shoulda packed enough food fer the both o' us."

"Ya packed enough for more than jus' us two."

"I mean me and the baby as well as the rest of the family." Mama smiles down at me.

"Oh," I say.



I fidget all the way through church, listening to my daddy's booming voice. I draw pictures on the program with Mama's pencil, and when that's full, I start drawing in the song book. Mama takes the book away, slams it shut and puts it back in the pew. She twists her face up and whispers, "Ya don't draw in the song books!" Daddy stops his preaching and stares at me and Mama. I sink down a bit into my seat. Then he continues his Hell-Fire sermon.

After the preaching, saving people at the altar, passing the plate, more singing and praying, we all walk outside and visit for a spell while setting up the picnic tables out back. Daddy prays over the food, Mama piles my plate high, full of chicken legs, potato salad,

corn, green beans, and a big mouth sized pickle. I think she saves the rest of the chicken for grownups. Children eat the legs. Though, one time I got the pully bone.

I pulled it with Rufus, my kissing boyfriend. He's the one I chase. I hit him if he doesn't do what I say. But he still likes me, and I share my chicken legs with him, seeing his family is poor. Mama said she gives me extra because she knows Rufus is always hungry. Poor people don't contribute to the picnic, so we all feeds them.

Daddy takes the Sabbath to visiting people. Sometimes we all go with him, but today, Mama is too tired. She is almost due. Sister Hodgkin is the midwife. She visits Mama quite often now so she doesn't miss the birthing. She don't want to do that because she won't get paid. But a preacher's wife don't have money anyhow. We only have what others give us, mostly chickens, and we give it to Sister Hodgkin. It seems we give her a half a chicken every time she comes. She likes rhubarb pie. We gave her the whole pie once. I imagine she would be bigger than she is except she has to go traipsing over this hill and that one. There is a lot of birthing going on nowadays. It seems like men have nothing better to do than making babies.

I wonder if Rufus and I will ever make babies. I'm not old enough now. I'm only eight. But I imagine we will someday. He sure likes to kiss me a lot. Mama says that's where it starts and warns me not to love him so, but I can't help it. I'm tied to him hand and foot. We have grown up together, and I can't think of a life without him.

I'm supposed to be taking a nap right now, but my head is laying on my Mama's breast, and I am stroking her tummy. She plays with my hair, and I am trying to imagine being in a family way. I guess I will be just like my ma.

"I'll be jus' like ye, Mama, when I grow up." I say. "I'm almos' grown now, ain't I?"

“Yes, Darlin’, ya are indeed.” She pauses, caresses my head, pulling a strand of hair to the back of my ear. “I will hate to lose ya to a man. But I want ta have lots a grandchildren. I guess my ma wants the same as me. Poor Ma. I wonder what she’s up to. She and Pa are growin’ old. I thought I’d never want ta see them ag’in, never want ta see The Corners ag’in, but now ... I don’t know. The more family I have, the more I want.”

“I wants lots of family too, Mama,” I says.

“Sometimes I dream of The Corners and Jeffery.” Mama sighs. “He was my first love.”

I turn my head and look up. “Who’s Jeffery, Mama?”

“He was a boy I met ... lived above the hollar where I lived.”

“Back in Virginia?”

“Back some’eres.” She’s not looking at me but into the air.

“Is Daddy yer number two love?”

“He is my only love.” When she said that, a light went out of her eyes.

I look down and halfway say, “When I grow up, I’m goin’ to have a number one love, a number two love, a number three love, and ...”

Mama laughs and says, “Ya’ll do no such thing. Ya’ll love yer man an’ like it.”

“I guess so.” I feel sleepy and rub my head into Mama’s breast.

“Ye love Rufus, don’t ya?” Mama says.

“Yes, Ma’am.”



I wake up, yawn, and realize I am on Mama's bed. I hear Mama and Daddy talking in the kitchen. I get up and walk in there.

Mama is saying, "Rowan, it's comin'. I feel it comin'. Lookie thar on the floor. My water's broke already."

Mama's not in her right mind. She's talking funny, like she's in a slow motion picture. She spies me and says, "Honey, go and get Sister Hodgkin 'er she'll miss it fer sure."

As I run out the door, I can hear Daddy try to comfort her, but she is just screaming back at him not to touch her. It's getting dark, but I know the way. I follow the trail through the woods, past the church and then over a stile onto a new trail that leads right up to Sister Hodgkin's door.

I don't knock, just bust in and yell, "Sister Hodgkin! It's on its way! Mama says come now or ya'll miss it fer sure."

Sister Hodgkin has one more drink from the jug, grabs her bag, and we're both out the door. I have to run to keep up with her.

When we reach our porch, Daddy opens the door. I guess he's been watching out the window. The old woman just barges in, pushing Daddy aside, yelling, "Help is here! Where's the woman? Get me some hot water, soap, and a towel. I'll wash up."

"She's on the bed," Daddy says, pointing. "Pearl, you get the stuff."

I bring the stuff into the bedroom, and Sister Hodgkin shoos me out, as I am staring at my ma. She is in awful pain and groaning and cussing. I never knew my ma to cuss so. Something is mighty wrong.

"Daddy?" I go to him for some loving, but Sister Hodgkin calls him in. I hear yelling and screaming and tears come to my eyes. I stand at the door staring in, and then the door

slams on my face. I can't help it, but I start crying, and Amelia is in her crib, crying. It is being a miserable night.



I wake up on the sofa as the light from the sun peeks through the curtains. I blink and yawn. I look over to see if Amelia is okay. She is sucking on a bottle. Daddy must have given it to her. Then I want to cover my ears. I notice Mama and Daddy are having a heated argument.

Mama says, "His name be Jeffery!"

Daddy says, "I think I ought to name my own son!"

"I don't care. His name be Jeffery, and that is that."

"What about Thomas. Thomas is a good name. My grandfather was Thomas Payne Davies."

"Ye *are* being a pain! Go on. Git out. I want ta be with my Jeffery."

The baby is crying and screaming as though he has no say in the matter.

Daddy stomps out of the bedroom. He yells back, "Ye don't care much about how the baby feels."

Mama yells back, "I don't care much about how ya feel right now!"

I try to sneak out the front door and out of the noise, but Daddy catches me.

"Pearl, where do ye think you're going?"

"Daddy!" I cry, bursting into tears.

He kneels down and wraps me in his arms. "I'm sorry. Your mother is being as unreasonable as ever." He kisses my cheeks, one by one and says, "Go wash up. I'll get cha

some breakfast.”

“Yes, Daddy,” I say, and give him a hug.

I go to the kitchen sink, stand on a stool and pump me some water into the big white bowl. Throwing water in my face makes me feel better, and the smell of bacon and eggs sizzling in the frying pan whets my appetite.



After breakfast, Daddy has to go to work on the farm. He leaves me in charge of Amelia, and I take her outside to play.

Pastors don't get much in the way of pay, so he has to work on the side. I was told we grow rye to make whiskey, and that is what sells in these hills. I don't think I've ever seen Daddy drink, though he visits them that drink. He told me one time that he is in a rocky, hard place. I think that's what he said.

I see a bench underneath Mama's window. I saunter up to it, step up and rest my head on my arms crossed on the window sill. She is in there sitting on her rocker holding the new baby, rocking and singing to him. I can hear it even through the window.

“Down in the valley, the valley so low,

Hang your head over, hear the wind blow.

Hear the wind blow, Dear, hear the wind blow.

Roses love sunshine, violets love dew,

Angels in heaven, know I love you.

Hang your head over, hear the wind blow,

Hear the wind blow, Dear, hear the wind blow.”

Mama sees me staring at her through the glass. I smile and wave frantically. She motions to me to come inside. I grab Amelia and race through the back door to the bedroom. Setting my sister down on the floor, I ask, “What’s ‘is name, Mama?”

“Name is Jeffery.” She holds him up and kisses his face. He slobbers, but she doesn’t see.

I lean on the arm of the rocker and say, “Ain’t that the name of yer first love?”

“Indeed it is.” She hugs the little thing and rocks him back and forth.

“Why’d ya name him that?”

“He’s come back to me.” She holds him out at arm’s length and stares at him. “My love’s come back to me.”

My face crinkles up all on its own. “Mama, yer crackers.”

“I guess I am. I’m crackers all right.” She laughs and smothers the baby with kisses.

I take Amelia into my arms. She’s so warm and cozy. I take her outside into the sunshine where things are more sane. I look back at Mama’s bedroom window and wonder what happened to my ma.

Chapter Two

I don't trust my ma to take care of Amelia anymore, so I take care of her. Mama is so busy caring for little Jeffery that she has forgotten the rest of us. I have Daddy tie Amelia to my back with a strip of old sack cloth so I can follow him up to the next hollow. We come to a wide place in the creek in the bottom land before the next climb up. A beaver pond reflects the white blue of the sky. Both sides of the creek are lined with pine trees. The smell of pine flowers take my breath away. Daddy shows me the beaver dam and explains how that's where the name of damnation comes from. I thought in my mind a nation of beavers, but that is not what Daddy had in mind.

"Seeing how if we sin," he explains, "our progress to Heaven is blocked up like the waters of this creek. See here?" he says with the wave of his arm as he steps up onto the dam. "It makes a little lake, and if we imagine this lake is us in Hell, we feel like we are ready to explode, just pushing against this damnation."

He reaches down and says, "Here. Take a hold of my hand."

I grab his hand and he lifts me and my little sister load onto the beaver dam. "In order to get to the other side, we need to make a dangerous crossing along the dam. This is like following our leader, Jesus, through the perils of life."

So I follow the leader across the dam, but I put my foot on an unsteady limb, and it slips, but Daddy catches me and lifts me back up.

"Just step where I step," he says.

"Daddy," I say, "Why not just go down there and cross the stream?"

“Why, ye would get all wet when ya slip on the slimy bottom, and then where would my sermon be?”

We make it safely across, as there is a couple of big tree trunks that span the dam. Daddy turns back to look at all that water collecting behind the log jam.

“We could sure use that water. It’s just sitting there doing nothing and no good.” He scratches his head, puts his hat back on, and we go on our way to see our neighbors, the Hellewells.



While Daddy is visiting Brother Hellewell, I am visiting his daughter Lu Ann. She has hair-matching red ribbons tying her two pigtails together, wears a blue checkered dress, the one she always wears, and her pig face is covered in freckles. She’s not fat, but she still has a big round nose. It’s been noised about that she was suckled by the pigs in her back yard, seeing she has no mother.

I ask her, “Is it true, Jo Ann, that ye was suckled by a pig?”

“I ain’t no pig, Pearly Q. I is a black injun.” She is calm as a cucumber. I hear she doesn’t get upset easily, but when she does, she always wins in a fight. It’s on account of her injun upbringing.

“Ye don’t look black,” I say.

“And yer brother’s not yer daddy’s neither.”

Now, that riles me up a bit, and I say, “What do ye mean, Hognose?”

“Do I have to teach cha?” We’re sitting on her front porch shucking corn, as I am supposed to be a good Christian and help people. “Everybody knows that that boy ye call a brother is of the devil. It don’t come from yo daddy no-how.”

“That is not a Christian thing to say, Lu Ann.” I don’t get upset either. It only stretches my neck a little. I grab another ear of corn from the bin and go a bit faster as we talk. I guess I want to hurry and get out of there.

“It’s true. That’s what the grownups say.” She stares off into space. “Why, we hear it straight from the midwife herself that its the former low-lander lover come to possess the baby’s body ... mind and soul ... to torment yer poor mother.”

“And my daddy,” I admit. “He’s a mind of it.”

“It will be the breakup of yer family if it’s let to continue.” Lu Ann stared me in the face. “Ye know what I mean.”

“Lu Ann.” The idea catches my breath away. “What *ever* can ya mean?”

“I’m not sayin’ nothin’.”

But I know she is, I could imagine her saying in her mind, “He’ll kill off all ye and have yer Mama all to his self,” and I didn’t want to talk about it.

I turn my attention to my daddy’s voice.

“I know yer property runs down one side of the creek, so half the beaver pond would be yers, Mister Hellewell.”

“If ya could figger it out, Pastor,” I hear Mr. Hellewell say, “we could both benefit from all that water.”



This is when all the bad things in my life start happening. It's the building of that damnation. That's what I call it. The beaver dam is bad enough, like when I slipped trying to cross it, but when Daddy and Mr. Hellewell decide to make the dam permanent, I decide to call the whole thing the Damnation. I just have a feeling deep down in my gut it will come to no good.

I stand there on the side of the creek and watch them pound stakes across the length of the dry side of the dam. Then they pound another set of stakes that make a person think she is seeing double. But then I see they have a good idea, as they can place logs in between each pair of stakes. Ya see, one stake is close to the dam and one is farther out, having room enough for a log in between. The logs stretch from bank to bank. And then there is a number of these couplets across the length of the beaver dam. So now I get all excited about the Damnation and think it's neat. I sit down finally and watch Daddy and Mr. Hellewell pile log after log on top of each other, but before they finish, it starts to rain.

Thunder blasts the sky and shakes the ground. Then it starts pouring. Daddy grabs me, puts me on his shoulders, and we hightail it out of there, both of us laughing. The Spring shower feels good, like a warm bath.

We push the living room door open. It slams against the wall. The living room fills with our laughter. Mama quickly shuts the door against the rain. We meet her sour face.

“Ya don't move nowhere 'till I get a towel er two!” she exclaims.

Daddy and I look at each other and giggle.

As Mama hands us a towel, she rudely says, “And take yer shoes off. Don't go traipsin' that mud all over tha' house.”

“Yes, Ma,” Daddy says as he shuffles the towel over his arms and then over my body.

“An’ don’t call me Ma.” She stands there with her arms crossed.

Daddy goes over to her and puts his hands on her arms. “Tess.”

She freezes stiff. “Pearl! Get my shawl.”

Daddy marches off to the kitchen to make some coffee. I can smell it as he opens the can. Mama goes marching off to the bedroom, slams the door, and I can hear her singing a lullaby to little Jeffery.

Me? I go to the kitchen and share a hot cup with my daddy.



Next day I traipse along with Daddy and Mr. Hellewell. I notice he is shorter and more stocky than my daddy. His face is square, and my daddy’s is more normal, oval in shape, like mine.

We come to the creek and find it swollen and the dam broken. Not even the beaver dam remained. It seems like the Damnation was just run over. The logs and limbs are strewn over both shores of the rushing creek like jackstraws.

“Nobody’s crossing that stream,” Daddy says, holding his hat in his hand as he scratches his head.

“We’re gonna have ta wait a week er two ‘afore we can work on this again,” Mr. Hellewell says with his hands on his hips.

Daddy says, “Ya can’t get back home this way, Mr. Hellewell.”

“I come down across the foot bridge by way of Maccabees’ place.” Mr. Hellewell strikes a match across his jeans and lights his pipe. “The creek’s deeper there.”

Daddy nods his head. They shake hands, Daddy says, “See ya in church,” and Mr. Hellewell salutes with one finger and goes off opposite us.

We go home thinking solemn thoughts. Mainly, I think of how my tummy doesn’t hurt when I am outside with nature and my daddy. Mama used to be a beautiful person. It was because she was happy, but after the birth of Jeffery, she became mean looking and spiteful. I am now always afraid she will pinch my arm for nothing at all. I start believing what Lu Ann said, that Jeffery is of the devil.

Chapter Three

Jeffery is three now. That makes me eleven and Amelia six. We play a lot together. We play house, pioneer women, where Jeff is the baby, of course, and cowboys and Indians. Mama isn't so mean now, but she only has smiles for Jeffery. She doesn't pet anyone but him. I don't know how she and Daddy are getting along, but she is in a family way again. She keeps saying this will be the last one. Daddy doesn't agree, but she is bullheaded.

The Damnation has been built again. This time, better. It is not only made of logs, but Daddy got inspired by the Children of Israel in servitude to King Pharaoh. Stuck onto the dry side of the logs is a wall of mud and straw bricks. All the damage of the storm of three years ago has been cleared away, and there is a small lake above the dam. The lake is calm and reflects the surrounding pines and blue of the sky. Daddy has built a spillway from the edges of the dam. He can close each one by inserting a metal door down into the grooves of each frame. When he wants water for irrigation, something no one in these parts ever heard of, he just raises the doors a bit. If the lake is getting too high, he just takes the doors out. That only happens when it rains hard.

There seems to be a lot of fish in our little lake. People come down from all around, get in their boats, and drop a line or two. Sometimes there are three boats on our lake. That's a crowd. They all talk to each other and spread the news of the nation, world, or whatever happens in these hills.

Mama even brings Jeffery down on some evenings and plays with him on the dock.

One night I go to fetch her. Sometimes she forgets the time. I have to bring a lantern so she can find her way back. It isn't all the way dark, but we don't take any chances with

Mama. I find her on the dock where the boats are tied up. She is sitting on a chair Daddy put down there for her. She is lifting Jeffery in the air, and they are both laughing. She turns when she hears me walking along the wooden deck.

“Oh, it’s you,” she says as I set the lantern down on a little table. She hugs Jeffery as she rises from the chair. “Here, ye take him,” she says as she hands him to me. She goes to pick up the basket with food and blankets in it.

I put Jeffery down, saying, “I’ll help ya with that,” and pick up the basket and things she brought, like his toys, a sailboat and various animals. I turn around to lift Jeffery into my other arm, but he’s not there. I figure Mama picked him up, but her arms are empty.

“Where’s Jeffery, Mama?”

“What do ya mean, where’s Jeffery? He was in yer arms. I gave him to ya.”

I pick up the lantern, setting the basket on the table. We both turn in circles, looking. Jeffery is not there. I look in the boats. He is not there.

“Jeffery? Jeffery?” Mama calls out.

“Je ... ffery! Je ... ffery!” I call out.

We stare at each other. I hear the rattling of the boats as the waves beat against them. We fall to our knees and look down into the water. Mama starts crying, frantically crawling the whole length of the dock. I hold the lantern over to see if we can see him. Then Mama gets up and starts beating on me, crying, “Jeffery! Jeffery! Where is Jeffery? What have ya done with him?” I cover my head with my arms and run away.

“I’ll get Daddy!” I call back.

I burst into the house all out of breath. “Daddy! Daddy! We can’t find Jeffery!”

Daddy is on his feet and heads for the door, but before he can get two steps, Mama, all

wet, is on the porch holding little Jeffery out to him. Her face is all gray and stone-like. “She killed my baby,” she says in a somber tone. “She killed my baby.”

Daddy takes the child and lays him on the kitchen table on his stomach, pumping his arms and pushing on his back in a rhythmic manner. He coughs up water and cries out, “Mama! Mama!”

Mama’s stone face softens. She grabs him up from the table, hugs him and sobs.

Daddy runs out the door, calling, “Get them dry! I’ll get Doc Hammer.”

Mama takes Jeffery into the bedroom and changes his clothes. I hold him while she gets out of her wet clothes, and then she sits down in the rocking chair with him. I cover them both with a warm blanket. She sings to him in a crackling voice as she rocks.

Rock-a-bye baby in the tree top,
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock,
When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall,
And down will come baby, cradle and all.

The two look so exhausted that I walk out of the room backwards and close the door.



It’s morning, and I wake from a restless night. The sun is shining through the curtains, but there is a shadow cast over my heart. I have a sadness I can’t throw off. My heart aches. Last night’s events were all my fault, and I have this wretched pain in my chest. It’s like someone stabbed me and I can’t get the knife out. It hurts so much tears come to my eyes. I grab my pillow and sob. After a while, I force myself to get up. Besides, my stomach is growling.

After putting on my pink night gown I walk past Mama's room, open the door a bit and peek in. Mama is still rocking Jeffery. I walk over to her to kiss her and tell her good morning. She is humming a song. I halt in my tracks. I can't breathe. Time itself stops.

I have seen a dead animal before. I have seen Daddy gut a hog. But what I remember is this dead kitten laying in the tall grass. It was stiff. It's mouth was half open. It's fur was scruffy, and it's eyes were glassy. Our little Jeffery looks just like that.

I ketch my breath, turn, and race out of that room.

"Daddy! Daddy!" I call. He isn't there. I run outside. I find him in the barn.

"Daddy! Come quick. There's somethin' wrong with Mama."

He comes running to the house with me. I remember I didn't mention Jeffery, just Mama.

Daddy stops at the door to the bedroom and looks at Mama. She is just sitting there, rocking her baby. She looks up and smiles at Daddy and then goes on humming her little tune. It's some hymn I heard at church, Rock of Ages.

Daddy takes me by the shoulder and directs me back to the living room. "Doc Hammer looked at him last night. Said he just needed to rest." Daddy's lips tighten, and tears come to his eyes. He wipes his face with his fist, sniffs, and says, "Go get Sister Hodgkin. She will know what to do. She's dealt with a lot of infant deaths."

"Yes, Daddy."

I run through the woods in my pink nighty and bump into Rufus.

"Girl! What are ya doin' out here in yer nighty?" He has his hands on his hips, and he better keep them there.

"Don't have time fer ya, Rufus. Gotta git Sister Hodgkin right away."

“Why? What’s wrong? Yer mother’s not due this month, God knows.”

My anger bursts out, and I raises my fists. I places them on his chest. “God! Rufus. Not now!” I run away. I have no time to beat on him today.

He runs alongside of me. We don’t speak. By the time we get to Sister Hodgkin’s, I am sobbing and blubbering. I burst through her door like it was the normal thing to do.

She is just having breakfast and rises from her table. She puts her coffee down and grabs me, smothering my face in her huge bosoms. I just cry and cry.

Rufus hum haws around with his hands in his pockets.

After I calm down, and as she is petting my head, I sob, “Our dear brother Jeffery died last night.”

“There, there, chil’.” She rubs my back. “Come. Sit a spell. Would ya like some eggs and bacon?”

I consult my growling stomach. “Yes’um.”

“Ye too, Rufus.”

Rufus comes and sits by me. We are both silent and don’t look at each other. Sister Hodgkin serves us breakfast and pours us coffee. Our stomachs might be satisfied, but it is a solemn occasion.

After we eat, Sister Hodgkin grabs her bag and we leap out the door to keep up with her. We rush through the woods, with the trees and bushes slapping us. She didn’t take the path, she just made a beeline straight to our place.

We run up our steps and through the door then stop dead as Sister Hodgkin steps into the bedroom and slams the door. Rufus and I look at each other, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Daddy is also in the bedroom.

Amelia walks over to me, grabs my legs, and asks, “What’s happenin? Why is Daddy and Sister Hodgkin in there with Mama?”

Now, I do want to cry. I kneel down, take Amelia in my arms and sob. Then Amelia starts to cry.

Rufus joins us on the floor and holds us both. “Don’t be scared, y’all. We all believe in the Lard. It were not yer fault, nor hers. The Lard knows. He’ll git ya through. He’ll git us all through.”

Amelia asks, “What happened?”

As I am not over my sobbing, Rufus says, “yer little brother died in the night. He has gone to Heaven to be with Jesus.”

“Is he with Granny too?” Amelia asks.

“Yes, he is with yer Granny too.”

“Did Daddy fix yer breakfast?” I ask Amelia.

She shakes her head.

I stand and take her hand. “Let’s go in the kitchen and I’ll fix ya somethin’.”

I make some biscuits and gravy with the leftover grease from last night. As I roll out the dough, I realize I am making enough for a big family, but we can always eat biscuits. We like them well enough.

As we sit around the kitchen table watching Amelia eat, we see Sister Hodgkin carry out a basket with something rolled in a little blanket. My face wrinkles up and tears come to my eyes as I realize what it is in that basket. Daddy follows her out, and they talk outside. I get up and go peek into the bedroom. Mama is sitting there rocking, holding something in her arms.

I say, “What tha’?”

Mama turns to me and smiles, just like she is a loving mother with a baby in her arms. Chills run up and down my spine as I see that what she is holding is my baby doll. I want to run over there and grab it away from her. It’s mine! But I dare not. I’m too afraid of the consequences.

I go back to the kitchen breathing hard.

“What’s wrong?” Rufus asks.

“I just saw a frightful thing,” I say.

“What?” they both ask.

“My ma is rockin’ my baby doll.”

Amelia runs to the bedroom and peeks in. She comes back laughin’.

I scrunch my eyebrows together. “What cha laughin’ for?” I am so angry because she is making fun of my ma.

“She’s rockin’ yer baby doll all right.” She continues to laugh, and I slap her face.

Rufus says, “Pearl! Ye have no right to do that.”

Just as Amelia starts screaming at me, Daddy walks in.

“What’s the ruckus?”

“Daddy,” says Amelia, “Pearl slapped me.”

“Pearl?” he asks.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” I start sobbing, and go to grab a hold of him, but he turns me around.

“You apologize to your sister, not me.”

I realize I am just upset at the whole situation and grab Amelia. “I am so sorry, little

sister. I hurt so about Mama.”

“I forgive ya, Pearl.” We hug, and she says, “I love ya.”

She is smiling, but I wonder if she just doesn’t understand what’s going on with Mama, or has she lost her mind too?

The day drags on, and we nibble on biscuits. We don’t feel like playing.

Chapter Four

We prepare for the funeral. Daddy and Mama wear their black wedding suits. Mama's gown is ruffly all over. Us girls have to borrow black dresses from neighbors. As we head out for the church, Mama starts asking questions. She has brought her baby doll with her.

"Where are we going, Rowan?"

"A little baby has died," he says.

"Oh, that is sad," she says. "What family is going through such suffering?"

"We will see when we get there, dear."

Daddy doesn't want to say it is our family.

When we arrive, it is a small gathering, for most of the folk have found out that Mama is not in her right mind, and they are embarrassed or ashamed to see her in such a condition. Maybe they are just being polite, so they stay away. Maybe they think being loony is catching, like a disease, or is it that they think Jeffery was an evil spirit, and placing his remains in hallowed ground is sacrilegious, so again they stay away. Anyway, there is only Sister Hodgkin, Mr. Hellewell and his daughter, Pignose, and Grandpa. That's Daddy's daddy. Mama's folks are still in Virginia, but Daddy wrote them a letter, not that they could read it.

It is an overcast day, and there are no shadows, although the sun is bright everywhere. That's what Daddy says Heaven is like. There are no shadows in God's presence. It makes me feel like God is here at the funeral.

Mr. Hellewell places the small casket he has made, carrying little Jeffery, in the earth. Daddy says a prayer.

“Oh Father in Heaven, we beseech thee for this little boy, Jeffery. Please accept this offering we give thee, a child born of misery into misery, only to die before it knew thee. We pray thou wilt take it to thee and let the waters that killed it be its baptism, and its death, our baptism of fire. We know we are not worthy of thy blessings, oh Lord, but we beseech thee to allow us sanctification this day, and let our grieving be short, knowing little Jeffery is with thee. Amen.”

“Rowen,” Mama says, as Daddy and Mr. Hellewell shovel dirt onto the casket to fill up the grave. “I don’t see the family here of this poor little baby. Is it Mr. Hellewell’s? I thought his wife died years ago.”

“We will be its family, Tess. It was our child, now it is his,” Daddy says as he shovels more dirt into the hole without looking at her.

“Isn’t it funny,” Mama asks, “that its name was Jeffery? Why, that’s our son’s name.”

Daddy says in his grief I am sure, “Tess, we just buried our Jeffery. Now leave it be.”

“Why, what *ever* do ya mean, Rowan. Ye are not making any sense. Here is Jeffery, right here.”

She shows him the baby doll. Daddy sobs and goes on covering up Jeffery’s grave.

The neighbors were right for not coming. I am totally ashamed of my mother.

After Daddy and Mr. Hellewell are through, Grandpa Davies goes to Daddy and puts his arm around him. “There, there, son. There will be peace in the end.”

“Yes, Father, I know.”



Home after the funeral, the house is quiet. Daddy is out in the field, working. Mama is in the bedroom with the door shut. God knows what she is doing. Amelia is taking a nap next to me on my bed. I can't sleep. I feel very tired, but sleep has escaped me. I wonder what is going to happen to my ma. I was told she was a lively girl, full of spirit. I guess when her daddy killed her boyfriend, it changed her brain. That's what the school teacher, Miss Bramble said, that people get depressed or go loony because something happens to their brains. Mama used to love me. She would spend time with me and touch me with loving fingers. Now she might as well be gone. She's not there for me, and I hate Jeffery. He did this to her. Lord forgive me, but I'm glad he's gone, but Mama won't let him go. His little devil spirit is still in that bedroom.



Gloom continues at the dinner table. I had to make the dinner. Mama does nothing but sit in the bedroom rocking my baby doll and singing songs to it.

The fried chicken is a bit burnt and hard to chew. The boiled potatoes are okay. I put some dill weed in them. Daddy likes to cut up his pickle into the potatoes. It is more like potato salad then. Amelia just eats whatever is put on her plate. She would put molasses on everything if we don't watch her, so we don't give her a biscuit until after she finishes her plate. Then we all have biscuits and molasses. I won't talk about the green beans.

Chapter Five

Rufus comes around more often nowadays. I appreciate that. He gets my mind off my ma. Here I am sitting on the steps and he comes prancing through the gate carrying a towel.

“Whatcha doin’, Pearl?” He asks with a grin on his face.

“Just sittin’ here, Rufus. I’m too tired to do a thing.” I look at him. I have been feeling hurt because of all my thoughts of Mama and the happenings and goings on with the funeral and all. Then here comes a bright spot in my life, and I actually want to smile, but my smile doesn’t know how to come out and slap itself onto my face.

“Yer eyes are a sparklin’, Pearl,” he says as he sets down beside me. “Why is that?”

“It beats me, Rufus, as I don’t have a mirror to look in and contemplate why my eyes are sparklin’.” I feel like I want to explode every time he is near me. In some way he settles my heart being near, but when he talks, I want to slap him.

“Is it because I am here with ya?”

He puts his arm around me, and I jump up off the steps and land in front of him.

“Rufus!”

He just sits there and smiles.

I put my hands on my hips and wrinkle my brow and ask, “Are ya goin’ to the swimmin’ hole with that towel?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Then can I go with ya? I need to get away from this here house and cool off.”

“Then let’s go!” Rufus jumps up, grabs my hand, and we are out the gate, leaving the darkness in the house.

We run through the woods with saplings and the spring growth slapping us in the face and on our shins. Laughter comes to my throat, and I can't hold it back. I feel a naughty freedom, escaping from all the sorrow and guilt of Jeffery's death. I feel the excitement of stealing something and getting away with it.

Rufus is laughing too. He must think he has me in his grip, but he has another thing coming. We arrive at the swimming hole with water falling from the top of the far cliff. We start taking our clothes off, but then I remember something.

"Rufus. Ye have to get undressed over there. I'll stay behind this bush," I say in a commanding voice.

"Ah, Pearl," he says, a little disappointed. "I've seen ya a lot of times."

"But its different now, Rufus." I peek out a little so I can see him. "Miss Bramble said we can't be naked together any more on account of I am goin' through the change."

"Change? What change?"

His voice sounds a bit irritated, but I press on. "Ye know. I am changin' into a young woman. And here's what's goin' to happen. I will swim around for awhile and then I get dressed and then ye can come into the water, and I will wait for ya, and then we can go home.

"Ahhh, Pearl," he moans. "Yer spoilin' the whole thing. I thought we were goin' to have fun together like we always do."

"I don't care. And we can't kiss any more neither."

I am done undressing and run to the water and jump in. It isn't a small hole, but smaller than the lake where Jeffery drowned, and it's secluded with trees and a cliff.

"Why is that?"

“Well ... well ...” I think and think. Then it comes to me, “because I’m gettin’ a cleavage!”

“Oh, that.” He paused and started coming close to the edge. “I don’t mind.”

“Rufus Jenkins! Ye get back or I’ll never see ya again.”

“Ohhh! Pearl!”

He turns away, and I laugh.

I swim around awhile, and all the troubles of the past few years seem to get washed off me. I am on my back, floating along, and I see an old man on top of the cliff staring at me. I scream.

Rufus is in the water and at my side before I can take another breath.

“What is it, Pearl?”

“Ye get away from me, Rufus.”

“But why did ya scream? I thought ya were hurt.”

“There is a man up there lookin’ at us.” I look back up, but don’t see him anymore.

“Go get my clothes. I want to go home.

“Okay. Ye swim into the shade over there.” He points to some branches that are hanging over the water to the left of the waterfall. “I’ll go fetch yer clothes.”

I hide in the shade, and then there is Rufus with my dress on a stick trying to hold it out over the water for me to grab.

“No, no, Rufus,” I say. He is so illogical. “Put my dress on the rock, then go away and don’t look.”

“Okay.”

Rufus leaves and I get out of the water and slip my dress on. I see that man again in

the same place above the cliff, just searching this way and that, trying to see me. Then he walks away.

I call Rufus, and we head home.

Clouds gather. It starts thundering really loud. Flashes of light and the rain make everything turn black and white. My wet pink dress becomes transparent.

“I see ya now, Pearl,” Rufus says after a lightning flash.

“I’m cold, Rufus,” is my response.

Rufus holds me close. Steam rises from our bodies.

Lightning flashes again with thunder that nearly throws us off our feet.

Old Man Barnes with his balding head shining in the lightning is standing before us. He is all wet and dripping. His round eyes are all white and staring. His long drawn face, unshaven, is smeared with hunger, and he is holding a club. I scream. We turn and run back toward the swimming hole.

I don’t look back, but I can hear his feet slapping the wet ground behind us.

Rufus pulls me into a bush. I’m shivering, even being close to his warm body. Old man Bradford runs past. I hold my breath, scared to breathe. We wait an eternity in the rain, then Rufus pulls me out of the bush. We run toward home, but Rufus takes a detour.

“I know a cave,” he says.

We enter a black hole in the side of a hill. Lightning flashes. I get a glimpse of the inside. There is the smell of an old fire. For a second I see a ring of rocks with charred embers in the center. There are larger rocks to sit on close to the ring. I also see in a second flash some tree branches stacked against the wall. Rufus has been here before. It must be the fort he once told me about.

“I’ll build a fire,” Rufus says. “There be plenty of dried wood in here.”

He strikes some flint he keeps in the cave, and a small fire begins to burn among the ashes. He blows on what looks like shredded bark. He adds twigs that burn brighter and then some dried up branches.

“He’ll surely see us now, Rufus,” I say, cuddling up to the fire.

“Have to take that chance, Pearl. Gotta git yer dry.”

I am getting comfortable and dry. We don’t talk, just sit there warming ourselves. As lightning lights up the sky again, I see the face of Old Man Barnes. He comes in with a snarl. He raises his club. His face is contorted by the orange light from the fire. I back into a corner of the cave, not knowing what to do. His club comes down on Rufus.

“Run, Pearl,” Rufus cries. “Run!”

Old Man Barnes is clubbing Rufus. I rush to the opening, slip out and run home, tears mixing with the rain, leaving a trail of heartbreak.



I don’t realize that Old Man Barnes has left Rufus and has followed me home until I turn around and see him lurking behind a tree in the yard. I jump through the door and slam it shut.

Daddy suddenly has hold of my arms and is yelling at me.

“Where in Hell have you been, Pearl? I have been looking all over the place for you. You left your mother and your sister to fend for themselves. Don’t you know they need you here? They can’t take care of themselves. What have you to say for yourself?” He

emphasizes that question with a shake of my arms.

I bow my head and point to the door. “There’s a man out there.”

“What do you mean, there’s a man out there?”

Daddy lets go and looks out the window. It’s too dark for him to see the old man.

“I don’t see anyone.” He kneels down and lifts my head up, staring me in the eyes.

“What have you been doing?”

“He beat on Rufus terribly,” I sob. I grab my daddy and say, “Oh, Daddy. He may have kilt him.”

“Where is Rufus now?” He asks, changing his voice to give me a little sympathy.

“I don’t know. He ... he’s in a cave.”

“Where’s the cave?”

“I ... I don’t know.” I start bawling on his shoulder. “Oh, Daddy! I don’t know!”



I wake up in my bed. It is morning, and I feel feverish and aching all over. I can’t raise myself. I’m powerfully thirsty. My daddy raises my head and puts a tin cup of water to my lips. I drink a little, and he takes it away. I say, “More, more.” I drink the whole cup. He lets me back down onto the pillow. I don’t have the strength to stay awake. I hear my ma singing a lullaby. I wish it were for me.



I feel my Daddy apply a wet rag to my forehead. That wakes me up.

“What’s happenin’, Daddy? I feel so tired.”

“You’ve had a fever, Baby. You’ve been out for two days.”

I try to get up. Daddy says, “You had better stay in bed and rest. You had a hard night.”

“I feel better now, but I’m all wet like it was a moment ago I was out in the rain.”

“I guess your fever broke. I don’t know. Let me feel your head.” He places his hand on my forehead rather kindly. “Yes. I think you’re going to be all right.”

“I’m mighty hungry for some pancakes, Daddy.”

“Okay. I’ll whip you up some right away.”

Daddy steps out of the bedroom, and I can hear him and Mama talking.

“And what are you up to, dear wife?”

“I heard someone wanted some pancakes, and I come out here to make a batch.”

“I thought ...”

“I feel spring in the air, Preacher Davies, and I wanted ta come out o’ my hole an’ stretch my legs a bit.”

“Well, then. That let’s me off the hook. I have work to do outside.”

After a bit, Mama comes in with a plate of cakes that make my mouth water, but the devil gets between me and her, and I cross my arms and say, “I wanted my daddy to do it.”

“Suit yer self, girl, but I’m leavin’ these here cakes on this tray where ya can git at them.” She walks to the door, turns, and says, “And that’s no way to talk to yer ma.”

I sit on the bed and grab them pancakes. I can’t help but whoof ‘em down and drink all my milk.

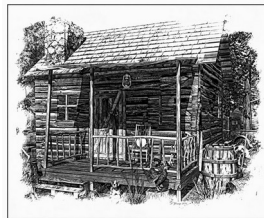
I get up and get dressed. I go to the door of my bedroom and peek out. I am afraid to say or do anything. My ma is out there cleaning house, making a fuss over Amelia, and

whistling. Where did the crazy woman go? I sneak over to her bedroom and spy through the crack in the door. The room looks like she cleaned up before she came out. It's been a mess for weeks. I push the door open a little further until I see the rocker. It has been pushed back against the wall. The baby doll is missing. I look all around. I don't see it. Then, thinking of little Jeffery, my thoughts immediately turn to Rufus. My hand goes to my mouth.

“Rufus! I forgot Rufus.”

“What' say?” my ma asks.

I race out the door. I don't know what to do; try to go find that cave where I left Rufus, or find Daddy and get his help. I decide on Daddy. I race around to the back of the house, go to the barn, out in the field, and no daddy. He must be out visiting. I dare not mention anything to Mama. She wouldn't understand. I decide to run over to the Jenkins' place and see if Rufus is there.



Rufus is sitting outside on the steps and scratching the ground with a stick. He seems so downtrodden. I come through the gate and approach him. I see large black and yellow bruises on his arms and face as though he was protecting his head with his arms, but it didn't work. His eyes were black and blue, and there were cuts and bruises across his forehead and left cheek.

He doesn't lift his head, as though I was not there.

“Rufus?” I ask, sitting beside him. “I was worried about'cha.”

“Yeah?” He still stares at the ground.

“What happened?”

“Ol’ Man Barnes whupped me terribly hard.”

I try putting my hand on his arm, but he pulls it away. I figure it’s just because his arm is sore.

“I’m glad ya made it back.”

“Are ya?” He glances at me and looks down again.



“Yes. I am.” My heart is beating hard, trying to find the right words to make him feel better and pay me some attention.

He raises his voice and says, “I had to crawl home and laid in bed fer several days. Ya didn’t come a’ tall.”

“I lay in bed too fer several days. I had a fever.” I fold my arms with my elbows on my knees and stare at the ground, copying him. “I feel sorry I couldn’t git here sooner.”

He puts his head in his hands. “Oh.” He’s breathing heavy. “Sorry ya were sick.”

“Sorry ya were laid up.”

I scoot over so I can feel his body next to mine. We look at each other and lean our cheeks together. We rotate our faces and we kiss.

“Sorry,” he says.

“Sorry,” I say.

I grab Rufus with my arms, and he cries out, “My ribs!”

I rear back, in shock. “I ... I ... I’m sorry, Rufus.” I put my arm to my mouth. I cry, placing my face on his shoulder, wetting his shirt with my tears. “I thought cha had died!”

“I thought fer sure I was gonner.” He pauses to caress my back. “I guess Ol’ Man

Barnes decided to go after ya instead of kill me.” He puts his hand on my face. “Did he hurt cha?”

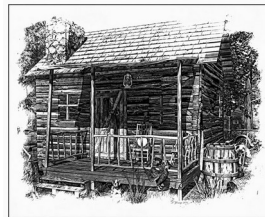
“Naw. I escaped and got to my Daddy a’fore he could.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah. Real good,” I laugh lightly.

He does too.

We go inside and he shows me to his ma, telling her everything is all right.



Sometimes I think Rufus is suffering from some kind of brain damage. He gets angry for any little reason. Maybe I am exaggerating, but I skip over to play with him and he blows up at me for what I think is being kind to him. I find him in his ma’s garden. He reaches for the hoe, and I say, “Let me git it for ya, Rufus.” I am looking out for him because of his broken ribs. That’s what the doctor said it was.

“Damnation, Pearl! I can git it myself.”

He is so stubborn. He insists on working when he is in a lot of pain. It’s just like a man. Old Man Barnes didn’t leave him in one piece. I just think he rattled his brains as well as his ribs. Rufus has always been a kind and gentle kid, always happy and fun loving. Now, all he wants to do is work and pick fights.

Billy Howard comes walking by and Rufus starts calling him names. Billy jumps the fence. He is bigger than Rufus by a hundred pounds. He puts up his dukes, Rufus puts his up, and I have to jump in between them to save Rufus.

“Git out a the way, Pearl,” Billy says.

“Looky here, Billy,” I say, as angry as I can get. “Ye don’t want to do this.”

“I have nothin’ against ya, Pearl. Git out o’ the way.” Billy rocks back and forth on his feet.

“Oh Billy! He’s not ready for ya. He’s been beat up by Ol’ Man Barnes ar’ready.”

“Git out o’ the way, Pearl!” Rufus yells. “I can drop this lamebrain in two seconds.”

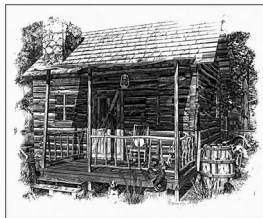
“Don’t call me a lamebrain.” Billy whaps me against my chest and knocks me down.

Then with a single punch across the jaw, Billy slams Rufus to the ground.

As Billy leaves, I cry, “Oh, Rufus! Why do ya punish yerself so?”

He shoves me aside, and in an angry fit, stomps off into his house and slams the door.

I walk home sobbing, saying, “Rufus! Oh, Rufus. Don’t che know I love ya?”



I talk to my daddy about Rufus. “Daddy,” I say, “What’s wrong with Rufus? I try to be kind to him, but all he does is git angry and stomp off into the house. When he is with me or somebody else, he argues and fights. He’s totally different. He used to be so kind and happy. When he’s alone, all he does is sit and pout and fret.”

Daddy is working on the barn, repairing a busted out window. Who knows who or what did it. Its been waiting so long to be fixed. He saws on a bit of wood to build a new frame. I guess he is thinking of an answer. Finally, he says, “Don’t blame yerself, Pearl. Remember he was battered pretty bad. He might be suffering from a brain concussion. Whatever it is, it has him fixed on a grudge against Old Man Barnes. When a mind gets

fixed on a thing and there is no forgiveness, it starts growing on him. It's like the story of the ax that got laid in the crotch of a tree, and as the tree gets older, it just grows right around that ax. Then when a storm comes and lightning strikes, the tree is so weak in that spot that it flies apart. I'm afraid that Rufus is going through such a storm."

"Daddy," I say, "I remember this tree in the woods way up north of here beyond the lake with an old bicycle stuck in the middle of its trunk. It's like some witch put it there, and the person ridin' it is said by some to still be inside the trunk. Is that what really happened?"

"I'm sure," he said, "that someone threw that bike in the tree when it was young and just never took it out." He stopped his sawing and stared at me. "Now what about Rufus?"

"What can I do?"

Mama comes in at that moment and says, "I suggest ya stay clear of 'im. He's been possessed."

"Now, Tess," Daddy came back at her. "It is a medical condition, I'm sure."

"Yer a preacher," she says. "Ye should know about these things."

"I guess I am a little too educated for you, Tess."

"Yer too good fer yer britches, I expect," Mama says.

Daddy takes a deep breath and smiles. Then he takes up the piece of wood he shaped and nails it in place in the window frame.

I look at Mama as she walks back to the house. She is getting pretty big. We'll have another baby in a few days, I expect.



I try once more to visit Rufus. Daddy told me to pray, so I've been praying and praying all the time for Rufus. I'm sure he'll get better. I see him out back of his house. His ma and pa are gone to town, I guess. The wagon and horses are gone. I see Rufus with an ax. He's throwing it at a tree. It sticks hard and fast.

"That's a good throw, Rufus," I say with a little humor.

"What do ya want, Pearl?" he asks as he takes the ax out of the trunk of the tree. He doesn't look at me, just walks back to his throwing place, looking at his ax.

"I see by the marks, ye've been hittin' the mark on that tree pretty regular."

"Out o' the way, Pearl, or ye'll get hurt."

I start walking away from the tree when I feel this whirring wind speed past me.

"Rufus Jenkins!" I scream. "Ye could o' almost kilt me."

"I'm tired o' ya coming over here, Pearl, and gittin' in my way." He stomps past me to get his ax out of the tree.

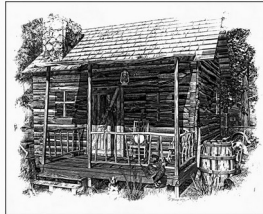
"It's not me yer mad at, Rufus. It' Old Man Barnes. He's the one ye should be yellin' at. Not me."

He stomps over to me holding his ax in the air as if he's going to chop my head off. I cringe. "That's right, Pearl. That's absolutely right. I am going to go find him and put this here ax right through his skull." He runs off into the woods.

"No Rufus. No," I sob. "Daddy! I got to go get Daddy!"

I run home and find Daddy. “Rufus has gone to kill Old Man Barnes!”

Daddy runs off in the direction to where I would expect Rufus to be ... at Old Man Barn’s place, up past the swimming hole. I am sure Daddy has visited him before, trying to get him to come to church. I never have been up there. Everyone knows he is just the meanest man around these parts.



I run back to Rufus’ place. I go inside. The house is empty. It smells of old things. Old rotting wood, old people, and old fat in the fireplace. I think the cabin used to belong to Sister Jenkins's grandmother. It feels lonely inside, so I go sit on the porch steps and wait for someone to show up. My throat chokes up with worry.

I wait the whole afternoon, weeping until my eyes dry up. The smell of the pine woods soothes my soul a bit along with the sound of running water from the creek nearby. People like to build near water, especially a creek where they can keep their food and drink cool. I even pray a bit for Daddy to bring Rufus back home safely.

Maybe Daddy, knowing the good preacher he is, can talk the two out of fighting. Maybe he can calm them down. But sometimes shadows tend to creep up on people, especially ones who wait for good things to happen. Every day has an evening. The shadows grow long and tend to gather into crowds until all there is is darkness.

This evening there is one particular shadow that has come out of the woods, and I hear someone scream. I here myself as if it is some bird flying overhead screaming that Hell has opened its mouth wide open ready to receive me. All I know is that my daddy is bringing me

my Rufus laying there all limp in his arms, all bloody looking. Rufus doesn't look right. He isn't the same as I last saw him. Isn't that a dark slit down his forehead, splitting the bridge of his nose open? A hatchet perhaps would fit nicely into that hole.

The next thing I know is that Daddy is holding me, putting a cold wet compress on my forehead. I wake up and realize what has happened. I wail without recourse to anything resembling comfort. Even my daddy holding me close does not stop the cry of my heart. There is no hole deep enough nor a cavern big enough to cover my sorrow. There is no water that will wash Rufus' spattered blood off my clothes or off my soul. I know now that it took Daddy a long time to separate me from the hold I had on Rufus as I had run and grabbed him out of my daddy's arms.

My sorrow is indescribable. My life is left empty and so it fills up with the cries of my mother complaining that she can't get any work out of me, that she has no one to help her with the housework chores, the cooking, and taking care of the baby. I have somehow missed her having another baby, but I see that Amelia is taking care of him all right. All I can do is lay on my bed and cry myself to sleep, wake up, realize that Rufus is dead and cry again. I see no reason for living. My life has been taken from me, and my daddy complains, "You are just like your mother!"

I have to agree with him there, but all I want is my Rufus. I can't have him. I will just lay here and die, and may my bones be buried with his.

Chapter Six

There are stories going around that I am a lazy bum, and maybe I am. I just feel too depressed to do anything. There have been complaints by some church goers that I have been seduced by the devil, and so I never show up anymore. Why, I follow my daddy to our good friends the Hellewells. I sit on the porch because I feel grouchy, and I hear Mr. Hellewell say, “If she were my daughter, I would whap the devil out o’ her.”

“Well, now,” my daddy answers, “that’s the difference between you and me. I respect my daughter’s feelings. She will come out of it someday soon, I dare say.”

Pignose comes and sits beside me and says, “I here ya don’t come ta Church no more, ‘cause ya been dancin’ wif the devil.”

If I were in my right mind, I would raise my hand and whop her in the face with my fist, but I don’t have that kind of energy anymore. I just look at her and say, “It must be true, Piggy, ‘cause God has forsaken me fer sure.”

She shamefully looks at the ground as though she knows she has done wrong, scratches the dirt with a stick, looks up at me shyly and asks, “Why is that, Pearl?”

“Don’t cha know my Rufus is daid?”

I turn and walk away into the woods. I don’t want her to see my tears.



I go to the most magical place I know, where the bicycle has been swallowed by the tree. It is the biggest pine tree around. My arms reach only halfway around the trunk. Most

of the other trees are pretty young. A big man could put his two hands around them. I go up and hug my tree. I call it mine because I have adopted it. I have heard no one else talk about this tree, so I own it. I keep it private and don't tell others about it. I sit on the ground, lean against my tree and ponder.

I guess I have finished crying. I'm all dried up inside. I feel like that bicycle. Life has caught me in a vice grip and won't let go of me. I yelled at my daddy the other day and told him God was to blame for everything, for my mother losing Jeffery, for me losing Rufus. I don't really blame God. I know the devil did it. I just was letting off steam like a tea kettle. All I can do now is breathe heavy.

I hear something. There is a rustling of leaves. A twig breaks. The air is so still that the "crack" sounds loud to my ears. I stand up and look around. There's a body poking its face out from behind a tree over there. He's sporting an old straw hat and blue denim overalls.

"Hey you!" I call out. "This here's my place and my tree. Ya hear?"

He calls back, as he steps from behind the tree, "I thought it was my place. I didn't know anyone else was here." His voice is nice and pleasant. "I often come here when I want to do some thinkin'."

I pick up a rock and throw it at him. "Git outta here. I found it first."

"I'm goin'," he says. "Don't throw anymore rocks."



Mama and Daddy take us to Church early every Sabbath. That gives me time to sneak out and go into the woods. I usually go to my spot at the bicycle tree, but today, I see a

familiar figure. I hide around the corner of the church to spy him out. I peek to see who it is. He looks straight into my eyes and smiles! I run away. It was him that was in the woods. How dare he look at me like that. I feel so angry. I feel defiled. My sacred friendship with Rufus has been marred in some awful way. I know my face is red. I can feel it flush, and tears come to my eyes. I finally come to my tree, sit down and bawl.

“Rufus, Rufus,” I whisper.



After a while, I think it time to go back to the church. Most of the people have gone down to the altar by now and are saved again. There is usually a core of the congregation that assemble at the altar every other Sunday, or at least every month and go through the praying and crying and being saved. They come out of the church all fresh and alive. They are kind to each other until another month comes when they are at each other's throats again. It then behooves my daddy to preach Hell, fire, and damnation to scare them sinners back to the altar.

I don't have a watch, but I can pretty much tell the time. I seem to have a clock inside of me. I arrive just as the people are coming out the door. I go to the back of the church where I usually climb in the rear window and walk down the isle to the front door so everyone knows I have been to church. But who's kidding who? Why do they always complain about me being missing during the meeting?

As I have one leg in the window and one leg out, I hear this wolf whistle. I turn my head and fall out the window, showing my bare ass, as my dress has covered my head.

“Here,” the guy says, “Let me help ya up.”

I stand up and snap my hand out of his, and as I straighten my white fancy dress covered with red rose buds, I ask as mad as I can be, “What in the Hell are ya doin’ back here?”

“I just come out back to have a smoke.” He takes a cigarette out of his front pocket and lights it by striking the match on his pants leg. “What’s ya doin’ climbin’ in the winder?”

I screw my face up to show how angry I am and say, “I left my shoe in there. Now I have to do all that climbin’ again to *git* it!”

“Here,” he says as he reaches in through the window. He is pretty tall. He puts the whole half of his body in, comes back out with my shoe and says, “May I introduce ya to yer shoe?”

I swipe it out of his hand, frown, and say, “Thank ye.” I don’t know what to do now. I might as well walk around the church instead of through it. My timing has been messed up.

“May I walk ya around?” He reaches out to take my arm, but I refuse him.

“Ye want to see my ass again?” I ask, jerking my dress.

He covers his face with his arm, holding onto his cigarette with that hand. “No, no!”

“Then leave me be!”

I walk out to the front, still showing my anger.

My daddy catches my arm. “Where have you been, young girl?”

I look back and see the tall boy. “I was bein’ molested by him!” I point to the guy.

“I’m innocent,” he says. “I was just back there having a smoke.” I could see he had gotten rid of the cigarette. “I seen this young lady in trouble and tried to help her out.”

“I fell through the winder,” I said.

“What were you doing in the window?” my daddy asked.

“Hell if I know!” I say very sassy.

Daddy slaps me, I hear laughter, and I run back to my tree.

As I run, I can hear Daddy trying to calm the people who are laughing at me.



I am spending more time at my bicycle tree, which I am going to call my wailing tree, more than I spend at home. My feelings are mixed up. All I can think about is this new guy. Where did my Rufus go? And then there is my daddy. I still feel the sting of his slap. Why did he do it? He is usually a kind and gentle man, but it seems to me that when he has to be the pastor, he has to be the big man and show off in front of the congregation. Maybe when he was a little boy he liked to act out in front of people.

Just then something happened to ruin my life all over again. My daddy shows up stomping through the woods. I yell out, “How could ye!” and hide my face in my folded arms resting upon my knees. My bosom is heaving, and my heart is beating hard. I stare down at my cleavage. Now that would be an interesting conversation to have with my daddy. I look at my dress partly open and realize I must have lost some buttons when I fell out the window.

“Pearl, I have had just about enough of this!” he complains as he comes and stands over me. “I will not whip you like other fathers would, but I sure am tempted to sell you to Old Man Barnes. You know? He offered me two hundred dollars to take you off my hands. It was all the money he had.”

This is enough! I jump up with tears in my eyes and exclaim, “Ye wouldn't!”

Daddy grabs me and holds me close, and says, “Honey, I wouldn't give you away ... not for the whole world. I am just very worried about you being alone out in the woods all by yourself with a man like Old Man Barnes wandering about. I wish you would stay close by.”

Now he is being nice again. This is very confusing for a young girl going through the change.

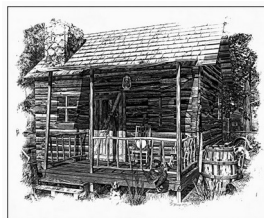
As we start walking home again with his arm around me, I ask, “Daddy, how did ye find me?”

“It's not too hard to figure out what place you would think is the most magical place in the world, not with your imagination.” He gives me a hug. “Besides. You know that tall young man you were with earlier?”

“Yes. He's a yahoo if I ever saw one.”

“Well, he's Tom Merkle's oldest boy, Jack, back from the war. He told me where you were likely to be.”

I am fuming. I cross my arms and growl and huff, “Oh!” and Daddy just laughs.



“Pearl?” I hear my Mama call me.

“Yes, Mama,” I answer from the bedroom.

“Come here. I need ya to go to the store for me.”

“Comin’ Mama.” I try to stay away from her grouchy face, so I enter the kitchen with

my eyes on the floor.

“Ye look at me, Pearl!”

I look up and try to hide my feelings, try not to notice the snarl on her lips.

“Here.”

She gives me a couple quarters, two dimes, a nickle and some pennies. That adds up to dollar. I learned that in school.

“I need a bag of sugar. I’m makin’ yer daddy a golden cake. It’s his birthday come Saturd’y.”

Now my face lights up, and I grab my Mama and give her a squeeze. “Thank ye! Oh thank ye!”

“None o’ that. None o’ that,” she says, breaking loose. “Now git goin’.”

She whops my behind as I leave, saying “Bring back some black licorice or hard candy for ye and the kids.”

Glory be. She must be feeling good. I feel so light, I skip down to the road. I wrap the money in my hanky, tie a knot in it and put it in my pocket. I haven’t had one of my mother’s cakes since little Jeffery was born. It seems a lifetime.

I sing an old song as I walk down the road toward town.

Were I sold on Indian soil,

Soon as the burning day was clos'd,

I could mock the sultry toil

When on my charmer's breast repos'd.

I would love you all the day.

Ev'ry night would kiss and play,

If with me you'd fondly stray

Over the hills and far away.

(From Over the Hills and Far Away)



I can remember when Main Street downtown still had wooden sidewalks. With the overhang of the general store, it seemed like you were visiting a friend and you were on their porch. Now concrete made it so impersonal. The overhang is still there, but I smell cement dust mixed with the scent of spices and new clothes.

As I walk down the street, I pass the livery. It smells of newly tanned leather and horse manure (pronounced “manuer”). The smoke shop with its strong flowery tobacco smell nearly knocks me off my feet. You don’t have to smoke the stuff in order to feel like you are floating on air. You just have to pass the shop and take a deep breath. Before the general store is the barber shop. Cut hair and rose water is another pleasant smell. But again, the concrete dust changes things. I have to remember how they used to smell.

I am daydreaming, holding onto the post at the general store with my arm wrapped around it when I get woken up suddenly by a familiar voice. It’s like getting slapped. I now associate that voice with such an incident.

“Hi, little girl,” he from the church and from my private place says.

“I am not a little girl,” I say, holding onto my straw hat with a ribbon. I stare up at his atrocious but handsome face. It seems to have grown a thin little mustachio below its nose. I screw my face up to let him know how unpleasant it is to see him.

“Goin’ into the store?” he asks.

“I come to get some sugar, if it were any of yer business,” I say smartly. And I do mean the slapping kind of smart, as I get this overwhelming feeling that I want to slap him.

“Mind if I join ya?” he asks, offering his hand. “I may find some sugar in there also.”

I ignore his hand and say, “It’s a free country ... Jack...Ya can if yer a wantin’ too.” I prance on in through the swinging glass doors. “And don’t be fresh!”

The inside of the store still smells like new clothes and fresh leather boots, and as I pass the candy counter, sugary goodness of all kinds of fruit and spice.

I get out my hanky, undo the knot, and slap down all my change. Mr. Hogg, wearing his white apron, scratches his bald head and his big round nose. His fat jowls bespeak his name. He booms out, “What can I git che, young Pearl of the western mansion?”

I once told him I wanted a huge mansion out west when I grew up, so he has always remembered that.

“I need a bag o’ sugar. My Mama’s makin’ a golden cake fer my daddy’s birthday Saturd’y.”

“That’s mouth watering,” Jack says behind me.

I give a kick behind me and hit his shins. “Quiet!” I say.

“Oh!” he says.

“What?” Mr. Hogg asks.

“Nothin’, Sir. I thought we were alone.” I turn my head back to Jack and give him a smirk.

Mr. Hogg leaves me alone with this scoundrel. My heart pounds, and it’s hard to breathe. I turn to him and ask, “Why don’t cha just go away?”

“Wow,” he says, “and spark too, along with all that beauty.”

I'm so confused. I just stand there and fume. I take a deep breath. I decide. "Ya may as well come fer dinner Sunday, seeing as how I can't git rid of ya. Then ye'll see if ye can stand the sight o' me."

"Will there be any cake left?"

"I doubt it."

"Well, Missy," Mr. Hogg says, as he returns with a two pound bag of sugar. He wraps it up with paper tape. "Here ya go, and here's yer change."

"Mama said I can git some candy too. She likes the licorice sticks. How many pennies do I have?"

"There's fifteen cents here, Missy," said Mr. Hogg as he pushed out each penny with his fat finger.

"Fifteen," I say, my eyes expanding. "That's a lot o' candy."

"Don't want to ruin yer appetite ... Missy," Jack interjected.

I try to ignore that, thank Mr. Hogg, and pick out several hard candies and licorice. He wraps it all up, and I march out as fast as I can, carrying my packages in my arms. Jack just walks in a slow stride along side me and goes the same speed. I shake my head. He is just a mysterious piece of glue that has stuck to me, like bubble gum under my foot.

Chapter Seven

Saturday was a mixture of holiday feelings and solemnity as Amelia and Tommy celebrated their father's birthday by running around and through the house in their Sunday best. Mama did her duty as a mother and wife, baking the cake along with a nice roast beef and potatoes. It was a circus.

It was hard to do the tasks I was put to. I had to scrub the floors of the whole house and the table and counter tops in the kitchen while skirting the constant traffic. Then there was the dusting, beating the rugs, and making the beds. We wanted the house to look special when Daddy came home from visiting and working at the Church. I may have been doing these chores for a good cause, but I felt I was being punished for inviting Jack for Sunday dinner.

When I got the courage to tell Mama, she complained, "Who made ye a queen that ya can make yer poor old ma a slave and do yer biddin'? Here's what ya will be doin' around here from now on." Thus the tasks at hand, getting ready for Daddy's birthday as well as the guests, or, a very special guest for Sunday.

All this work caused a remarkable change in me even though I at first resented it. I got out of the doldrums. I was singing and laughing with the children. I even swung Tommy in the air as he tried running through the living room from Amelia. But Mama interrupted. "This is not a circus. We got work to do, young lady."

Young Lady. I pondered that. I had been called a "young lady." I now have a new title other than slave, maid, wench, or turnspit. I have ears. I know what I have been called. My new title perked me up a bit and warmed my heart, as I knew that now a man was in love

with me, and not a mere boy like Rufus. I was sad he was gone, but my heart has taken a turn, and I can't wait for Sunday. But my mama's golden cake might help.



Daddy comes home and throws a blanket on the festivities as he did some inviting of his own. He has brought old Nancy Weems and her spinster daughter Rebecca. Sister Weems is a gentle old woman. You can see in her eyes that she had been a beautiful but fragile girl, yet she had good blood to survive out in these woods. Rebecca is tall and skinny like her ma. It seems like they don't eat much. That is good, as I don't want them to eat much of that cake. I am hoping to save some for Jack.

We all sit down at the table after Mama and Daddy have some words in the bedroom. I think Daddy won. We all show our politeness by smiling at each other. I am sure these girls are embarrassed. I can't say I cleaned the house up, that would be forward, but I am proud that I did. It would also be presumptuous of me. After Daddy came home and looked around and smiled, I was going to tell him how I had cleaned up the place for him. That's when Mama pulled him into the bedroom. But now we are all sitting around the table in our Sunday best and smiling, and Daddy says the blessing over the food.

Under other circumstances, we children would be vying for his attention, wanting him to open the birthday gifts before we start eating. But everyone is mum. Our lips are sealed except for scarfing down the delicious roast and potatoes. We also have green beans. Like Daddy, I like mine overcooked, but just to be nice to Mama, I eat them crunchy green things.

Polite conversation does not get interrupted by mouthfuls of potatoes and gravy. The

adults seem to have forgotten the manners we children have to abide by. We can't speak with our mouths full.

Mama has to remind Amelia and Tommy, "Ye have to clean yer plates if ye want cake."

With that announcement I see Rebecca drool. I can't stand it. I can hardly breathe thinking that somebody else is going to have some of that golden cake. Now my mouth is watering just thinking about it. I have to swallow several times after my mouth fills up. I don't let it drip down my chin like our guests do.

"Pearl!" my mama commands, "Clear the table and I will get the special dessert dishes."

I collect the plates while my mind fills with the memory of the caramel flavor of Mama's favorite cake with white icing. I licked some of that icing with my finger from the bowl when I watched Mama ice the cake earlier. All my attention is on that cake, when all of a sudden, I with an armload of dishes, run right into Mama carrying the cake. I almost knock her down. She launches the cake into the air, and it lands right in front of Daddy. He caught it and saved us from a disaster. The children and guests laugh, but Mama, thinking the worst, is slapping me with both hands, like a person slapping water while drowning and is crying like a baby. Daddy has to rescue me. He takes Mama back into the bedroom. She comes out calm and unruffled, Daddy, behind her.

We all sigh as Mama finally cuts the cake and serves each one a slice lying on its side on the small blue plates. When a plate is placed before me and the aroma rises to my nose, I don't want to eat it, just savor the goodness. I want it to last, but it doesn't. I eat it so fast, I am surprised it is all gone. I want to cry, but that night, I lay in my bed with the taste of that

cake still on my tongue and I savor it again.

I wake up with a start. I have forgotten to give Daddy his birthday present. How selfish I am. I have learned to darn socks and have a pair of them in some tissue under my pillow. *Sigh*. Tomorrow is another day.



In the morning, the first thing I hear is, “Wake up, girl. Ya overslept. We have ta git to Church. Git the baby ready. I have to git Amelia bathed.”

“Oh, Mama,” I yawn and stretch. “Oh no. Where’s Daddy?” I grab his present and go to take it to him.

“He’s long gone. Got up early and went to the Church,” she calls from the kitchen.

I go in Mama’s and Daddy’s bedroom. It smells like baby diaper. Tommy is standing up in his crib and cries when he sees me. I put down the darned socks on the bed and carefully take Tommy’s diaper off. He grabs hold of my hair trying to climb out.

“I’ll gitcha out in just a minute,” I say as I untangle myself from his fingers. He just cries louder.

I put the diaper in the pail and go to the kitchen, grab a rag, dip it in Amelia’s bath and wring it out.

“Hey, this is my bath,” Amelia complains.

“Tough!” I say as I return to the bedroom.

“Girls!” Mama warns. “Take care ‘er somebody’s not goin’. Ye’ll have ta stay here an’ clean up the house.” She pauses. “I have a good mind to leave Pearl here. This house is a

mess.”

I get Tommy all washed up and dressed and put him on the floor. I put his wet bed clothes in the washtub out back. After Amelia steps out of the bathtub I strip and step in.

“Whatcha doin?” Mama asks with her face all screwed up. “ya took a bath yesterd’y.”

“I gotta wash Tommy off me,” I say.

“Wall hurry up,” Mama calls from the bedroom. “We’re late already.”



We finally make it to Church. The choir is singing. One of the choir members motions to me. I remember I promised, so I go up there and start singing with them only to wind up singing the last stanza and we all sit down. Mama sighs heavily to let everyone know how disappointed she is for being late. Daddy prays and we all start singing *Rock of Ages*, *Bringing in the Sheaves* and a few more to get us in the mood for Daddy’s preaching.

While we sing, my eyes gaze around the room, and I spot Jack. He winks at me and I quickly look at my song book. It sure is hard to sing when you’re breathing heavy and your heart is beating fast.

I sit through Daddy’s preaching and saving at the altar with my head down. I am afraid to look up. Then I find myself the only one in the choir seats, and the people are filing out the front door. I smell cigarette smoke coming through the window to my left. It must have woke me up. I frown and stare at the window only to see Jack with his head poking through the window, and he’s resting his folded arms on the window sill. He’s holding his cigarette with his lips and puffing out smoke into the chapel like a dragon from Hell laughing at all us

churchgoers.

“Jack Merkle!” I say in a huff. I stomp down from the choir and stand in front of the window with my hands on my hips. “How dare ye dirty my Daddy’s church!”

“Is dinner still on?” he asks with a grin.

“If ya wanna smoke, go out back. Don’t bring it in here.”

He stares at me and says, “Hum?” still asking the question.

I bow my head and fiddle with my purse. “Yes,” I say. I feel conquered.

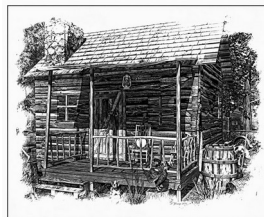
He throws his cigarette butt down and says, “I’ll meet cha out front.”

I walk down the aisle fearing what’s going to happen. Is this the fellow I am going to marry? I don’t think it in words, but I know I’m worried about it. Coming out the door, Jack takes my arm. “I’ll walk ya home.”

“Dinner’s not ready yet,” I say, “and we are likely to have leftovers.”

“I’m not expecting a fancy restaurant,” he says, “I just want to be with ya.”

As we walk along, I don’t notice where the family went. It seems like Jack and I are the only people on the earth, like Adam and Eve.



I sit at the table biting my lips while Daddy says the prayer over the food, over my favorite chicken. I loved that chicken and Mama knew it. She killed it just for spite and tells me we needed it for Sunday dinner. She wanted to impress Jack she can make a good fried chicken. Last night’s beef roast would have tasted just as good or better for a man. “Men like fried chicken on Sundays,” she had said. I am embarrassed. How can I hide my tears from

Jack? I let one drop on my cheek during the prayer and wipe it off before Daddy says “Amen.”

“The dinner smells wonderful, Sister Davies,” Jack said. He is sitting opposite my ma.

“Thank ye, dear,” Mama said.

“We had a better one yesterd’y,” I said under my breath.

“What did ya say, dear?” Mama asked.

“I just said this dinner tastes as good as yesterd’y’s.”

“Thank ye. Ya know yer mother knows how to cook fer guests,” she says.

I bet I can do better. At least I won’t cook any of my daughter’s pet chickens.

“Ye know how to make excellent potatoes and gravy, Ma’am,” Jack says.

My pupils flick from corner to corner as I listen to this cantering of conversation. It boils my insides.

“I am glad your parents have the privilege of your safe return from the war.” My daddy is wise in changing the subject.

“Luckier than some, Sir,” Jack responds, clearing his throat a little. No doubt he is embarrassed at Daddy bringing up this subject.

“What was it like?” Daddy asks.

“I’m sure, Daddy,” I say, “Jack doesn’t want to rehash that subject.”

“It’s all right, Pearl,” Jack assures me.

“May I say, it was hell. I am just glad the Lord spared me, Sir.”

I was so focused on Jack and Daddy talking about the war that I forgot and took a bite of my chicken’s leg. When I realized it, an unwanted tear slid down my cheek. Jack reached over and wiped it off with his napkin.

“It is a sad thing, Pearl, to see yer friend lose his life. I think now ya know how I feel about my friends.”

How can I tell him I was crying about the chicken? Not Rufus. But now that he mentions him, he’s opened a can of worms and I can’t swallow the chicken. I start sobbing and have to say, “Please, may I be excused?” Mama and Daddy just stare at me. I rush off, out of the house and up to my bicycle tree.



I guess my chicken was the last straw. I sit under my tree and weep. Jack sneaks up on me, sits down beside me, and I let him. I lay my head against his arm.

“I thought I had let him go, but his ghost is still hangin’ around.”

Jack puts his arm around me, and I lay my head on his chest. I hear his heart beating and his lungs breathing.

“Jack, how do I git over this?”

“It becomes dirt under yer fingernails after awhile. Ya try to wash it away. I did after I came back, but I haven’t visited a bar since I’ve been home.”

“Maybe it’s because there isn’t one in town.”

“Well, I’ve been offered a lot of whiskey from all the neighbors, but somehow it belongs out there somewhere, not here.”

“That’s nice.”

We sit there in silence smelling each other. His nose is on my head. I smell his sweat, his cigarettes, and French cologne. I guess he picked that up in Europe. I tuck him away into

my memory by these smells. Everyone has a different smell. His smell is comforting to me. Then he kisses me on the top of my head as I place my arm around his leg.

“Ya want to marry me?” I ask.

I feel his face go red. He clears his throat. “Hmm, yes.”

“Daddy can do it.”

“I guess he can.”

I don't have to be with Jack for a long time. I mean, he doesn't have to come calling or take me to town several times before I know he is the right man for me. A girl just knows. That's what Mama told me. He's the one.

Chapter Eight

I am struggling with all the people in our little house. Dad seems to have invited everyone in the Church. They are not all here at once, but they keep coming and going, eating our food, breaking our dishes and the nick-knacks on the walls, and I am getting really angry cleaning up after them. I am so frustrated that I wake up. It was a dream, and I am in bed. But what is this? Someone has grabbed me and put their hand over my nose and mouth. I smell ether, like when I had my tonsils out, when I try to breathe. My arms are held down tight and I can't scream! I start kicking, but I go numb all over. I am being dragged through my window when everything goes black.

I wake up in a strange bed. It stinks like old blankets that haven't been washed for 20 years. I sit up and look around. There is a tall elderly man with his back to me. It is a small cabin. There is a fireplace on the other end. He seems to be cooking something that smells like beans. The only furniture is a table and a couple chairs, and a dark wood cupboard and chifferobe wardrobe against the back wall to my right. A loaf of bread and a bottle of liquor sit on top of the table. There is a door to my left in the center of the wall with small windows on either side. I can see there is a padlock on the door and the two windows don't slide open.

I notice I am naked. I cover my chest with the blankets.

The man turns around with a flat bowl of beans. It is Old Man Barnes him who killed my Rufus! I suck in my breath. I watch him set the bowl on the table.

"I already et," he says. "Here's some fer ye if ya want."

I try to talk and say, "Where are my clothes?" but my chin is shivering.

He points to the chifferobe and smiles, showing several missing teeth. "The dog done

tore up yer dress, but ye can find a dress in thar. Belong to my wives.”

I don't move, and my mouth is clamped shut. I am shaking all over, and I need to pee.

He grabs his rifle from between the cupboard and the chifferobe. “I'm gonna go out. Ya can't get out o' this place, so don't try. And don't go messin' things up er I'll slap the Hell out o' ya. Yer my wife now,” and pointing to a bucket of water near the door, says, “I expect ya to clean up the place 'afore I get back.” He paused. “Ya can eat first.”

I get the gumption to say, “I gotta pee!”

“Thar's a can on the other side o' the bed.”

I watch him unlock the padlock, put the key back inside his pants pocket, and carry his gun outside. When he slams the door, I quickly go to open the door. It's stuck. I hear a muffled voice say, “It's locked.” There's also a dog barking.

After I pee in the can and clean up the floor with some pages from the Sears and Roebuck catalog nearby, I creep up to the chifferobe. I open it slowly as if there may be ghosts, or at least a dead body inside. It smells like mothballs.

I find a nice red dress with little bitty blue flowers covering it. The short sleeves have a thin rim of lace around the ends. I slip it on. It fits a little tight, as I am somewhat chubby. I don't think it will rip. Mama said I never lost my baby fat.

I sit down to a nice bowl of warm beans and ham hock. He is a good cook, I give him that much. But I need to think about escaping. After finishing, I wash my bowl in the pail. There is a dishtowel hanging on one of the lower doors of the cupboard. I dry the bowl and put in up with other bowls like it. Looking in the drawers, I find a butcher knife big enough to defend myself. I take it out, close the drawer with a slight jingle and place the knife under the pillow on the bed.

Out of habit I make up the bed and replace the knife under the pillow.

I look out the window. The scene is of a damp and dreary day. It is overcast and wet, just the way my heart feels. The forest is dense with dark green trees and foliage. I have not been up here before and if I did escape, I wonder if I would get lost. I turn around and sigh. Better get cleaning the house. Nothing else to do. He doesn't have any books.



I hear a rattle at the door. I have been sitting at the table with nothing to do for some time now, worrying what will happen when Old Man Barnes comes home. Now that he's here, I stiffen up. He opens the door and slams it. He throws a half dozen dead squirrels on the table, and I jump.

“Here,” he says. “Clean these up.”

He bends down. His face gets close to mine. I guess he is trying to kiss me or something, but I turn as if to get out of the chair. I do stand up and he grabs my shoulders.

“That dress belonged to my first wife, Dora.”

He put his gun back in its place and flipped his hand toward the cupboard. “Ye'll find a butcher knife in the drawer.”

Now I'm in trouble. Instead of going to the cupboard. I go to the head of the bed, facing him all the way.

“Darn girl! What'er yer up too. I said clean them squirrels!”

I try to sneak the butcher knife out from under the pillow and put it behind my back, all the while staring at him. After I get the knife, he approaches. He raises his hand. “Go on, 'er I'll slap 'e.”

I sneak by the windows and door, keeping the front of my body toward him and slide over to the table.

“Go on then,” he says.

I sit down, whimpering, afraid he will say something about the knife. I take it from behind my back and start gutting the first squirrel. My thoughts have gone back to the day he killed Rufus, worrying he will treat me the same way.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha!” he laughs. “I see what cha done. Ya already had the knife to slit my throat in the night. Well, ya won’t do it! ya won’t git the chance. It all comes out now, and ya failed.” He laughs again like some old witch. “Ye cook? Yer ma should have taught cha by now. If not, I got plenty of ideas on how to cook squirrel.”



I roast the squirrels on a spit over the coals in the fireplace, shaking plenty of salt and pepper on them. I hadn’t had any food since breakfast, and my stomach is growling. Old Man Barnes watches me, grinning, while leaning his chair against the corner next to the fireplace. I sigh and shudder. *Everything will be all right* I tell myself.

“Sure smells good,” he says. “Beans and squirrels is what I lives on.”

It’s a wonder he hasn’t lost his teeth on such fare. I notice that his teeth look ground flat and don’t have any sharp edges, like cows teeth. He must grind his teeth in the night.

“Ya know my daddy is lookin’ fer me right now,” I say.

“And he’ll never find ya neither. This here’s not my regular cabin, ya know. It’s two valley’s and a mountain over from where ya lived.”

Lived? I feel faint, like my spirit has already left my body, him keeping me here like a

pet.

We eat beans and squirrel. It is delicious, but I can't let him know that. I sit at the table afterwards and stare into space, not knowing what to do. If I could get out, what do I do with a mean dog just beyond that door? Earlier, the dog laid himself down, leaning on the door. I heard him do that, and I can hear him panting. I imagine him to be a big black dog with his red dripping tongue hanging out. He's waiting out there for his master or his next meal, which could be me.

With the overcast sky it is dark early, and there are only the embers in the fireplace to see by.

Old Man Barnes gets up after having a couple glasses of whiskey. "Wiel, time fer bed, doncha think?"

After he undresses, I just stand at the foot of the bed. I don't want to get in there with him. I would rather lie on the floor like the dog.

"Ya can't wear that dress ta bed," he says. "Hang it up so it won't git dirty."

I undress and face the bed, placing my arms across my chest.

"Awe, come ta bed. I seen ya a plenty a time."

"At the swimmin' hole, I'll bet."

"Yeh, yeh ... at the swimmin' hole."

I remember seeing a snake hypnotize a little bird once. That is what I feel like, that little bird, so I crawl into bed on the window side right into the jaws of the snake. I don't resist. I cuddle up in the covers just shivering with fear. I feel the snake creeping through the covers and it lands on my side. It has five fingers; it touches my stomach.



I must have passed out sometime last night, but I remember getting up before Old Man Barnes and walking over to the fireplace. A thought came to me. I looked up through the chimney. I saw stars. I formed a plan. I would have to wait for the old man and his dog to leave. I got back in bed and pretended to be asleep until the old man left. I listened to the dog barking until the sound faded away as the dog followed its master.

I open my eyes now and sit up. I feel dirty and want to bathe, but I am locked up in the house with only a bucket of dirty water and the rag I used yesterday.

I get up and go over to the fireplace to get warm. There is still beans in the pot, so I gobble them up. I spot a rake near the fireplace. I wonder if he kept my shoes. I will need them to get up that chimney. I go to the chifferobe and look in the bottom. I don't see my shoes, but there are several lady's shoes to choose from. I find some that fit good enough. I put on that red dress, get the rake and rake out all the coals. With my new shoes on the hearth it is not too hot. I use the dishrag to grab the hangers in the chimney and climb up, then it is just slippery river rocks. They are covered with creosote, tar from the wood smoke. My mama makes cough syrup from it.

The shoes aren't working. They just slide off the rocks. I hold myself in place by pushing my feet against the wall of the chimney with my back up against the opposite wall. I take off my shoes one at a time, holding them in my mouth by the shoe strings. Then, pushing with my hands and my feet, I wind up at the top. I can't exactly fit, but I get my arms out first and the creosote does the rest. I am just like a greased pig. My mama won't like this black girl coming into the house. I will have to go to the swimming hole and wash

off.

I try scampering down the chimney, but I fall onto my back. That hurt. It almost knocks the breath out of me. I should have tried jumping from the roof. Lucky for me I fell onto a grassy mulch. I could lie here and dream, but I hear the barking of that dog in the distance.

I get up and run, forgetting my shoes.

It's downhill, uphill, and downhill again if I remember correctly.

I don't want to look back, but I hear the sound of flames licking the forest green. Just for a second, I turn and see smoke rising up from where I left the cabin. Those coals and embers I raked onto the floor must have been too hot. No time for apologies. I start running again, because I hear Old Man Barnes curssing.



I am lost. I keep running into brambles and all kinds of underbrush. It's raining, and I am soaked to the bone. I find a stream. It's too shallow to lie down in, but the rain is washing me off. I am shaking. I don't know if it's from the cold or from hearing the dog getting closer.

I step into the water and run down stream. At least I don't have to fight with the underbrush. The water gets deeper as other streams join together. It must be the rain coming down the mountainsides.

Thunder and lightening start up. One flash is so bright that I seem to have come upon a clearing, because the forest and the creek I have been following come to an end. Beyond

that is a field of darkness. The current is strong here, pulling me closer and closer to the dark. Then I hear the barking right behind me, and I scream. I turn around. Lightning reveals Old Man Barnes. I scream again. The big black dog steps up onto the flat rock I am standing on. Approaching stealthily, he stops and barks loudly several times. He seems to be saying “I’ve got ye little girl!”

I step back. I can feel the rock’s edge. I hear the water falling down into a deep hole. It’s the waterfall at the swimming hole Rufus and I frequented. I stoop down, grabbing my knees. “Nice doggy. Nice doggy.”

I only get a growl in answer.

Old Man Barnes wades over to me. He grabs my arms. “Ya can’t git away from Lucifer. He’s the best dern tracker of all dogs in the county.”

I don’t resist, I just fall backwards and push off from the edge of the rock. I pull Old Man Barnes with me. Will I die now? He yells as we fall into the pit below. The dog barks.



I bob up to the top of the water, coughing. I look around. Old Man Barnes is floating in the water near a rock where he has left some of his brains. He must have let go of me when we fell. Well, good riddance. I peer up at the top of the waterfall and see Lucifer looking over, whimpering. He disappears.

I swim to the bank and lift myself out. The side of the red dress has ripped open, but I am fine, and I am near home.



It is still raining when I get home. Mama and Daddy don't noticed me while they talk on the porch.

"We did all we could do. We've been looking without sleep for three days now," Daddy says.

"Well, ye just go back out there and find our daughter." My mama is crying and beating on my Daddy's chest.

Lightening flashes, and Mama is looking directly at me. She screams and buries her head in Daddy's breast. He turns his head and sees me.

"Pearl! Is that you?"

"Yes, Daddy. It's me," I say.

"Honey. It's Pearl. Look and see."

"No. No. She's daid. She's daid." She's shaking her head back and forth.

I come up on the porch. I touch my mama's shoulder. "Mama," I says. She runs into the house, screaming, "She's daid. She's daid."

"Daddy?" I cry, grabbing him with both arms.

"Pearl. Where have you been? You smell like a chimney."

"I been kidnapped, Daddy. Old Man Barnes ... but I escaped."

"I thought it was him. But we checked his cabin. There was nobody home." He looks down into my eyes. "Did he hurt you?"

"He has another cabin up the mountain, down the mountain," I draw with my finger.

“Up the mountain, down the mountain. Up the ... I feel so tired now.”

“Did he hurt you!” Daddy says a bit louder.

I just shake my head.

“We’re all tired. Come inside,” my daddy says. “We’ll get you cleaned up.”

I sit in the kitchen, and Daddy brings in the tub and starts some water heating on the stove. He goes to get Mama, but she will not come. She is just crying and crying and saying, “No! No!” I think she’s lost it again.

“Never mind, Daddy,” I yell from the kitchen, “I can do it myself.” Then I say under my breath, “I been doin’ ever thang by myself anyway.”

I pour the steaming water into the tub and fill it. It took five kettles full. When I step into that hot water, my body absorbs all that warmth. My skin turns to a pretty pink. I hold my breath and dunk my head under the water by sticking my legs out. I stand and cover my body with Ivory soap lather. I sit back down and scrub my head with it. I rinse all the dirt off.

I am so glad to be home.

Chapter Nine

I sleep in. I smell pancakes and maple syrup. I slip a clean dress on from *my* chifferobe and saunter into the kitchen. Daddy is at the stove flipping the cakes. He sees me standing against the door stop.

“Come on in, baby girl. The rest of us are eating pancakes and eggs. You want some?”

I sit down at the table without saying a thing. I don't feel like talking. In fact, I don't feel a thing, just curious. But to be polite, I say, “Amelia ... Tommy.” They look at me as though I were a stranger and go on eating.

After Daddy piles my plate high with pancakes with lots of butter and syrup, I ask, “Where's Mama?”

“She's not feeling well this morning, Sugar.”

He sits down to his own cakes and starts eating.”

“Oh,” I say.

“You sleep good?” he says.

“Um hum,” I say with my mouth full.

“I would like you to see your mama, Pearl, after you get finished there.”

I nod my head, and then after I swallow and take a drink of milk I say, “Daddy, ya might want to go to the swimming hole and fish out Old Man Barnes. He'll stink it up.”

“What?” Daddy stands up and looks at me as if I had lit a stick of dynamite.

“He chased me, and we both fell in, only, he hit his head on a rock.”

“Gosh Almighty, girl.” He comes over to me, kneels down and starts examining me.

“I'm all right, Daddy. I have survived worse things.”

“You want to talk about it, baby?”

“I’d rather fergit it if you don’t mind.” I take my last bite and gulp it down with the rest of my milk. “May I be excused? I want to see Jack.”

“Okay.” He stands as I do. “See your mother first, though.”

I take a deep breath, wipe my mouth on my arm and go into Mama’s and Daddy’s bedroom. There she is, lying in her bed suffering the way she did when Jeffery died. I stroll over to her bed and touch her shoulder. She makes a sound like “ah, ah, ah,” and shrinks away from me, bringing her fists up to her chest, ready to fight.

“Mama, I’m not daid!”

I show her my arms. “See? No blood ... no nothin’. I was kidnapped. I couldn’t get to ya until last night. Don’t worry. Old Man Barnes is the one daid.” *But his dog is still out there on the loose.*

Mama reaches out her arms. I guess she has decided I am alive and worthy of a hug. I bend down and let her hug me.

“Oh, darlin’, darlin’, ye ‘re back. I love ya so.”

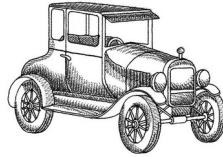
I want to sob on her shoulder. Under normal circumstances, if there be any around here, maybe I would, but it just doesn’t come. All I can do is take a deep breath of all her smells I recognize as Mama. I feel so sad now, and a tear comes to my eye. We hold hands and stare at each other. I have to let go and wipe my face. She sighs. I sigh. Then she says. “I best be gittin’ up.” She sniffs and I help her to her feet. She gives me a hug, then I say, “I got to go see Jack and tell him I’m all right.”

“Ye love that guy?”

My face wrinkles up and I almost cry. “Yes, Ma’am.”

“Then ya had better go to him. I will feel awfully lonely when ya are gone.”

“Oh Mama!” I cry and we hug. Then I leave.



After consulting Daddy, I make my way over to Jack’s place, and the first thing I see is a real live automobile. It about takes my breath away. There it is sitting up against the barn where a wagon should be. I don’t even look at the house which is plain, covered with white clapboards, having a wide porch and shingle roof. The automobile is all black, a box with doors, one on each side. It has large glass windows all the way around with a long pig nose sticking out front. It looks like it’s stretched over a wagon because it has wagon wheels. But I’ve never seen wheels with the rims covered up with rubber. I skip over to it and kick one of those rubber wheels. My foot bounces off.

Then I hear “Pearl! Pearl!”

I turn around and Jack is upon me, grabbing me, embracing me, and kissing me.

“My goodness, Jack!” I say. “Ye make my heart jump out and dance around.”

He swirls me around and I have to grab my hat so it won’t fly away. I just laugh, and laugh.

“Ya come over just to visit my automobile?” He places a hand on it as if it is precious.

“It is so beautiful. I never seen one in real life.” I don’t know whether my heart is beating for him or for the automobile. “My mama calls them horseless carriages.”

“Where ya been? The whole county was out lookin’ for ya.”

“Well, they can stop lookin’ because I am right here in yer arms.”

I hold onto Jack and don’t want to let go.

“What happened? How did ya git lost?”

“Don’t want to talk about it. I am here now.”

We stare at each other and then I remember. “Ya might want to help my daddy though. He has to go over to the swimmin’ hole and get Old Man Barnes out o’ the water.”

“Why? What happened to him?”

“Had an accident.”

He pushes me out, still holding onto my hands, so he can look me in the face. “How did *that* happen?”

“Don’t want to talk about it.”

“I have a feelin’ ye’re involved.”

I say as serious as I can, “Don’t – want – to – talk about it!” emphasizing every word.

“Okay, okay. I’m just glad to have ya back and safe.” He hugs me again.

I look him in the face. “Ya still want to marry me?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Even if I have a baby?”

“What do ya mean? Of course we will have babies.”

“I mean ... It might not be *yer* baby.” I look down and let go of his hands.

Jack steps back. He seems cold now, having lost all expression in his face, like he’s thinking it over.

“He’s daid, Jack. What’s done is done.” I reach out my hand to him and notice his parents standing on the porch staring at us. “Hump, hump,” I say, clearing my throat. He takes my hand and turns around to face them.

“I still want to marry ya, Pearl,” He says to the air and smiles, but not for me, but for

his parents, Ma and Pa Merkle. As they walk up to us, he says, “This is the girl.”

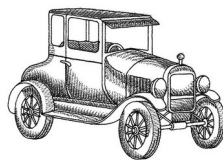
Jack’s parents are short and stocky. How did he get to be so tall? I notice Pa Merkle’s shiny head, his thick eyebrows, and the pipe he takes out of his mouth as he says, “She’s the preacher’s daughter.”

“Yes, Pa,” Jack says.

“She’s the crazy one. Never is at Church,” his ma says.

No one is talking to me, just about me. I don’t pay attention to the conversation. My head is filled with the sound of crickets or cicadas. I am back with Rufus in the swimming hole. That was the time of my innocence. When I come to, I hear Jack say, “Okay, I will see ya when ya come back. I think I will take Pearl out fer a ride.”

I almost scream and jump for joy. I am shaking at the expectation of riding in that new automobile. A real automobile. I know Jack is talking, but I don’t know what he is saying. He walks me over to the contraption, opens the door and seats me inside. The red leather seats smell new. I breathe it in. He gets a bent metal bar from the back and takes it to the front of the car. It looks like he puts it in somewhere and starts cranking, turning it around and around. A loud noise starts up in the front, and then there is a bang! The car is vibrating, Jack hops in, slams the door, adjusts a stick in between the seats, and off we go. I have to hold my breath, I’m going so fast.



Jack takes us down a dirt road lined with trees. I am not used to traveling like this, so I don’t recognize the place until we get there. It is the lake Daddy and Mr. Hellewell created with the dam. He pulls up to the pier, gets out, comes around to my side, opens the door, and

helps me out like a gentleman. I have not known him to be a gentleman, so I figure he is courting me. We haven't talked all the way here, so it shocks me a bit when he says, "What do ya think?"

"What?" I ask, holding onto my broad rimmed hat with flowers on top as I step down onto the grass.

"The automobile," he says, "What do ya think of it?"

"It was breath-taking, Jack," I say, strolling toward the wharf. "Especially with the winders down."

He takes my hand. "I am sorry. I should have showed ya how to roll yer winder up."

I laugh and take my hand down. I don't have to keep holding my hat; there is no wind now.

Jack has a troubled look on his face. We walk along the wooden planks of the pier down to the water's edge and settle into one of the two boats tied up. He sits on one seat and I sit on the other, facing him. It is peaceful listening to the lapping of the water and smelling the flags and water life. The smell is almost rotten but somehow fresh. A breeze starts up, but not enough to blow my hat. I look at Jack. He stares back. I feel pulled into his soul.

I don't want to say anything. The peace here soothes my soul. I used to come here after Jeffery died because I secretly knew he was a celestial angel. I can still feel his spirit here.

Jack takes both my hands and sighs. "I want cha to know I still love ya, Pearl. I just don't know what to think of ya."

"Don't think nothin', Jack. Just don't think nothin'."

"Well, I ..."

“Don’t cha now! Don’t cha dare. We will take up our lives from where we sit right here and now.”

Jack looks down at his feet. “Okay.” He looks back up at me. “I just want cha to know that I am not a virgin either.” There is a wistful look in his eyes. “I knew several women in France. I’m not proud of it. I was just weak. Drunk most of the time. It was a hard thing to ask a young guy to go through.”

“I would expect so. I knew ya weren’t a saint. Nobody is. Still, I can’t help the way I feel about cha.”

I sigh and then Jack sighs after looking at me for a long while. “We better get married in a hurry, Pearl. I want to make love to ya right here in this boat.”

“That’s fool talk, Jack.” I take my hands back. “Besides, there’s no room.”

Jack looks around. “That’s fer sure.”

We both laugh, and our faces turn red.

He stares at me again and says, “How about in the water?”

I am wearing a dress with a wide elastic collar, so I pull down one side, bearing my shoulder to take my arm out, and I wake up to what I am doing. “Oh, Jack! Ye just want to see me naked. Well! Ye won’t get that pleasure today.” I place my dress back over my shoulder very dainty like.

I see the disappointment in his face.

“Ye’re just gonna have to wait ‘til we get married,” I say.

“At least come over here and sit next to me,” he says.

“Okay, but don’t try nothin’.”

I sit down beside him, rocking the boat a little. He puts his arm around me and,

removing my hat, kisses me. I let him because I feel like melting.

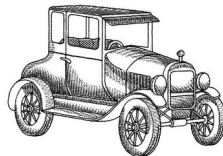
I put my hand on my face. “I declare, Jack. I could use more of that wind in my face. Let’s go for a ride again.” I rise, grabbing my hat. He gets up, hops out of the boat and lifts me out.

He starts taking his clothes off. “Last one in is a rotten egg!”

He is in the nude and diving into the water. I am determined not to be made a fool of. He is not going to get the better of me! I strip, throwing my dress and hat onto the pier, dive into the cold water and start swimming. I will show him. I swim out to the center of the lake.

Jack swims up along side me. He makes me laugh. I feel like a free spirit. I feel really happy beside him. Just being near him makes me feel like a woman. I am not a little girl to him. He grabs me. I don’t scream. I would have if it were Rufus. Rufus and I were children. Jack and I are adults. He presses his body against mine. We kiss. I love him and don’t want to let go. Then he starts splashing me. That gets my dander up. I start splashing him, and we just laugh.

We swim to the pier. He climbs up and helps me out. We sit on the edge with our feet slapping the water. We look at each other and laugh our heads off. He lays down and I lay back into his arms. I am comfortable and feel protected.



I think we must have taken a nap. The sun is descending toward the horizon and is peeking through the tops of the trees. We get up and dress, kiss, and go back to the automobile. He helps me in, closes my door, and cranks up the motor. He gets in and turns

the car around toward home. I would sit close to him if it weren't for that stick in the floor between us. At least he reaches his arm out and places it across the top of my seat.

"My stomach is growling," I say.

"So is mine. Ye want to go to town and eat?"

"No. My mama is in a bad way. I need to be near her. She'll feel right cranky if I don't show up fer dinner. I may even have to cook the dinner."

"Okay. Home it is." He looks over at me. "Is she sick?"

"Only in the heart." I sigh. "Ever since little Jeffery died she hasn't been right."

"That's what I heard."

"Yeah."

I start thinking of my mama and fail to be a very good conversationalist. I didn't know we had stopped until Jack places his hand on my leg.

"Huh?"

"We're here," he says.

"Oh," I say. "Guess I'm still asleep."

He comes around, opens my door like a gentleman, I step out into his arms and we kiss goodnight.

"See ya Sunday?" he asks.

"Yeah. Sunday," I say.

He drives off, leaving me walking on clouds.

I drift into the house.

Standing in the living room, I hear my Daddy say something. I say "Huh?" and he says, "I said, do you want some dinner?"

I take a deep breath, walk over to my daddy standing in the kitchen doorway, put my arms around him, lay my head on his chest, and say, “Daddy. Did ya love Mama as much as I love Jack?”

“Anything you want to tell me?”

“I’m alright, Daddy,” I say. “But I think I am going to faint if I don’t eat something.”

“Well, come in the kitchen. I made us all some fried chicken.”

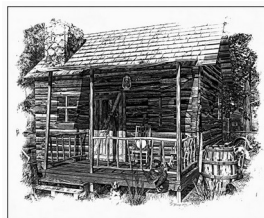
“I am glad I don’t have any more pet chickens then.”

Daddy laughs.

Chapter Ten

I am accompanying Daddy as he walks his rounds to visit the neighbors. As we visit, he introduces me and explains I am getting married. Then he tells each one they are invited to my wedding. I am definitely too shy to do this alone. Besides, this is the way the mountain people do it. Now the only girl I know well enough to be a bridesmaid is Pignose, Lu Ann Hellewell. Her nose is shrinking down though to a normal size as she gets older, but her nickname has stuck. Everyone at school still calls her Pig. Jack said he will ask his brother Ben to be his best man. He is not as tall, but makes up for it in his build. He is a tough little guy that is always getting into scrapes. He wasn't old enough to go to war, but makes up for it in all the fighting and wrestling he does. He claims he is unbeaten. I know other guys tell it differently. Perhaps what he means, he is unbeaten in spirit.

I also know that if everyone Daddy is asking comes, the living room will be too full to have the wedding. Maybe we will have it outside. Mr. Hellewell says he will bring his bar-b-cue equipment. Pignose is all excited. She says she just loves weddings. She jumps up and down and says in a high lyrical voice, "They is so romantical."



I do not want to go through this. I would like to get into Jack's automobile and him take me away from all this embarrassment. Mother has me on a stool trying to pin together a dress for me to wear. There are strange women in the kitchen making all kinds of foods and cakes, messing the place up. I know I will be the one to clean up after them. There are all

kinds of children running around, screaming. I don't know if I can stand this. I want to run out of the house and hide in the woods. Now I remember a dream I had a few weeks ago right before I was kidnapped. It's all coming true.

After Mama sews the dress together, she has me try it on, and then she makes alterations. I am a nervous wreck. I take deep breathes and Mama says, "Be still. How do ya expect me to keep from sticking ya with a pin?" I think she is about to do it out of spite.



The afternoon wastes away and the evening is here. My stomach is growling. I put on my new dress. It isn't white, but it is pretty with all kinds of flowers printed on it. It reminds me of ... oh no! Did I look at my bedroom curtains lately? No. It's not them. They are different flowers. I wonder who's curtains it could be. Oh well. It's the prettiest dress my mama ever made.

I peek into the living room. There are a lot of people standing around, and there are pots of flowers here and there to make the place look nice. I smell roses. That's my favorite. Mother pulls me back into the bedroom.

Jack isn't here yet. Neither is his brother. Maybe he is convincing him or trying to get the unruly brother dressed. I here a motor car and a bang. It must be him. I don't know of many automobiles around these parts.

Jack comes into the back bedroom. "They told me to ..."

"Go back in thar," my mama says. "Not supposed to see her yet. Bad luck. Send her father back here."

“What do you want?” my father asks as he peeks in.

“For ya to walk her out,” Mama says sharply.

“But I’m the preacher. I should wait for her in there. We sent Jack in here so *he* could walk her out.”

“That’s just not done!”

“Both of ya!” I say. “Just go out thar and wait fer me. I’ll bring myself.”

Oh! This is frustrating.

Mama instructs everyone to sing “Here comes the bride.” I am about to cry, but I walk down the hall and enter into the living room. The crowd of people make way for me. I smell perfume and tobacco mixed with the smell of liquor breath. Daddy is in front of the window with Jack and Ben on one side of him. They look surprisingly smart in their suits and ties. I see Lu Ann is wearing the same dress as me. That’s a let down. Maybe it was *her* curtains.

I stand before my daddy and smile. He wipes tears from his eyes.

“Join hands,” he says.

“Dearly beloved,” he starts. I look at Jack and get all warm inside. I want to kiss him right now. We smile at each other, and all of a sudden, I hear Daddy say, “Say yes.” Huh? I missed something, but I say “Yes.” Then I hear Daddy say, “Then you may exchange rings and kiss the bride.” I missed the whole thing. I am too much in my thoughts. Jack puts a ring on my finger and kisses me. I don’t have a ring to give him, but maybe we will get him one after we can afford it.

Everyone claps and passes cake and bar-b-cued chicken around along with liquored up punch. All the people come up to me and Jack and shake our hands. Daddy and Mama give us hugs as well as Sister Hodgkin, the midwife. She says, “I brought cha both into this

world. Now I expect to bring yers in.” That was a nice thought, but I really don’t want to stay around here. It would be the death of me.

Lu Ann comes around and says, “It was such a nice weddin’, Pearl. I thank ya fer allowin’ me to be yer flower girl.”

“Not flower girl, Pignose. Maid of Honor.”

“Maid of Honor! Oh Pearl. Thank ye, thank ye.” Lu Ann jumps up and down and dances around. She is a lunatic! I think her freckles will surely fall off.

I am so full of emotion that I pull Jack out of the house.

“Let’s git outta here before I pop,” I say to Jack. He only laughs.

We pass Mr. Hellewell with his bar-b-cue pit. He waves. I smell that sugary smoke, and I want to stay and eat some more, but now Jack is pulling me into the motor car after I grab a drumstick off the grill and start gnawing on it.

“Come on,” he says. “I have something to show ya. They call it a motor car hotel. Imagine that. A hotel fer cars.”



Jack pulls up to a line of little cottages. The sign we drive under says Indian Princess Motel. Jack says, “Stay here. I’ll go get the key.” He trots over to the office, and in another moment comes back with a key which he is so proud of. He has to wiggle it in front of me. He gets in, drives the motor car a few feet, we both get out and hurry to the door to see what’s inside.

It is a wonderful little cabin with a kitchenette, bed, and shower. The walls, cabinets

and furniture are all made of polished knotty pine. It's almost a red color. I am sorry we didn't bring any clothes with us, as I would like to use the pretty chest of drawers. I don't see any bed at first, but Jack walks over to the couch which looks pretty much like a box with a pillow on it and sits down. It has scroll work on the back and on each side, matching the scroll work holding nick-knacks in the corners. He kicks the box with his heel, looks at it, gets up, takes the pillow off and unfolds a bed.

I wrap my arms around him, give him a squeeze, and say, "ye're the smart one."

It looks nice and comfy, but I sit on it and it isn't bouncy like mine at home. Jack sits next to me.

I see the shower around the corner from the bed. I leave Jack to inspect it. The door had been left open, so I could see inside.

"Want ta use it?" he asks, rising.

"I never seen one of these before. I hear tell of them, but this is the first one."

"It's just like rain." Jack reaches in, saying, "I'll show ya."

He proceeds to turn a knob, and water bursts from the shower head. I jump back. "I don't want to get my *dress* wet!" I jaunt over to the bed and sit down. I say mostly to myself, "I want to lie down, but I don't want to wrinkle my dress."

"There is a rod over here around the corner with some hangers on it. Ye can hang yer dress up."

I stand up and take my dress off, exposing my new slip. I walk over to the little alcove and hang my dress on the rod.

"Wow," Jack says. "Fancy. It looks ..." and he puts his arms around me, caressing my back, "... and feels so silky."

“Mama gave it to me fer a weddin’ gift.”

We smooch, and he starts peeling my slip off.

“Let me take a shower first,” I say and “slip” out of his embrace, leaving my slip in his hands.

When in the shower with the door closed, I scream as I turn the water on. It is absolutely freezing! But Jack opens the door and shows me another knob that warms it up a little.

“Thank ye!” I pull his head in and kiss him.

“Hey!” he calls out. “Now that I’m all wet, I’ll have to come in there with ya.”

“Hey, hey. There’s a flat bar of soap with wet paper all over it.”

“Hand the paper above the door. I’ll throw it out.”

“And no,” I say, lathering my head, “Ye may not come in. I want to *enjoy* this shower all by myself.”

After I’m done, I ask for a towel, but he says, “Come and git it.”

“Just hand me the towel.”

He opens the door, sees me with my arms crossed over my chest, he giggles, hands me the towel, and closes the door. *I am not going to get angry*, I tell myself. *I am going to enjoy myself*.

I open the door. He is all naked and ready to step in. “Hee, hee,” he says. He jumps in and showers. I don’t think he’s clean because it seems like he only takes two minutes.

“Ye did that fast,” I say from the bed, under the covers.

“Ye were in there so long there was no more hot water. I had to hurry. But it was fun.”

He comes out of the shower with a grin on his face. He leaps around to the window

side of the bed. I did not want to sleep on the window side. It makes me nervous. I believe the woman should feel safe. I roll over and face him. He creeps over to me and grabs me. I don't know if I am screaming or laughing, but I am having the time of my life.



Chapter Eleven

“Pa is old and wants ta retire from farmin’,” Jack says as he buttons his trousers. “He wants me ta take over, but I am no farmer.”

“So what will yer income be, Jack?” I say, tying my shoes. “We can’t live on hopes and dreams like I have been doin’ all my life.”

“While I was in the army I learned a trade. I became a mechanic. I can work on automobiles, trucks, aeroplanes ...”

“Oh, Jack! Wouldn’t that be a wonderful thang if ya could work on aeroplanes?” I ask as we head out the door of our little cabin. “Ye could take us up into the sky, into the clouds, and we could see all the buildin’s and people down below.”

Jack scratched his head and opened the door to the motor car for me. “Ye are dreamin’ again. Ya won’t find me up thar in one of them contraptions. I remain on the ground crew.”

“Oh, Yer no fun.” I look back at the cabin, wishing we could live there. “And where’re we goin’ to live now?”

“My pa wants us ta live with him and Ma, but that means he wants me ta work the farm.”

“Well, I never thought we would be without home and hearth. I guess we could go back ta my house and live in my bedroom.”

“I don’t think so. I’ll work it out with my pa. We’d best go to yer place and gather up yer thangs.”

I wonder if we could rent out that little cabin, but then I know Jack is out of a job right now. I stared at it wistfully, just wishing. It would be a place of our own.

“Well,” Jack says, “Are ya comin’?”

“That would make us a nice home fer a while.” I sigh. “It’s such a beautiful place.”

“Motels are meant fer short stays.” Jack screws up his face. “I fergit. I bought cha a present.”

He reaches into the motor car and brings out a box wrapped up with a ribbon. My heart is about to burst. I jump up and down and act just like Pignose. I grab it and kiss him on the cheek. I tear it open. It is a Brownie camera.

“Oh, Jack! Does it have film? I gotta take pi’tures of that cabin. How does it work?”

He puts his arms around me, takes the camera and shows me. “Ya look down into this winder here, see? On the top. It’s called framin’ tha pi’ture. When ya see what ya want ta take, ya press this button here. Then ya roll the film with this crank on tha side here. It folds out and back in again. Ya listen fer a click. That’s one frame, then take another, roll, click and take another. Got it?”

“Got it.”

I race back into our honeymoon cabin, open the door and windows wide to let in the light and just snap and roll, snap and roll. It is so fun. I rush outside and take pictures of the car and Jack, and the sign we drove under and all the other cabins as a whole. Then something happens.

“Jack,” I call. “I broke it.” Tears come to my eyes. “It won’t crank no more.”

Jack laughs at me, and I hit him on the arm with the camera. “Here,” he says. “Let me fix it.” He takes it from me, presses a different button on the side, cranks until the arm is loose. He flips it with his finger, and it spins.

“Now ya broke it!” I say, not understanding. “Give it back.”

“Look,” he says. “When it spins around like this, all the remaining film is rolled up and ready to take to the developers.”

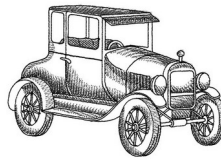
“Oh.” I shake it. I don’t hear any loose parts. “Okay.”

“When we git cha home, I’ll show ya how to open it up. I also have mailing envelopes to send the film in. They’re in the back thar.”

After stepping up into the motor car, I look in the back and see some yellow envelopes. After Jack starts the motor car and climbs in, I grab his arm and lean against him. I wet his arm with my tears. I am so emotional. “Thank ye, thank ye, thank ye.”

“Yer welcome. It’s just a camera.”

“Fer ever thang.”



I feel like the world is closing in on me, and there is not enough room to breathe. After getting home, I gather my clothes and other things I have collected over the years into two suitcases. It seems like it may take several trips or I will have to throw away a lot of precious stuff. Then Daddy comes in and says, “Why don’t you two stay here until you get a place of your own?”

I expected that from him. I know Mama would put it in his mind to ask us. She wants to chain me down to this place so I will take care of her.

“Daddy, we’ve already discussed it,” I say. “Jack’s folks are expecting us to stay with them.”

“Well, the fact is,” Daddy says, and I knew he would, “that your mama needs you

here. If you don't want to stay here, perhaps you could come take care of her for awhile, you know, until you get a little one of your own."

"Which might be sooner than later." I place the last of my socks in my suitcase, and as I close it, I pause to look him in the face.

"What do you mean by that? Are you already pregnant?" he asks, putting his hands on his hips.

"I don't know. Perhaps I am, perhaps I'm not. I'm just saying it coulda happened. But I won't go into that now." I turn the suitcase up on end so the handle is in the air. "Daddy, could ya help?"

As he walks me out to the car, a suitcase in each hand, he says, "You know your mother is in a bad way. You are the only one who knows her well enough to take care of her."

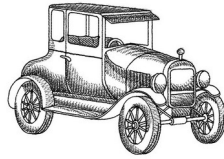
I am about ready to punch someone. I love my daddy, but I think he is being misled. Nevertheless, I relent. "I will see what I can do."

I look around for Jack. I see him swinging Tommy in the air with Amelia beside him, giggling. It's a wonder he doesn't hit her in the face with Tommy's feet. "Stop playing with the kids and let's go."

I give Daddy a hug. "I love ya, Daddy."

"I love you too, Darling." He gives me a kiss on the cheek. "Remember. Try to make you're way over here as soon as you can."

Daddy puts the suitcases in the back and helps me in while Jack cranks up the motor car. He hops in, and I wave at Daddy as we leave. He stands there with a worried look on his face.



Jack and I are pregnant. He has opened up a mechanic shop where he sells and fixes automobiles, but in this area, mostly trucks because of the farming. The idea came to him by way of my daddy and his daddy when they met in town one day to discuss our place of residence. Staying in town was a compromise between us staying at home or at Jack's father's farm. Since he didn't want to be a farmer, he came up with an idea that pleased them both. He would work on his own by getting a G. I. loan from the bank. There was no discount in the interest, but because he was a veteran of the War, he got the loan. I would work at home to help Daddy with Mama, and Jack would help at the farm seasonally.

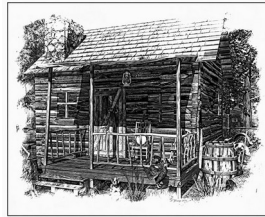
So far, Jack has sold three trucks and one motor car. We are scraping by, but living above the shop, we only have to pay one rent. I take my big belly each morning over to Mama and Daddy's and take care of the queen of the bedroom. I mainly have to take care of Tommy, Amelia, and Daddy. I visit Mama only when she needs me.

The other day we tramped down to the lake for a picnic, but Mama only sat down on top of one of the pilings, one of the tree trunks that hold up the pier, and spilled her tears. I was going to comfort her, but when I heard her whisper, "Jeffery, Jeffery, Jeffery," I walked away and went and played with the kids, trying my best to keep them out of the boats and out of the water. It would have killed Mama if one of *them* fell in. I hadn't thought of that when I planned the picnic.

Today she is chipper. She called me into the bedroom and complained, as she lay there pointing with her long arm and boney finger, "Looky thar, how dirty those winders be!"

Then, another time, “Ya haven’t scrubbed this floor in a fortnight.” Again, “Yer the slowest girl I ever saw. I haven’t had my lunch yet.”

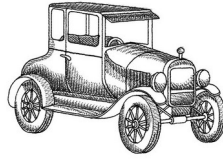
I get this every day ... when she’s lively. It has been almost nine months now since Jack and I married. We spent the winter building up the shop and accumulating things for the baby. Whenever I had to spend time at the doctor’s Mama complained that I didn’t love her and that I should be ashamed. I don’t know how long I can take this. I heard mothers losing their babies for less.



I am scrubbing the floor in Mama’s bedroom after having to clean up her and the bed. She had thrown up, complaining I had poisoned her. She says, “I do not know what I have done in this life to deserve such a disobedient daughter. Why little Jeffery was so tame. He would always bring me thangs an’ try ta cheer me up. He was the most lovin’ baby.” She always compares me with Jeffery. She has never gotten over the loss of her first love whom her first baby boy was named after. My tears mix with the soapy water on the floor. My heart burns in my suffering. I will not have my baby grow up knowing what a fool of a mother I have.

My days of deliverance are near. After cleaning the house twice, running after sister and brother, changing his diapers several times and washing them out, after feeding everyone breakfast, lunch, and dinner, It almost makes me wish I would have no children. But one thing is sure, I don’t want this child inside me to know my mother. She would steal him away from me. I need to find a maid to look after Mama. I cannot stay here another day.

I may need to leave the state and go so far away they can't find me. I hope Jack would do that for me. If not, I will leave anyway. I'm through suffering.



“Jack, I can't go back there,” I say. “I scrub and bake and take care of ever'body like a slave. That's what they want, and that's what they have made me into, a slave. I git no appreciation what *ever* I do. No thank ye, Pearl, no sit here, Pearl and take a rest, Pearl. Nothin.' No nothin.’”

“We can't leave the business. We can't just jump up and go off to no one knows where. Ya can stay here and help *me* out. Someone can take yer place at yer mom and dad's. A maid could step in and help out.” That is just what I said earlier.

Jack paces back and forth and scratches the back of his head. “The people have come to depend upon us. We have become a staple in the community.”

“Hogwash!” I say. “These people don't care about you an' me. They have gone about their little lives before we were born, and they will continue on after we're gone.”

Jack finishes his sandwich in silence, still standing. He gulps down his coffee and heads down the stairs.

I call after him. “Pignose would be the perfect replacement. She was born to clean up after others.”

I sit here and look at my sandwich. It has nice tasty ham in it and mustard. But I have not gotten myself to even touch the thing. I stand up to put the dishes away and water flows down between my legs.

“Jack! Jack! My water’s busted!” I stand there startled, not knowing what to do or what to think.

Jack calls back. “I’m with a customer right now, Dear. I’ll come up and fix it in a minute if its not running onto the floor.”

I stand at the top of the stairs and call back. “Damnation, Jack! It’s not the plumin.’ It’s *my* plumin.’ The baby’s comin.’ Go an’ git Sister Hodgkin!”

“I’ll get Doc Hammer,” he calls back. “He’s right down the street.” I hear the front door slam.

“No!” I say too late. Then I say to myself, “I want Sister Hodgkin.” I start sobbing and sit down in my kitchen chair again. “I ... I want Sister Hodg ... Hodgkin.” Then I have a jabbing pain in my guts. Oh! It hurts.

I hear someone coming up the steps. It hasn’t been enough time for Jack to get the doctor. I ask loudly, “Who is that?” holding onto the back of the chair as another stabbing pain attacks.

“Pearl?” comes an old familiar voice. “May I come up?”

I see Grandpa Davies stick his ancient white head up above the floor. Like an angel, he comes.

“Grandpa?” I say, so surprised. “What’er ya doin’ here?”

He comes up and pulls the other kitchen chair next to me and sits down. “I’m the customer. What’s happenin’ to my granddaughter? I heard ya got married.”

“I ... oh ... am havin’ a baby.”

“My, my.” He tries to give me a sideways hug. “Can I help ya to yer bed?”

“I was going to walk around, but these pains ... oh ... I don’t think they’re normal. I

been to a lot of birthin's. Only one I seen ... oh ... had bad pains. She died. Am I goin' ta die, Grandpa?"

He rises like a tall thin giant. He is silent. He only smiles, but helps me up. I lead him to the bedroom, seeing he hasn't been here before. I lie down on the bed. He takes my shoes off and retrieves a stool to sit on. He takes my hand. "There, there. Just squeeze my hand if ya need to. It's pretty tough."

I do squeeze his hand as another pain comes. "Tha pains 'er gittin' stronger. Where's the doc and Jack?"

It gives me little relief as I hear Jack and Doc Hammer run up the stairs. I see the doctor's bag next to my face on the night stand. I feel nothing but pain. I scream and cuss words I didn't know I knew. I have Grandpa Davies in one hand and Jack in the other. I hear people talking, but I don't have any idea what they're saying. All I know is the pain that won't let me breathe. I am covered in sweat. I pant when I can. I feel delirious. I want to pass out, but the pain keeps me awake. I do eventually pass out. I wake again and someone tells me to push, so I push. I pass out again. I wake to see Jack holding a little baby. It's not even crying. Maybe something is wrong with it.

Doc Hammer is saying, "was a breach baby, but she's fine and healthy."

I start blubbering, stretching my arms out. "I want my baby. Is she all right?" Jack places her into my arms. She is so darling. Her eyes are like stars from Eternity as she stares back at me. She is jabbering away as if talking some kind of foreign language. I am so amazed because little babies don't do that. But mine is. "Oh, Rachel," I say, "Rachel my darlin'. Rachel is her name, Jack. She just told me in my heart."

"Rachel it is, then." Jack is just standing there, smiling so proudly.

Doc Hammer, Grandpa Davies, and Jack huddle in a circle. I hear clear enough what the doctor whispers. “She won’t have any more children,” he says. I didn’t know I had tears left, but they flow down my cheeks and I kiss little Rachel’s cheek, getting it all wet. Her little fists shake as though she wants to do something with them. I sigh. I’m sure those hands will be filled with work and sorrow.

Chapter Twelve

I visit Lu Ann, Pignose, for the last time, and show her Rachel. I hold her up, removing the baby blanket. Rachel is smiling and laughing. That makes Lu Ann laugh.

“Oh, Pearl,” she says, jumping up and down, clapping. “She is so cute. May I hold’er?”

I hand her to Lu Ann. “Goochy, goochy, goo,” she says. “I wish I had a man. I would have a million little babies. Ooooh, I want a baby so bad.” She rocks Rachel back and forth.

“I wouldn’t wish it on ya, Lu Ann. And ya better be careful around boys. Choose wisely. Thar be some mean boys in these hills. Ever one of them would want to git cha pregnant. I don’t know why ya don’t have a man already. Ya look like the marryin’ kind.”

“I don’t know, Pearl. Why don’t I have a man?” She gives Rachel back to me, hugs us both and kisses me on the cheek. “Thank ya, Pearl.” Now she’s wiping tears from her eyes with the backs of her hands.

“Don’t weep so, Lu Ann,” I say. “Look. The reason I come over here is to offer ya some work. It pays three dollars a week. That’s pretty much.”

“Pretty much,” she parrots. “It’s more’n I have now. I’m not lazy. I just don’t have nothin’ to do ‘till school starts a-gin.”

“Well, ya do now. I can’t take care o’ Mama now that I have Rachel *and* Jack to take care of.” Now I am rocking Rachel back and forth and caressing her little cheek.

“Take care o’ yer ma?” Lu Ann takes a step back as if she is ready to run.

“Ya can do it, Lu Ann. Thar’s not much to do. Just keep’er clean an’ feed’er. Mostly it’s just takin’ care of Amelia and Tommy and playin’ with them. And of course, my daddy.”

Now she looks scared. Her eyebrows rise up, and her eyes bulge out. “What does yer pa want wif me?”

I laugh. “It’s not that, Pignose! It’s just fixin’ dinner fer ever one.”

She wipes her brow and says, “Whew! I’m glad o’ that.”

Rachel thinks it’s time to go. She is whining. I lift her up and down a bit to calm her. “Of course, there is Tommy’s diapers. Ya don’t mind changin’ diapers, do ya?”

“Course not. I used ta take care of some nieces o’ mine.”

“Okay.” We both smile at Rachel. “Come by tomorrow mornin’ at my old house. I’ll prepare my daddy. This’ll be my last day.”

We hug and kiss and part as best friends. I could have been a better friend to her at school. I have just been independent of friends. I liked too much being by myself.

She waves, and says, “I love ya, Pearl.”

I don’t know if I have ever loved anyone before, other than Jack, but if I ever did, it might be her. Now that I wave and smile, going out the wicker gate, I think I will miss her.



“Sorry I’m late, Mama,” I say as I enter her bedroom. “I brought little Rachel for ya to see.” I hold her out over the bed so Mama can see her. She looks but doesn’t respond until I take her away.

“I wasn’t finished lookin’!” She is looking, but straight ahead like someone paralyzed.

I put Rachel on Mama’s lap and Mama starts talking baby talk to her and poking her chest. Rachel responds by kicking her feet and laughing.

“Mama, I’m goin’ in the kitchen to do the dishes. I won’t be here tomorrow, but I will have someone come and take care o’ the house.”

“Why can’t cha come tomorry?” She finally turns her head and looks at me. “I need ya ta be here an’ take care o’ the youngins ‘till I git ta feelin’ better.”

“I’m sorry,” I lie, “but I’ve got to help Jack with something.” What I mean is that I will be packing and getting out of this place.

“What’s wrong with Jack? Is he ailin’?”

“Nothin’s wrong with Jack, Mama,” I call back from the kitchen.

I pump some water into the sink and grate soap into it. I love washing dishes, getting things clean. It rests my brain a while. I don’t have to think of all the troublesome things in my life, just whistle while I work. I think I heard that song on a neighbor’s radio.

I poke my head out the window above the sink and yell, “Amelia! Stop feedin’ Tommy dirt. If he’s hungry, I have some sandwiches here in the kitchen.” That brought them inside. I wonder what Tommy’s diapers are going to look like tonight after eating all that dirt.

After I get Amelia and Tommy seated at the table, I go into Mama’s bedroom. She’s fast asleep, so I don’t have to apologize for taking the baby. I always have an argument with my mama all set up in my mind to defend my actions. Now I can go into the kitchen and feed Rachel in peace.



I hear Jack’s motor car outside as he drives up. He and Daddy both walk through the door. I guess Jack picked him up somewhere. I’m nursing Rachel in Daddy’s big chair in the

living room. Mama is snoring. “She’s been asleep most of the day,” I announce, “so I had more time to tend the kids and take care o’ Rachel. Dinner’s on the table.”

Daddy comes over and kisses me on the head. “Hi, kid. So everything’s been running smoothly?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Except I think Amelia is tryin’ to grow a garden inside Tommy.”

Daddy laughs, and Jack screws his face up.

“How’s that?” Jack asks.

“Amelia’s been scooping dirt into Tommy, I’m guessing,” Daddy says as he disappears down the hall.

I stretch my neck to meet Jack’s lips as he leans down and kisses me. “Hi, Hun,” he says.

“Hi,” I say, feeling pleased he has come to pick me up. Rachel stretches, still holding onto my nipple. I pull it out of her mouth, she squeaks, and I give her to Jack.

“Smells good,” Jack says. “I mean the dinner.”

“Well,” I say. “She smells good too.”

Everyone gathers at the table after I lay Rachel on the couch. It’s a Saturday night, and we’re eating roast beef and cabbage with some carrots thrown in.

“I hear you’re leaving us,” Daddy says. “Is there no mashed potatoes?”

“Sorry, Daddy. There was none.” We are the parsonage, and we rely on donations in order to eat. There were not enough potatoes for this week.

I finish dishing up Daddy’s plate, then the children. I let Jack serve himself.

“Yes,” Jack answers Daddy while cutting up Amelia’s meat. “I found another dealership in Texas. They’re sending someone up here to take over. The shop will only be

closed a couple days.”

“Isn’t he the greatest, Daddy? He’s gettin’ a raise too. They’re goin’ ta give him seventy five dollars a *week!*”

“I just asked around. Have ta go where the money is.” Jack fills his mouth with roast.

Tommy is in his highchair, chopping at his food, trying to eat with a spoon. His face and bib are messy, as always. I don’t know why, but my gut feels so much sorrow knowing I won’t ever have a son. I have to look away and try to eat my roast without mashed potatoes.

“You kids going to stay over for Sunday service?” Daddy asks.

“We wouldn’t miss it, Sir,” Jack says. “Have to say goodbye to the place where we met.” He takes my hand and squeezes it.

I get chills up my spine. I look over my shoulder and see Mama staring at me. I rise from my chair.

“Mama,” I say.

“Eatin’ without me?” she says sharply. “Of all the rude children. Why didn’t cha wake me?” She comes in, grabs her chair, and sits down, facing the rest of us. “At least ya sat my plate. Thank ye fer that.”

“Yes, Mama. We sat yer plate. We didn’t want to wake ya. Ye were sound asleep.”

I sit back down and pass her all the food. She has a grumpy expression on her face. I continue eating.

“I overheard ya,” she says in her sharp voice. “Runnin’ away, leavin’ me and mine to fend fer ourselves. No matter I am ill.”

“Mama. Ye know the Hellewells.” I pause with a piece of roast on my fork. “Well, Lu Ann Hellewell will be comin’ in the mornin’ to help with the kids and git them ready fer

Church.”

“You didn’t tell me, Pearl,” Daddy says, sipping his coffee.

“Ye just got home, Daddy. There wasn’t time.” I sigh. “She’s only askin’ fer three dollars a week.”

“That’s a whole bag o’ groceries,” Mama says with her mouth full.

“It’s the wage fer a maid nowadays, Mama.” This is the reason I need to leave. It hurts in my heart, but I have to get away from her constant complaining. “They gotta eat too,” I say.

The rest of the dinner was quiet. I washed the dishes. Jack dried. We said goodbye to Daddy, Amelia, and Tommy. Amelia hugged me more than she ever has, but Mama retired to her bed and wouldn’t say anything when I went in to say goodbye. She just stared straight ahead.

I felt a bit nauseated when we left. As I stood by the motor car I turned and looked at the house, and sighed. Amelia grabbed my legs and wouldn’t let go.

“We have to go now, Amelia,” I pleaded.

“Give me a kiss,” she asked.

I kissed her and she said, “A longer one.” I kissed her one long kiss, said, “I will miss you, kid,” and then she said, “Bye bye, Sissy.”

Lately, she started calling me Sissy. I guess she heard it somewhere.

I stepped up into the car, slammed the door and waved out the window. Amelia waved, and Daddy, standing on the porch with a coon dog sad expression on his face, also waved, but not with as much enthusiasm as Amelia.

Texas

Chapter One

Hello. My name is Rachel. I am six years old. I am learning to write. My mommy is telling me how to spell the words. Today I started the first grade. My teacher is Miss Wright. It is funny, because she is a teacher, and I thought her name was Miss Write. Mommy had to tell me the difference between 'right' and 'write.'



It is my eighth birthday, and Mommy gave me a Big Chief Tablet to take to school today. I am using this tablet to write in and practice my cursive. I also write my times tables in it. There are a few poems I have copied because I have to memorize them for class. Miss Wright is still my teacher. She loves to read poems and stories to us. My favorite story is *The Three Brothers*. It is about three magic plates, three pairs of dancing shoes, and how the brothers fall in love with three girls and get married.

One of the poems I have to memorize is:

Corn in the Shocks
by Katherine Ellis Barrett

Corn-shocked tepees
Dry rattling sound,
Trees all scalped,
Leaves on the ground,
Stealthy approach of winter's cold,
The year grows gaunt and sere and old -
Indians must be around.

Another one is:

A New Friend

by Marjorie Allen Anderson

They've taken in the furniture;
I watched them carefully.
I wondered, "Will there be a child
Just right to play with me?"

So I peeked through the garden fence
(I couldn't wait and see).
I found a little boy next door
Was peeking back at me.

The last one is:

Principle Exports

by Marchette Chute

In China they wear pigtails
As pirates used to do.
In Asia they have elephants
And in the Congo, too.

In Holland they have windmills,
In Ceylon they grow tea,
And in the South Sea Islands
There is a breadfruit tree.

In England there are rabbits,
In Greenland they make lard.
In Java there are turtles;
Geography isn't hard.

Miss Wright is my friend. She is tall and thin and wears dark clothes. She wears her hair in a bun. She has taught me to keep a journal. She says it is like a diary. My mama keeps a diary. I keep a journal. It is for school. Miss Wright grades me on it.

There are a lot of children at school. My best friend is Maggie. She and I are

neighbors. We live in a small town called Amarillo. It is in the Texas panhandle. It has a lot of cows and cowboys.



“Mama,” I call out, “I’m home.” I put my books on the kitchen table, and Mama comes through the back door carrying an empty clothes basket. I look out the window and see sheets hanging on the line and blowing in the wind. I smile because I know I will go to bed tonight with clean sheets.

“You want some cookies and milk?” she asks, putting the basket down by the door.

“Yes, Ma’am.” I sit at the table and think what a wonderful life I live.

Mama goes to the ice box behind me and brings out a bottle of milk with one hand and takes a glass down from the cupboard in front of me with the other. She places the glass on the table, pours the milk, and puts the bottle back in the ice box. Then she reaches on top of the cupboard and brings down the cookie jar, bright yellow with large pink flowers around it.

“Help yourself,” she says. “Four cookies is enough.”

I look up while she puts the cookies away. “Thank you,” I say.

“You have homework?” she says.

“Lots and lots,” I say, “but I don’t mind. I like the writing assignments.”

“That’s good. You will grow up to be a good writer some day.”

I am still at my table writing in my Big Chief Tablet when Daddy comes home. I hear Mama greet him. “How did it go today, Jack?”

I lay my pencil down, run into the living room and grab Daddy’s legs. He lifts me up

and gives me a peck on the cheek. “How’s my little darlin’ today? Are you doin’ yer homework? Did you have a good time at school?”

“Yes, Daddy,” I say. “Miss Wright is very nice. She read us the story of a giant fish that gives wishes.”

As Daddy carries me into the kitchen, he says, “And what would you wish for?”

“I would wish that you, me, and Mama could always be together, living in this house, and I will always go to school and be with Miss Wright in her class.”

As Daddy puts me down, he slaps my butt.

“Daddy!” I complain.

“That’s just in case you did somthin’ naughty today.”

“She’s been a good girl today,” Mama says, defending my honor.

I climb back up into my chair to resume my homework. My honor stings, so I scrunch up my face and say, “Mean Daddy,” Mama and Daddy laugh. I try to ignore them when they do that.

“Clean off the table, Rachel. It’s time fer dinner,” Mama says. “You can take yer homework into the bedroom.”

I climb onto my bed and continue writing, which I love to do. Between my mama teaching me at home and Miss Wright teaching me at school, I am getting pretty good at reading and writing. I have a dictionary which I read with Mama. She takes night classes at school for adults. She says she wants to enlarge herself. But I’m sure she can do that at the dinner table. Somehow, I don’t think that’s what she meant. In any case, she hasn’t grown fat like other mothers I see at school.

I get one paragraph written about the fall leaves on the trees when Mama calls,

“Dinner’s ready. We have to hurry tonight. It’s Parents and Teachers Meeting.”

I hear other kids complain when Miss Wright talks to their parents and tells them how poorly they are doing, but I like it when she talks to my parents. She only has good things to tell them about me. We four are all pals.



When we arrive we meet the Holcombs coming out of the school. Mama and Daddy talk with the parents, and I talk with Jamie.

“Hi, Jamie,” I say to him.

“Hi,” he says. He has a sad expression on his face, but then he brightens up and asks, “Can we do our homework together? I don’t have anyone to help me, and yer really smart.”

“If you help me with my multiplication and division, I will help you with yer readin’ and writin’.”

“That’s a deal.” He spits on his hand and reaches out for mine. My eyes go wide.

“Jamie Holcomb! If yer expectin’ me ta shake yer hand, you had better wipe it off.”

He wipes his hands on his dungarees and says, “Ah, Rachel. Here, shake.”

I shake his hand, but I say, “You can do that with boys, but you can’t do it with girls.”

Jamie is tall, slender, and red headed, is covered with freckles, and more than likely is wearing a striped t-shirt under that denim jacket. He is the one in the poem I had to memorize. The day his family moved in next door to us, I saw him spying on me through the bushes. I had to go over and introduce myself. Maggie, Jamie, and I are now the best of friends. She lives on one side of me, and Jamie on the other.

“Come on,” Daddy says, as he holds the door open.

“I’ll see ya tomorrow, Jamie.”

“Yeah, I’ll see ya tomorrow.”

Daddy ushers me in, and we walk up the aisle to Miss Wright’s desk.

My teacher stands and shakes hands across her desk with Mama and Daddy. “Please have a seat. Hello, Rachel. I’m glad you all could come tonight.” We sit down and Miss Wright continues, “Rachel is doing well as always.” Everyone smiles. “We’ve come to expect that of her. In the first grade I was really surprised that she could read and write already.”

“She was interested at a very early age,” Mama says. “Why, she was talking at eight months.”

“That is remarkable.” Miss Write smiles and looks at me. “Was she saying complete sentences?”

“She was saying three word sentences,” Mama says, “like, ‘Me get it.’”

“Well, I have no complaints,” Miss Wright says, picking up a card from her desk. “Except for one thing. You can see here that her math score is wanting.”

Mama and Daddy both say, “Hummmm.”

But I interrupt. “Jamie said he will help me with my multiplication and division. I’m going to help him with his reading and writing.”

“That’s good, Rachel.” Miss Wright winks at me. “I’m glad you are taking the initiative.”

She looks at my parents. “What can I say more?”

“We’re satisfied,” Mama says.

We leave Miss Wright and join other parents outside at the gazebo where there is punch and cookies. It is lit up in celebration of the new electric lights. When I see them all over the gazebo, I take in a breath like I was going to cry.

“Oh, Mama, look! They weren’t there before.” I want to dance around, but all I can do is jump up and down and clap my hands.

Suddenly, Mama says, “Stop that! You look like Pignose.”

I stop. Now I want to cry for a different reason. Tears come to my eyes. Mama has never been cross with me before. I start shaking. Daddy picks me up.

“Don’t cry. Mama didn’t mean it.” He looks at Mama as though he were a big question mark.

Mama just looks straight ahead. “I’m sorry,” she says, but she doesn’t sound like she means it.

We mingle with the people at the punch bowl in the gazebo, and Mama is smiling and laughing with others as though nothing ever happened. My spark has been rained on and my heart is heavy. I no longer feel like celebrating.

Jamie and Maggie join me as I sit on the surrounding steps.

Maggie is chubby, has pig tails, and wears wire-rim glasses. She sits on one side of me, and Jamie on the other side.

“What’s the matter?” she says.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I upset my mama for some reason. Somethin’ happened to her. I’m just worried is all.”

“Parents can be scary sometimes,” said Jamie. “One time I came home and my ma spanked me. She was angry, and I didn’t know why.”

“Yeah,” Maggie says, picking her nose, “My mama gets upset at me for any little thing I do’r.” She sighs. “I’m used to’r it, though.”

We sit there in silence until we all agree we need a cookie. We stand up to get some and Daddy says, “Come on. It’s time to go.”

“I want a cookie,” I say.

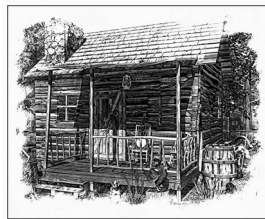
He grabs my hand. “Don’t worry. I gottcha some.” He reaches in his coat pocket and pulls out a chocolate chip. He smiles. “Gottchur back.”

I take it and smile. I know *he* loves me.

I turn back and wave at Maggie and Jamie, but they are busy getting cookies.

Mama looks at Daddy and me with a smirk on her face. It is a funny look, like red lipstick out of place on one corner of the mouth.

As I lay in bed with the stars twinkling through my window and the crickets chirping, I have a thought. Something between me and Mama has changed. I feel heartache, and perhaps, some resentment at her having broken a perfect record ... a strain of music I loved once but that now has an off key. I am scared. I wet my pillow with my tears and shudder.



At breakfast when I see Mama, there is an uncertainty now between us, and I hesitate to say “Good morning.”

“You don’t look well, Dear,” she says. “Do you have a fever?” She puts her hand on my forehead.”

“I feel fine, Mama,” I say. I see we are having pancakes again. “Can I have peanut

butter on mine?”

“You always wanted strawberries on yours. I got the strawberry syrup and the sugared strawberries. I thought we would extend the celebration from last night.”

She is busy at the stove and I take a sniff. There is a whiff of strawberries in the air, but I say, “I still want peanut butter. Maybe, can I have the strawberries on top of the peanut butter. Please?”

“You are a strange girl this morning. Did you have a row with one of your friends?”

My Daddy comes in to the rescue. He cuts between me and my strange mom. “Hi Hun. Oh! That smells good. Coffee smells just right, too. Can I have peanut butter on mine, and maple syrup?” He sits down beside me and pinches my nose. He makes me smile.

“That must be where she gets it. I didn’t realize you put peanut butter on yer pancakes.”

“All the time, dear.”

“Oh. I’m just now finding this out?”

“I guess so.”

Mama serves us peanut butter lovers our pancakes, covers our peanut butter with strawberries, then sits down and enjoys her strawberries covered in strawberry syrup.

“Umm, umm. You don’t know what yer missing.”

Daddy leans over and whispers in my ear, “I didn’t want the strawberries.”

“I heard that,” Mama says. “This is what we’re having. Strawberries.”

When Daddy is finished, he rises and says, “Got to drive a car for a customer down to Lubbock today, pick one up there, drive it to Plains and hitch a ride back. I will see you all tonight.”

Mama gets up and kisses him goodbye. “You will be gone all day.” She kisses him again, and I cover my eyes. “I’ll miss you,” she says in her slow, lonely voice.

“Miss you too, Hun.”

“Can I come?” I ask, wanting so very much to escape.

“When yer older, kid. Love you.” He leaves by the kitchen door. I hear him cranking up the old Model T. It backfires and then he’s off. I hear the car’s motor get farther and farther away.

I grab my school books and scoot out the front door, yelling, “I love you,” like a chicken. I feel too scared to say that directly to her. She did something to me last night I don’t understand.

Chapter Two

The school used to be a church. It has a bell in the steeple, which is convenient in calling the kids. There is a potbellied stove in the left corner by the door. It has two doors with a hall between them to hang your coats. Daddy says that keeps the cold out. Mama said her school had the stove in the very center with only one door. Things like this are interesting to me. But I could care less if I knew mathematics. I like geometry though, and how different buildings look.

Geography, how the world is divided into land masses and oceans and countries is really interesting, but when Miss Wright reads stories to us, I pay more attention to that. It is during a story about young George Washington, which combines history, geography, and writing, that Maggie passes me a note.

“Meet us after school.”

Miss Wright glances my way and catches my eye for a split second. I quickly hide the note.

After school, Jamie, Maggie, and I meet on the north side by the bike rack.

“Look what Jamie brought to’r school,” Maggie says as she grabs a bicycle.

“It’s my brother’s,” Jamie says. “He let me borrow it because he has to go out of town today.” Jamie takes the bike from Maggie. It is a rust color with slim bars formed into a triangle which acts as the body. The handle bars are swept back like wings of a gliding bird. There is a rack above the back wheel that will fit two little girls.

“Want a ride home?” Jamie asks with a mouth wide with excitement.

“How will we do’r this?” Maggie asks.

“I’ll hold onto Jamie,” I say, “and you can hold onto me.”

So Jamie brings the bike over to the steps. He mounts like a cowboy onto a horse, and I climb up using the axle of the back wheel which sticks out on both sides. Maggie follows suit, grabbing my waist as I had grabbed Jamie’s. Then we are off as Jamie shoves away from the steps.

Maggie and I scream as the bike wobbles over the school yard, but when we reach the street, we are going fast enough to hold us all up. That reminds me of a demonstration that Miss Wright showed us. She rolled a bicycle wheel slowly. It wobbled and fell down. She tried again, and with a stick, stroked the top of it until it was going fast. It went all the way to the woods behind the school. We all three yelled as the bicycle sped down the street.



I come through the door, calling back, “Thank you, Jamie.” All excited, I run toward the kitchen. “Mama, Mama. Guess what I did?”

“What was that?” Mama asks.

“Jamie gave me and Maggie a ride home on his brother’s bicycle.” I am out of breath by the time I rush into the kitchen and slam my books down onto the table.

“Slow down. You almost spilt yer milk.”

“Yes, Mama,” I say, sliding into a kitchen chair.

Mama peeks into the oven and the smell of roast beef makes my mouth water. “There is a nice brownie on the table for you.”

I have eaten half of it already. “Thank you, Mama. It’s really good.”

She stands there peering at me through two slits in her adult face. “I didn’t know Jamie had a brother.”

“I guess he does now,” is all I can think to say.

I am too excited to open my books and do my homework. “I’m goin’ to write about it.” I get out my Big Chief writing pad and flip to an empty page. I relive the thrilling ride down the street and bumping over the curb and onto my grassy front yard and write it all down. I sigh and Mama says, “Why are you sitting there all dreamy-eyed? You have homework to do.” That pops my bubble, and I say, “Yes, Ma’am.”



Next morning at breakfast, Daddy comes in half asleep. I guess he got in late. He throws a somber blanket over the fresh sunlit morning. As he sits down and sips his coffee, he says, “This morning I was talking to a policeman at the diner. They found a boy out at the lake. No one knows why he went in there and drowned. They say they found tire tracks of a bicycle, but there was no bike to be seen. Someone must have seen it lying there and took it.”

Bells started ringing in my head. What if that bike Jamie has is the bicycle that went missing? But Jamie said it was his brother’s. And Mama said she didn’t know he had a brother. This reminds me of the Sherlock Holmes story that Mama has been reading to me at night. It could turn into a real mystery. I will have to investigate.



It is Saturday morning. Breakfast is torture because I am so anxious to get out of the house and talk to Jamie and Maggie. I stuff my mouth with a biscuit and wash it down with milk. “May I be excused?” I ask. “I want to play with my friends.”

“Okay,” Mama says. “But don’t wander off. We’re going shopping today.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” I hurry out the door, then I stick my head back in for a split second and say, “Thank you.”

I first go to Jamie’s on the north side of the yard. Maggie sees and joins me. We walk up to the front porch, and Jamie pops his red head out from behind the corner of the house.

“This way,” he says. “I’m in the back yard.”

We run into the back where he has his bicycle turned upside down and torn all apart.

“I’m working on it,” he says. “Pa told me that if you want to learn how a thing works, take it apart and put it back together again. That’s how he learned about motor cars.”

“Well, Jamie Holcomb!” I say. “This is a nice state of affairs. We were going to ask for a ride. Weren’t we, Maggie?”

“Yes, we were,” Maggie says, brushing the hair out of her eyes. It is a wonderment how you get hair in your eyes when you wear pigtails to hold it back.

“It won’t take me too long to fix it,” Jamie says, surveying the pieces laying in the grass. “Maybe you can help.”

“What do ya want?” I ask.

Maggie sits on an upturned bucket and rests her chin on her fists, staring at us.

“Hand me that gear there.” Jamie points.

I start handing him things, and he puts them back in place with very little trouble.

Sometimes he turns the thing over in his fingers, his face lights up, and he says, “Ah. That goes here.”

Finally, he has all the pieces put back together. He turns it over and pulls down the kick stand which comes from behind the seat and goes under the back wheel. He takes a deep breath. “It should run better now that I have greased the gears.”

He raises his dirty hands and pretends his is going to smear grease on my face. I can’t help but scream and run away. He chases me and then starts chasing Maggie.

“Stop it right this minute,” I demand, “or we will go home!”

“Let me go in and wash my hands. I’ll be right back.” He laughs all the way up the back steps. I know his mother is going to be mad when she finds grease on the doorknob.

“Boys!” Maggie says with her hands on her hips.

“Yeah,” I agree. “Maggie?” I ask, “Were you with him when he got the bike?”

“No ... Why do you ask? He said his brother gave it to him.”

Maggie sits back down on the bucket. I choose the back steps.

I say, “My mama said she doesn’t think Jamie has a brother.”

“I’ve never seen him,” she says crossing her arms, “but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t.”

Jamie opens the back door. “All right,” he says all excited, rubbing his hands together. He rushes past me down the steps. “Let’s try her out.”

Jamie pushes the bicycle over to the steps, mounts it, and then we girls mount it just like before, and off we go across the lawn and out into the street.

“Jamie!” I cry as we miss a head-on collision with a car.

“She’s doin’ great!” he yells back.

He races to Main Street and downtown. There are cars everywhere. Maggie and I are

screaming our lungs out as Jamie weaves in and out of traffic. He winds up on the sidewalk, and we crash into this bald headed man with a huge nose and big lips. We are all down, but the old man gets up fast. He grabs the bike.

“So that’s where it was.” He peers at Jamie and glances at us girls as we all get to our feet. With one hand he holds the bike, and with the other he grabs Jamie’s shoulder.

“Where’d ja git this bike, boy?” he asks in anger.

“I uh, uh, I found it,” Jamie says, shaking in his boots.

That explains a lot. He didn’t get it from his brother after all.

“I said where?” The old man shouts.

Jamie starts crying. “In in an alley.”

“And where, by gum, is the alley?”

“Don’t hurt Jamie!” I yell.

The old man growls at me and tilts his head and asks politely. “Where?” Yet, he holds onto the bike and Jamie.

Jamie looks around. “Behind the Kress store over there.” He points across the street.

“Ya don’t mind do ya,” the man said in a sing song voice, then yelled “if I take my son’s bike?” He lets go of Jamie and walks away with the bike.

I am shaking as though the man had a hold of *me*. Jamie and Maggie are crying, and I say, “Let’s get out of here.”

Jamie darts across the street. We follow him in a zig zag manner to keep from being hit by the cars.

“What are ya doin?” I ask.

“Ya want some candy?” he asks. “This change in my pocket is burning a hole in my

pants. And after running into that old man, I have a hankerin' for somethin' sweet."

"Okay," I say. "We all agree on that."

"Yes sirree," Maggie says, licking her lips.



We walk through the double doors of the Kress Five and Dime. It smells of chocolate and cheap perfumes with a hint of old paper.

The candy counter is filled with bonbons, chocolate covered creams, chocolate covered nuts, especially peanuts, which I can smell, gumdrops, coconut macaroons, orange slices, Christmas hard candy, but no sugar canes, and then there is the Halloween section with candy corn, sugar pumpkins, moons, witches, and haystacks.

Jamie has three dimes, just enough to get each of us a bag full. The chocolate covered nuts are too expensive. It would cost me half my dime, so I get bonbons, creams, gumdrops, a few candy corns, and an orange slice. Jamie gets licorice. I didn't see any licorice and am sorely disappointed, but Jamie lets me trade my orange slice for a couple of his licorice drops. Maggie buys nothing but chocolate covered peanuts and won't give us any. She just laughs when I ask for some and stuffs her mouth full.

"Let's go out the back way," Jamie says. "I know a shortcut."

We tromp down the aisles until we reach a door that leads to a short hallway. The

other end steers us out into the alley. It is two sides of the buildings with giant sized advertisements of cigars and sodas painted on them. Garbage cans, pallets, and crates line the alley with trash strewn everywhere. It's as if the garbage collectors weren't very accurate when they emptied the cans.

"This is where I found the bicycle." Jamie points to a spot between a can and some crates. "I told my pa I found the bicycle on a trash heap, so he let me keep it."

"That's stealing," I say. "You can't just take someone's bicycle."

"Well," Jamie says, raising his voice. "The man got his bike back, didn't he?"

"But why did you say your brother gave it to you?" I ask.

"It sounded better than saying I found it in the trash." He kicks a pile of pallets.

"It must be God doing it," Maggie adds. "He doesn't want you to get into trouble, Jamie."

"You were with me," he says.

"But you're the one who picked it up." Maggie sticks her chocolate coated tongue out.

"I don't believe it," I say with my hands on my hips. "That my friends are thieves."

"Oh, grow up, Rachel," he says, spitting licorice juice as if it were chewing tobacco.

"That was the dead boy's bicycle," I comment as we reach the street. "The murderer must have left it there."

"And that wasn't the boy's father neither." Jamie reaches into his bag for another licorice drop.

"What do you mean?" Maggie asks. "He said he was."

"Don't believe everything ya hear." Jamie leads us across to the other corner, waving at the cars for them to stop and let us cross. They honk their angry horns in response. "Don't

cha read the papers?”

“No,” she says. “It’s too hard.”

“Well, my pa does,” he says as we reach the sidewalk. “I saw him show my ma a picture of the guy, and he was younger, wearing a suit and a hat.”

I put a candy corn in my mouth. “You don’t read the newspaper either.”

“Who needs ‘em anyway?” He spit licorice juice onto the sidewalk again.

“Well sometimes I do,” I say. “I am going home and read that article. I only have trouble when Mama rolls up the garbage into the paper.”

Maggie laughs. “I can see your unrolling the newspaper to read through the garbage.”

“Ha ha ha,” Jamie guffaws.

My dander is up. My jaw is clinched. I stiffen my arms. My fists fly back and forth as I march away from my thieving friends. They run after me.

“Hey,” Jamie calls. “We have a mystery here.”

“Yeah.” Maggie catches up to me. “Maybe that old man was the murderer.”

I stop and think. “We should go back to that alley and look for clues.”

So we go back to the alley and look around in the garbage and trash. Maggie finds a button next to the wall opposite Kress where Jamie had found the bike. I grab it out of her hand. I close my eyes and try to remember what that bald headed old man was wearing. It was a brown jacket. I looked at the button again. “Yes!” I say. “This button came from that old man’s jacket.”

I let Jamie touch the button. “He must be the murderer,” he says. “He placed the bicycle here to hide it.”

“To throw off the police,” Maggie says.

“Come on,” Jamie says. “We gotta find that old man.”

So we spend the rest of the afternoon looking, but not finding the prime suspect in our murder investigation.

Chapter Three

When I get home, there is a strange car in the driveway. It is still box shaped, but it has rounded edges. It looks more enclosed somehow with less window space and with a visor over the front window. It looks like the wind almost melted Daddy's car and blew it back to look wind-swept, especially the fenders, and the grill is creased down the middle. I stand there and pant and go up to the car and pet it, running my hand across the fenders and the hood.

Daddy comes out and asks, "How do you like it? Want to go for a ride?"

"Oh yes!" I say, bouncing up and down. Then I stop. Mother might see me and call me a pig nose, whatever that was supposed to be. "Please," I beg.

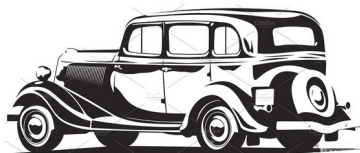
"When I leave after supper," he says, getting into the driver's side.

I get in on the other side as he opens the glove compartment and takes out some papers. The soft seats are covered with a light brown plush nap like velvet. There is a grill like the one out front on the dashboard. It has knobs and push buttons. I start pushing the buttons but nothing happens.

"It's a radio," Daddy says, rustling his papers. "Smashing, huh?"

"Smashing," I say with a smile.

"Doesn't work without the engine on."



Mother has other ideas. She is angry at me. "Where were you? I spent the afternoon looking for you. We were supposed to go to Sears and buy you a couple of new dresses and

some shoes. Now you'll have to wear an old dress to the Halloween party. You can go to your room and come out tomorrow." She points the way with her long arm and finger.

As I sit on my bed, I can hear Mama and Daddy arguing. Daddy, talking in his smooth voice, and Mama almost screaming and crying. I hear her say, "I have never seen anyone so disobedient in all my life!" That will be ingrained on my brain forever. I feel really depressed until Daddy opens the door.

"I think you owe your mama an apology, young girl. Then I think she will allow you to come out and eat."

I run to Mama and grab her waist and cry out, "I'm sorry Mama. I'm really awfully sorry." I dampened her dress with my tears. I am about to tell her what we had found, but something stops me. I don't feel I can trust her with that. It's too important.

"I forgive you this time, Rachel," she says rather sharply, "but next time, you will feel my hand for sure."

I hug her again, "Thank you, Mama."

"Go wash up and get to the table," she says.

At dinner we eat a bowl of chili beans with sliced up hot dogs.

Daddy brings up the subject of him taking me on a ride in the new car. "It will only be a couple hours. We should be back by ten o'clock."

Mama shakes her spoon at Daddy. "Jack, she'll lose two hours sleep."

Daddy musses my hair. "Oh, she'll fall asleep in the car, so it won't be that bad."

"I'm lonely enough when you have to go out at night. Now you want to take Rachel too." Mama frowns as she puts some more chili in her mouth. She holds the spoon in the air, chews her food, swallows, and says, "I'll miss you both."

“Yay!” I say, jumping up and down in my chair with my bumpus.

Mama squashes my excitement with, “Not at the table.”

I hurry and finish my chili, run around the table and hug Mama.

“Keep her safe, Jack,” she says as she clears the table.

“I will, honey.”

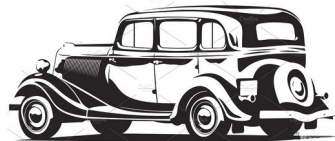
They kiss, and then Mama reaches down and kisses me goodbye. “Be a good girl now, and don’t forget yer coat.”

I grab my coat off the wall by the door and say, “I will,” as I step out the door. I meant I will behave, not that I will forget my coat.

I am so excited I can’t get my little heart to slow down. Sliding into that new car beside my daddy almost takes my breath away.

Daddy doesn’t crank up the car to start it. He explains, “You just press this button near the steering wheel. That starts the electricity, and you pull this button, called the throttle, like this. It puts gasoline into the engine.” The engine roars. He slides the throttle back in, and the engine just purrs. He puts the gears in place with a stick, and we’re backing up.

As we pass Jamie’s place, I see him in the front yard, so I lean into Daddy’s lap and wave out the window. Jamie waves back with his mouth wide open.



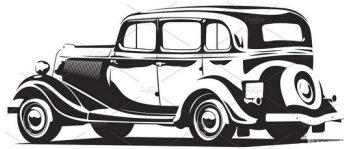
Compared to the old model-T, I can hardly feel the bumps in the road. When we get out onto the highway, the ride is really smooth.

I see the lights of Amarillo like fireflies that have decided to rest on a fence. Every now and then I see lights off to the side far off into the distance, like the stars have come

down and sat on the earth. When I look out at the horizon, I can see the Milky Way rising up into the night sky.

Daddy interrupts my wind-swept dreams. “Honey, if we get stopped by the highway patrol, you just pretend to be asleep. Let me to the talking. Okay?”

“Okay,” I say. I put my elbow out the window and lay my head on my arm and continue my reveries in the wind.



I must have gone to sleep because I didn't notice the car had stopped. I can hear men talking. There is a lamp on a telephone pole sending a cone of light into a small gathering of men. I can smell oil and grease in the air mingled with tobacco smoke.

Daddy comes to the car door. “Honey, I need you to get out for a spell.” He opens the door, I step out, feeling a bit groggy, and he says, “You can sit over here on this chair.”

The chair is dirty. I dust it off with my hand. I notice I am still outside, but on a porch of what seems to be a store.

A couple of men help Daddy push the car inside a garage which lights up when they open two large doors. I hear a lot of rattling and clanking. Does the new car need fixing already?

After a while, Daddy comes back with a grape soda and hands it to me. I take a gulp. Wow. That really wakes me up. The fizz almost comes out my nose.

“What's happening, Daddy?” I ask.

“We just have to make some minor adjustments to the car, and then it will be useful to us.”

“Isn’t it useful now?” I ask, taking another swig of soda.

“It will carry more in the trunk. It has such a small one. I want to expand it.”

I notice he is taking a drink of his own soda, but his is in a brown bottle and smells sweeter than mine, and his breath smells sugary.

“Just like Mama wanting to expand herself?”

Daddy laughs. “Not quite, darling.”

By the time I drink all my soda and doze off a bit, the men bring the car back out of the garage. It doesn’t look different. The trunk still looks like a big metal pillow attached to the back, just big enough for a spare tire. I don’t know if they really did anything.

As we drive off, I say, “Daddy, the trunk doesn’t look any bigger.”

“It’s bigger on the inside, darling.”

“Oh,” I say. I turn around to see if any of the backseat is missing. No. It is still the same. “Does ‘t look no different,” I say.

“You won’t be able to see the extra storage space. That’s the beauty of it.”

“Oh.”

“But you can’t tell anyone.”

“Why, Daddy?”

“It’s a secret. Like when I want to hide your birthday present, or your mommy’s.”

He smiles at me. “It’s our little secret. Okay?”

“Okay.” I have a bad feeling about this.

After awhile, I hear a siren behind us. A motorcycle comes up on Daddy’s window. The man on it is wearing a brown uniform, and he motions Daddy to pull over. Daddy pulls off to the side of the road.

It looks like a policeman. He leans down and asks, "Have your license and registration?"

Daddy reaches over into the glove compartment and pulls out some papers, showing the policeman.

"Pop yer trunk, please."

Daddy pulls a lever and the policeman goes back and lifts the trunk. He shuts it and comes back to Daddy's window.

I watch out of the slits of my eyes because I am supposed to be asleep.

"There's been some illegal traffic about. May I ask what your business is tonight?"

I listen to all this while leaning against my door.

"Here," Daddy says, rustling some papers. "I'm a driver for the Ford Motor Company. I drive new cars to the customers in the surrounding towns. Sometimes I get to keep a new car for awhile, like this one. We were just out for a drive. I wanted to show my girl. She's used to my old model-T I had."

"Um Hum." There was more rustling of papers. "Okay. You're free to go. Do you have a latch on that door? A lot of little kids have been falling out."

"Yes, sir," Daddy reaches over and latches my door. I wink at him. He winks back. "There," he says.

"Okay. Have a good drive back home. You do live in Amarillo?"

"Yes, sir."

"You seem to be heading that way." The policeman pats the car on top. "Okay, you're free to go."

We're back on the road. It seems strange to make stops along the way at night. I ask,

“Daddy. Did I do good when that policeman stopped us?”

“Yes, Darling. You did good. But he was not a policeman. He is highway patrol.”

“What’s the difference?”

“You find policemen in the city. These other fellows are state troopers.”

“Can I play the radio?” I hope I have not done wrong by pretending to be asleep, but I love my daddy, and I trust him.

“You can now. We’re in range.”

Daddy turns the dial and a lot of static comes out of the speaker on the dashboard. He pushes a button under the grill and country western music blares out. He turns the knob on the opposite side and turns down the volume.

The next thing I know is that we are pulling into the driveway at home and I am waking up. I hate that about cars. They always put me to sleep.

Daddy carries me inside and into my bedroom. Mama is there to put me to bed. I act like a lifeless doll and let her tuck me in.

“Good night, sweetheart.” She kisses me on the forehead.

I open my eyes long enough to say “Night, Mama,” and roll over and close my eyes, wondering if I am surrounded by crooks, and what is Daddy hiding?

Chapter Four

Halloween is drawing near. School is decorated with harvest hay and Jack-o-Lanterns, apples on strings, and ghouls and goblins students have colored in crayon. The contest pictures were put up on the wall in the main hallway to see who could draw the best haunted house or cemetery scene. Mine is a ghost who has slipped out of his grave and is flying above it to scare unwary people.

In art class we decorate a mask that we glue onto a paper bag we can put over our heads. I am cutting out the eyes when Mrs. Wright announces, “Don’t forget, children, the annual Halloween party is this Saturday. We expect you to wear your masks, and I hope your mothers make you a smart costume to go with it.”

I know what I will be wearing. Of course, my mother is letting me design my own costume out of black and red crepe papers.

Maggie comes over to my desk. “Rachel, what are you going to come as?”

“A witch, of course.” I show her my witch face with its warts on the nose, cheek, and chin, then the bell rings. “Here comes math. Ugh!”

“Yeah,” Maggie says, gathering her books. “I have music next, and I can’t sing like an owl.”

“You mean ‘worth a hoot’?”

“Yeah.”

I sit beside Jamie’s desk and he plops down into it as if by magic.

“What are you coming as?” I ask.

“A wolf.” He laughs softly. “I like how Mrs. Wright showed me how to cut the face in

half and let the nose hang over the mouth.”

“Yeah. My witch's nose does the same thing.”

Mr. Beattle says, “Alright class, it’s time to start.”

So I have to be quiet.



The week slipped by pretty fast. Today is Halloween Saturday, and my stomach is in knots waiting for tonight’s party. I know I’m going to have the greatest fun. I don’t think I will bob for apples though, I don’t want to get my head wet. But I know there will be other games to play and songs to sing with my friends.

“Mama, can I go over to Maggie’s?” I ask, finishing my last pancake. “I want to show her my costume.”

“I don’t want you wearing your costume until tonight, Rachel.” Mama takes the breakfast dishes off the table without looking at me, just talking to the dishes. “I know you will tear it if you do.”

“I won’t tear it,” I say. “I promise. Please. Oh, please.”

Mama stands at the sink, washing dishes, turns her head, looks at me and sighs. “You can show it to her tonight. Now go outside and play. I have a lot of work to do before the party.”

I start to leave when she says, “And brush yer teeth before you go.”

Now I sigh and think to myself, *Mean Mama.*

Instead of brushing my teeth, I peek into Mama and Daddy’s bedroom to see if I can get Daddy’s permission to show my costume to Maggie. He has his back turned towards me

over by the bed and doesn't know I'm there, and I see something I had never seen before. On the chest-drawers I see a holstered gun and a wallet with a silver badge attached to the outside of it. I slide over to it and want to touch it, but I'm afraid it's too dangerous.

"Daddy," I say, and Daddy jumps almost out of his shoes. "What is this?"

He turns around and puts a fake smile on. I always can tell. "That's part of my costume for tonight," he says. "I'm going to scare someone at the Halloween party."

"Oh, Daddy," I say. "You shouldn't scare somebody."

He grabs the wallet with the star on it and his gun, hiding his wallet in his pants pocket and strapping his gun on. I notice he is wearing a red bow tie. He grabs his suit coat out of the closet and puts it on, I guess to hide his shoulder holster.

"Daddy," I say, turning back and forth with my finger on my chin, "why are you wearing your Sunday suit?"

He reaches down and kisses me on the head. "It's part of the costume, darling. I'm going as a G-man."

I jump up and down, "Oh, goody, goody."

He puts his finger to his lips, "Shhh!" and whispers into my ear, "It's a secret. There won't be a surprise if anyone else knows, so don't tell. Okay?"

"Okay, Daddy." We lock our little fingers to make the bargain.

As he goes out the door, he says, "Now I believe your mother told you to brush your teeth."

"Yes, Daddy," I say, having forgotten the reason I came into the bedroom in the first place. Now he is gone.

After I brush my teeth, Mama is using her new vacuum cleaner with its dirt catching

bag hanging from the long handle.

“Are you and Daddy goin’ ta have a party here tonight?”

“Yes, dear. Now run along.”

“Are ya goin’ ta drink adult soda pop?”

“We are not going to have beer, if that’s what you mean. We will be having punch.”

“Will ya save me some punch?”

Mama stops the vacuuming. “Why all the questions? They will have punch at yer party at school, I’m sure. Now get along.”

I saunter out the door, disappointed I can’t take my costume over to Maggie’s.

When I arrive, Maggie says, “Not a problem. We can make you up like a witch right now.”

I feel like a weight has been lifted off my heart as Maggie’s mother cuts out black capes for me and Maggie. We cut out and tape together two hats from black construction paper. Maggie’s mother then puts makeup on us girls so we look all wrinkled with warts. She just happens to work at a theater downtown and helps out at the school whenever we have a school play. She knows all about scary make-up.

Two little witches run out of Maggie’s house and down the street to Jamie’s.

Jamie’s father was born with one leg shorter than the other and has to wear a shoe with a very thick sole. Jamie is wearing one of his father’s extra shoes when he opens the door.

“Ahh! Witches!” Then he proceeds to stretch out his arms and come at us, limping and crashing down that heavy shoe. “I am Frankenstein.”

Of course, we scream and run away.

Jamie has tossed his father’s shoe back into his house, put his own shoe on and has

met us at the school playground. We spend our time running, swinging, sliding, and twirling around on the merry-go-round, and climbing on the monkey bars. Then we are interrupted by a couple of boys dressed as ghouls with white faces and black shirts. I know one of them is Butch, the one with blonde curly hair, and the other, Jamie knows to be Richard Tarr. They don't play fair. They go up the slide when we want to go down, and when we are on the monkey bars, one of them is always right underneath us trying to look under our skirts and teasing us about having dirty underwear. We girls finally have to leave, as the three of them group together and laugh and make jokes about us.

Maggie and I have lunch at her house. We don't mention the boys and spend time telling ghost stories until my mama calls me home.

"The party's at six o'clock, so we are having an early supper," she says, not noticing me at all. "It is only a light meal, but I am sure you will have something this evening at the school."

What I find on my plate is a few tamales and a couple of candy corns.

"I know it's not much, but I was able to trade with a street vendor and got these with a pair of old shoes I had. I also had a couple pennys in my purse, so I got you that Halloween treat."

"Where is Daddy?" I say as I lift a bite of tamale to my mouth.

"He had to go to work down in Lubbock. He said he would be back before the party was over."

"Umm. This is good, Mama. Why haven't we had this before?"

"Well, dear. It's Mexican food, and in hard times it's cheap."

I was about to ask Mama about Daddy's work, as I suspect he is a G-man, and I start

to cry.

“What on the earth is the matter, Rachel?”

“I just wish Daddy was here. It is dangerous on Halloween night.”

“I wouldn’t worry. Halloween is just made up of fairy tales. It isn’t serious.”

But I was thinking of Daddy wearing that gun. I thought of that secret compartment in the car, and I can imagine all kinds of trouble he may be getting into, having to deal with, and yes, even fight with criminals and get hurt.



Mama did finally notice I had makeup on and made me wash it off. Now I am having to wear the old paper bag mask I made at school over my head. My construction paper hat will not stay on over the paper bag, so I carry it in my hand as Maggie and I walk to school. My black cape rustles against my crepe paper dress. I am glad we are finally getting to go to the party, but the night is gloomy. Wispy clouds pass over the moon, throwing shadows over our path. We cringe at every alley we pass by, expecting Butch and Richard Tarr will jump out at us.

Reaching the hill where the school sits, we are greeted by a gay and cheery atmosphere. Yellow and orange lights pour out of the school windows, flickering against children running about laughing and screaming. Voices and music of every kind comes from the open door. We are met by a popular song coming from the school’s only record player.

“Say, say, oh playmate,

Come out and play with me

And bring your dollies three,

Climb up my apple tree.

Shout down my rain barrel,

Slide down my cellar door,

And we'll be jolly friends forevermore."¹

I recognize Jamie's wolf mask and costume as he runs to greet us.

"Come play musical chairs," he says. "I am sure to win."

Oh dear. I have to play a game right away. Mrs. Wright now has *Night On Bald Mountain* by Mussorgsky playing on the record player and we are supposed to march around two rows of chairs and find a seat when she stops the record. This makes me so nervous. I am always losing my seat. The music stops, and I sit on Jamie's lap. I am the man out. I am so embarrassed I stay seated on top of Jamie as the music starts again.

"Rachel!" he demands. "Don't just sit here."

He pushes me off, and I walk away to see what else I can do. I see kids bobbing for apples. I quickly turn away from that. I see a punch bowl on a table filled with cookies and cakes. That's more like it.

As I fill my plate with cookies and a slice of chocolate cake, Maggie finds me.

"I lost my seat too." She grabs a plate. "Look at all this. Umm, ummm."

One of Mrs. Wright's helpers, Judith, a ninth grader, serves Maggie and me each a cup of red-orange punch. I taste it. It's exotic, whatever it is.

¹"Playmates" by Philip Wingate and Henry W. Petrie 1894

"Let's find a seat," Maggie suggests.

We find some desks that have been shoved to the side against the windows.

"Oh, I forgot a fork," I say, taking off my paper bag witch's face.

“Don’t worry, I got an extra napkin,” Maggie says, handing me one. “Just grab that cake and stuff it into your mouth, like this.”

Maggie consumes half her cake in one bite. Then she starts choking and staring and pointing.

“Here,” I say. “Drink yer punch.”

After clearing her throat, Maggie moans, “Oh no. Look who’s talking to Jamie.”

“Isn’t that Butch and Richard Tarr dressed as pirates?”

“Yeah. I wonder what they’re up to.” Maggie fills her mouth with a whole cookie.

“Let’s go and see.”

We saunter up to the boys, who are laughing their heads off.

“Yeah,” says Butch. “And they put old man Quattlebaum’s Model T on the roof of his barn.”

Lots of laughter.

Butch shoves Jamie with his elbow. “And guess what we’re gonna do?” Without waiting, Butch says, “We’re gonna move Jenkin’s outhouse over a few feet so when he goes out there, he’ll drop into the hole!”

More guffaws.

“Jamie,” I say completely miffed, “Don’t listen to this trash. Come with us.”

“Maybe he doesn’t want to, Miss Priss,” Butch taunted. He turned to Jamie. “Want to come with? It’ll be a blast.”

“Look! Look!” Maggie says, half choking, half whispering.

I try to see where she is pointing. I automatically turn my head and hope he doesn’t see me. It’s the man that took the bicycle, and he also is dressed as a pirate. He looks a lot

like Butch.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say, “before he sees us.”

We duck down to hide behind the kids dancing, trying to get out by the front door.

When we reach it, this giant pirate slides in front of us. “Goin’ some ‘ere mateys?”

I didn’t notice he had a sword, but he is now pointing it right into my chest, and my heart is pounding so hard I think it’s going to pop out and stick right on the end of it.

He withdraws the sword and seems stunned. His hat is smashed down. He turns around and yells, waving his sword. I see Jamie running away with a thick stick in his hand. The old man runs after him.

“Oh, brave Jamie,” I yell, and commence running after him with Maggie at my heels.

Everyone is screaming and Jamie jumps out a window. The pirate follows him. Maggie and I wind up at the window yelling Jamie’s name. We can’t see him. He fled into the dark shadows of Halloween.

I am shuddering and slump down onto the floor. Maggie sits down beside me and pants.

I hear Mrs. Wright. “Rachel. Rachel.”

The next thing I know is Daddy leaning over me. “Honey?” He slaps me gently on the cheek, and I shake my head, trying to tell him it isn’t necessary.

“Daddy?” I rub my eyes. I feel groggy.

“Rachel. Are you all right? They say you fainted.” Daddy pushes my hair back and smiles anxiously.

“Did you catch the bad guy? He was chasing Jamie.” I sit up. I seem to be on a couch. I look around. Someone moved me to the corner of the room. The couch had been covered in

hay and corn stalks. I try to dust off my costume. Maggie sits down beside me and puts her hand on my shoulder. Tears are flowing down her face. Daddy is still stooping down looking at me. He holds my face with his hand. “We’re still looking, but we will find him.”

This is not how I imagined the Halloween party would go.



I have hidden in the back seat of the car. Daddy thinks he took me home and put me to bed. We are driving out of Amarillo and into the darkness of the night. After a long while we stop. Daddy didn’t park on the side of the road, but just stopped. We are in the middle of the highway on a gentle slope. I poke my head up and read a sign. It says, “Canadian River.” The headlights show that we are on a small bridge. Daddy gets out. I see other headlights. One car comes toward us from across the bridge. Two other cars come up from behind. Men get out. There is a lot of talking and smoking. One guy is smoking a cigar. When I see him, I almost faint. It is the pirate! What is *he* doing here? I sink down into the floor of the car. My heart is pounding so hard I am sure it will yet escape. All I can do is cry silently. What is my daddy doing with this murderer?

Daddy gets back into the car. We turn around and head back toward home. I have to stick my fist into my mouth and bite down in order not to cry.

We don’t go home, but we drive up to the school. It’s all dark now. I guess everyone went home after the escapade with the sword flying around scaring everyone. After sitting here for awhile I hear another car drive up. I look out the window. A door on the other car opens and a body is dumped out. The car races away. Daddy shines a flashlight onto the body. It is a little boy all tied up with rope.

It is Jamie!

I slam the door open, start bawling, and run over to him. “Jamie! Jamie!” I cry.

“What the ...” says Daddy.

I grab Jamie and drag him into my lap.

“Rachel!” I can tell Daddy is aghast.

He stoops down and flips out a pocket knife. He cuts the ropes off. Jamie is groaning.

“Get back into the car. In the front. I’ll put Jamie in the backseat.”

We drive off.

“Where are you taking him?” I sob.

“To the hospital. And you, young girl, are going to feel the strap of my belt.”



I think Daddy forgot to spank me. As soon as he delivers me to Mama, he is off again.

Mama takes my hand, and we stroll up the steps to the front door. She says, “Where’s he off to again? He got a phone call right in the middle of the party. He said he had a job to do.”

The house is dark except for the light coming out of the kitchen window on the right side. We walk slowly into the kitchen and sit down at the table. The kitchen smells of cake, icing, and coffee. There is also a sweet smell I had only smelled once on Daddy’s breath. Adult soda pop.

Mama looks exhausted. She lights a cigarette. I have never seen her smoke before. “I guess he didn’t want ta take ya tonight.” Her words sound funny with a cigarette in between her lips as though she is sticking her tongue out.

“I guess he didn’t tell ya,” I say, helping myself to leftover cake.

“Tell me what, dear?” she asks, blowing smoke across her shoulder toward the sink.

“That we just saved Jamie’s life.” I stuff my mouth with spice cake with white icing. I can taste vanilla and almond flavoring in the icing.

“What happened to Jamie?”

“He got kidnapped by a pirate.”

Mama laughed softly. “One of the games you played at school?”

“No Mama. Jamie got taken by that old man who took his bike.” I reload my mouth with cake. “It seemed that Daddy knew the man, and talked to him tonight, and got Jamie back.”

“What are you talking about?” Mama rested her chin in her hands and stared blankly.

I told her what happened the Saturday before when I went out playing with Jamie and Maggie, when I was suppose to go shopping with her. She sat there with her mouth open.

“Then he showed up tonight at the Halloween party dressed as a pirate. Look here.” I opened my blouse and showed her near my left nipple. “This is where he cut me with his sword.”

“Come in the bathroom. Let me take care of that.” She stood up and smashed her cigarette onto my plate. She looked like she was about to faint as she grabbed my hand and led me down the hall.

“I didn’t know it was bleeding so much,” I said as I leaned against the lavatory.

She took out a cotton swab, dipped it in a liquor bottle she got from the medicine cabinet and swabbed my chest.

I jumped. “Ouch!”

“Be still.” She took my blouse and undershirt off and put a cotton ball soaked in the liquor on the cut. “Hold this.”

“Ow,” I complained.

Then she took a piece of gauze and wrapped it around my torso to hold the cotton in place.

“You said a pirate did this to you?”

“Yes.”

She led me out of the bathroom to my bedroom. “I didn’t think they would let a kid play with a real sword.”

“Mama. It was a man!”

“What man?” She stooped down to my height as I lay on the bed letting her undress me. “Did a man hurt you? Where was your teacher? I am going to have a word with her.”

“Mama, she couldn’t be everywhere at once.”

She covered me up and kissed me. “Did he touch you?”

“Only with the sword. Why?”

“Never mind. Go to sleep.”

As I lay there trying to go to sleep, I hear Butch walking down the sidewalk.

“Wasn’t that a smash? He got all covered with it.” Lots of guffaws.

As I lay there trying to go to sleep, I hear Butch walking down the sidewalk.

“Wasn’t that a blast? He got all covered with it.” Lots of guffaws.

Now I remember what Butch had said at the Halloween party. Butch and Richard Tarr were going to move Mr. Jenkin’s outhouse so he would fall into it. I guess they did. Oh! I shouldn’t laugh. I can’t stop laughing! What a wicked girl I am. Stop it!



When I wake up, Daddy is already finishing his breakfast. I have to ask him about Jamie before he leaves for work. I run into the kitchen in my pajamas.

“Daddy,” I say as I grab the knob on the back of his chair. “Can we go see Jamie at the hospital before you go to work?”

He wipes his mouth with his napkin. “Hon’, Jamie’s already at home. It was just an emergency visit at the hospital, then I brought him home.” He stands up and scoots his chair in. “And yes, you can go see him after breakfast, and no, I’m off today. Today is Sunday.”

“I don’t want to go alone, and Maggie goes to church on Sundays.” I stand there wondering if I should get dressed or eat first.

“I can go with you. I want to call on him and his dad anyway.”

I grab Daddy’s legs and give him a big hug. “Thank you, Daddy. I love you.”

“I love you too, pet.” He hugs me by pressing my head into his thigh.

After a breakfast of pancakes and real maple syrup, I get dressed and Daddy and I walk over to Jamie’s.

Jamie’s daddy opens the door. He is tall, balding, half shaven, has a long nose and jowls hanging from his jawbone. I look at his feet. One leg is shorter. He wears a very thick-soled shoe to make up the difference.

“Hello Mr. Merkle,” he said politely. “Won’t you come in?”

He ushers us into a musty smelling living room that smells of cigarette smoke and old newspaper. There is an old worn out couch facing the door, and a rather large floor radio

standing next to the door. It is probably also a record player. The coffee table in between is covered with magazines, papers, beer cans, and a green glass ashtray filled with ashes and old cigarette butts.

“Thank you again fer what you did fer Jamie last night,” he says, squeezing my daddy’s right shoulder.

“Any neighbor would have done the same,” Daddy says.

I see a doorway to my right near the couch. I wonder if Jamie might be in his bedroom. I start to go through it, but Mr. Holcomb says with a slow Texas drawl, “I wouldn’t go in thar. Jamie’s asleep.”

I am disappointed today. Daddy and Mr. Holcomb talk a lot. I don’t listen except to hear our neighbor say he didn’t know Jamie had a bicycle. His mother ran off recently... no one to look after him, and Jamie pretty well has to fend for himself while Mr. Holcomb works. I spend the rest of the day waiting for Maggie, who doesn’t come over.

Chapter Five

I hear my mama say, “Rachel, git up. We’re goin’ ta Church,” as though she were far away, but it is enough to let me know that the world I thought I was in is but a dream. I rub my eyes and yawn.

“What?” I ask.

“Git up. Ta-day is Sundie, an’ we’re gonna go ta Church.”

I sit on the edge of my bed and try to wake up by taking deep breaths. A girl shouldn’t be woken up right in the middle of a dream. I think I was wandering through all kinds of rooms, looking for a way out. They were all bedrooms and living rooms and kitchens of different sorts. It was like several houses got stiched together into one giant maze. I wake up really tired, having tried to get out of it. The thought comes to me that a stolen bicycle is at the end of it all when Mama calls me a third time. I knew she wouldn’t call again.

As I stroll into the hallway, she says, “Into the bathtub, youngun. You can use my bathwater. It’s still warm.”

Mama is using a rose scented soap. It would be nice if it didn’t have that sting of soap smell to it. I can remember the rose bush outside the front door this last summer. It smelled so nice. I have often sat on the porch, getting drowsy, breath it in. I don’t have a clean washrag, so I just rub the bar of roses all over my body, dunk once, get out and dry myself on mama’s damp towel. Sometimes I wish I could always have my own bathwater and towel. I hear that other people do.

Having donned on my pink ruffley dress, I follow the smell of coffee to the kitchen, where Mama has cooked up some eggs, bacon, hominy grits, and toast.

“Your daddy brought them in last night,” she says as she serves me a plate. I get one of everyth. She gets two eggs, two bacon strips, but only one toast. I guess she is sav the bread.

“Where is Daddy?” I say as I mix my eggs into the grits, which is always on the breakfast menu, except for when we have pancakes. It must be a Southern habit.

“Your daddy is sleepin’. Come in drunk last night. That’s when I decided we are goin’ ta Church ta-day.” She sips her coffee and gives me the stern look that was meant for my daddy for sure.

I swallow down some grits and eggs, take a gulp of milk, and say, “We never been to Church before. Why we goin’ now?” I ask. I also wonder why she has reverted to her Ozark accent.

“We did when you were little. My daddy was a preacher. I guess we wandered from the path when he died. It’s the hard times, you know. Yer daddy isn’t gettin’ paid as much as he used to. He pays the rent though, even if we have to starve sometimes.” Mama has finished, gets up and puts her dish in the sink. “I’m goin’ ta pray fer more money. Ever body can use more money.”

I get up and put my dish in the sink. “I know you is worried, Mama, ‘cause yer accent has come back. Always does when yer worried.”

“I guess it has.”

As we walk to the door, she hands me my coat and says, “Put yer coat on. It has snowed in the night.”

We walk out into the snow. It’s a foot deep, at least my size of foot. It’s like a wonderland outside with peaks of snow on the fences, bushes, cars, and trees. I blow into the

air to see my frozen breath. I wish I had mittens. I am reminded of my little Golden Book. “You shall have no mittens, you naughty kittens.” Another Golden book is all about go to Grandma’s house and decorate a Christmas tree. I guess it won’t be too long before that holiday. Thanksgiving is right around the corner. Maybe the snow will last.



The church build is made of stone. I’ve never seen one like it. There are tall cathedral windows in front and smaller ones on the side. The front door is inset in the bell tower out front. We carefully ascend stone steps to get to it like in the story of Jacob’s ladder to Heaven. We push open the heavy dark-wood door and step inside. I am engulfed by the smell of old paper and someone’s flowery perfume. We must be late because everyone is singing like a choir of angels. We sit on the left back row. I keep my coat on. It seems that stone churches are cold. After the song, everyone stands and recites out of a little prayer book that sits next to the hymnal. The preacher says, “Amen,” and everyone sits down.

I enjoy the dark beams holding up the white gabled ceiling and the leaded glass cathedral windows with every color of the rainbow marching down in shafts of light as the people sing *Onward Christian Soldiers*.

Onward Christian soldiers

Marching as to war,

With the cross of Jesus

Going on before,

Christ, the royal Master,

Leads against the foe;
Forward into battle,
See his banners go!²

My soul has been lifted, and I want to stand up and march down the aisle. It takes my breath away.

I try to listen to the sermon, all about being a Christian, but every time I think about what the preacher is saying, my mind drifts off into Never Never Land. I then receive an elbow in the ribs by an overzealous mother. Can't a girl have some peace at Church?

Sometimes I see my mama sleeping, but then I remember she wanted to come here and pray. I wouldn't jab her in the ribs. I know she would take me out and whup my bottom. So I abide my time by looking at all the interesting people. There are some that look like cowboys, some women that are so dressed up with all their makeup that they look like movie stars. There are old people with glasses and beards and faces full of wrinkles, and there are families with children I know from school. Yes, even Butch is here across the aisle from us. He must have felt I was staring at him, for he turns and winks at me. He leans forward to rest his head on his hands, and then I see a man who must be his pa.

My heart skips a beat and I stop breathing. I stare at the man sitting next to Butch. Now I understand why that old man had dressed up as a pirate at the Halloween party. He and Butch must have been a pair. I can feel the blood leaving my face. How dare he! How can a man like that come to Church? And Butch too. Butch looks at me again and laughs silently. His body is shaking in laughter. Then the old man jabs him in the ribs. Butch's face becomes stiff as he raises back up and looks straight ahead.

I think I went to sleep. Everyone is rising and moving towards the door. Mama sits there in a somber mood. When there is enough room in the aisle she rises and scoots me forward. I hesitate, look around, don't see Butch or the old man, and Mama says, "Go on." I head for the door, but Mama pulls me back. She wants to go against the flow of traffic. She heads up toward the altar and the pulpit. No, she passes those things and heads towards the organ and the choir seats.

The organist is still playing, but Mama just leans on the organ and waits. When she stops playing, the old woman rises and starts talking to my mama.

"Hi, Pearl. I'm glad you came."

Mama puts her arm around me and introduces me. "Hi, Henrietta. This is my girl, Rachel. Say hi to my music teacher."

"Hi," is the only thing I can say because this is a complete surprise to me.

"And this, Pearl, is the organ I wanted to show you. It is the biggest in the whole state of Texas. Isn't it grand? As you can see above the choir seats, it has a whole ensemble of pipes."

"Yes. They're beautiful, and it sounds so divine." Mama and this lady, Henrietta just beam at each other. I didn't know my mama could smile so wide. But I can see that these two women are good for each other. I'm glad she has a friend, but I never knew she had one.

Henrietta looks at me and says, "This is the reason your mama has been absent from home at nights. I've been teaching her to play the piano at the school."

"Mama," I say, "Have you been absent from home?"

"When you were sleeping, dear. So you wouldn't miss me." She pets my head like I was a dog. I scrunch up my face.

“Now your mama will study on this magnificent organ, dear.” Instead of shaking hands, they hold hands like old friends.

“Mama,” I say. “Are you gonna play as beautiful as this old lady here?” I would be so proud.

They both laugh.

“You, dear child, can call me Ma Peters. Everyone else does.” They are smiling too much. “Someday she will take my place when I retire, see? I like your mama very much. She has become more than a student to me. She is just one of my many children.”

“How many children do ya have, may I ask?”

She reaches down and wiggles my nose. “Of course you may. I have thirty two I think.”

“Wow, Ma’am, that is a lot of children.” My eyes almost pop out at the number.

“They are all my students.”

“Oh. I see.” Well I am glad she didn’t have to go through that many births.

“You come over tonight,” says Ma Peters. “We will have some tea and cookies.”

“We would love to,” Mama says. “Well. We will be going. I have a slow pot on, and my hard working husband will be up by now.”

“If he doesn’t have to work tonight, bring him along too.”

“I will if I can. We will see you then.”

So we launch ourselves back out into the snow and a cold blizzard wind. By the time we arrive home, I can smell the roast beef. Even though my brain says I need a nap, I scoot myself onto a kitchen chair and wait in anxious anticipation like a panting puppy that’s hard to hold back.



After dinner I sneak off to Maggie's. No one answers, so I go over to Jamie's. I peek in the window because I think maybe he won't be home, but I see Butch is there. I am so disappointed that Jamie has taken up with the likes of him. It almost brings tears to my eyes. I would cry if I weren't so angry. I go back home and try to slip back into the house through the kitchen door. But as I come in, Mama steps into the kitchen.

"Where have you been?" she asks. "I thought you were in there taking a nap."

"I just went outside," I say, taking my coat off.

"Is it too cold for ya?" She starts clearing off the table.

I pinch a bit of roast just for a last taste. "Yes Ma'am. It's too cold to play outside."

"Too bad Maggie's family will still be in Church. Maybe when we go over to Ma Peter's tonight we can invite Maggie too."

"That will be swell." I grab her legs and give her a squeeze. "Thank you, thank you."

"Now you had better go take a nap before we go."

"Okay."

I don't go to sleep right away, trying to know what to do about a possible murder suspect showing up at Church. But sleep does catch up to me, and I doze for a long while. It is dark when I wake up.

"Hon'," I hear my daddy say, "comb your hair and put on your coat. I'll take you and your mother over to Ma Peters."

"Oh!" I say. "I'm supposed to go get Maggie. She's coming with us."

“Just comb your hair,” Daddy says. “Your mother and Maggie are in the living room waiting for you.”

I quickly flick the light on, run the brush through my hair a couple times and rush out of the bedroom.”

“Oh, Maggie,” I say, greeting her. “Isn’t it great? Mama’s goin’ to play the organ at Church.”

“Get yer coat on, Rachel.” Mama hands me my coat.

I slip it on fast while Maggie is talking. “Your church maybe. I’m a Babtist.”

“I don’t know what I am, but I do know that Butch and that old man that took Jamie’s bicycle is the same. They were at our Church today.”

“No kidding,” Maggie says in surprise.

Mama guides us out the door with two hands.

“You do mean the pirate, don’t you?” Maggie says, grabbing my hand.

It is snowing outside. Daddy has shoveled the walk and made a path to the driveway on the left side of the house. We girls climb into the backseat, and Mama closes our door and rushes around to the other side in front. Another door slams and we back up into the street. The tires sound like when you pull your finger across a balloon right before it pops, and the snow crunches beneath the weight of the car.

My attention is pulled between the pretty street lights, the yellow glow that comes from the windows of the houses, and Maggie trying to talk to me.

“What did he do? Did he chase anyone at Church?” she asked, pulling at my arm.

“No, he just jabbed Butch in the ribs with his elbow. Butch is real scared of him.”

“You mean he’s after Butch too?”

I turn my head to look her in the eyes. “No.” I put a very important look on my face. “I think he is Butch’s daddy.”

“No kidding!” Maggie’s eyes get really round and big. “Well now that I think of it, they did look alike at the Halloween party. Yeah, they both looked like pirates.”

“Did you notice the shape of their faces?” I ask.

“I know. How would it be like to have a father like that?”

Daddy says, as we drive up into a strange driveway, “It means that Butch will most likely turn out like his father.”

“Daddy. You been listening in on us,” I complain.

“Just like a party line,” he says. “Here we are. I’ll be back in a couple hours. I have something to do at work.”

“Love ya,” Mama says as she kisses him goodbye.

“Love you too,” he says in return.

I stand up in back and squeeze Daddy around the neck and he pretends he’s being choked. “I love you too, Daddy,” I say.

“You girls mind your manners now,” is what daddy’s always say.

In the back of my mind I wonder if it is police work.

We get out and tromp through the snow heading toward the front door.

“No, girls,” Mama calls. “This way.”

We enter the kitchen on the right side of the house, just the opposite of ours. Ma Peters is there to take our coats and hang them on the back of her door. We scrape the snow off onto a floor mat, and she guides us into the living room.

“This way, girls,” she says, including my mama as being one of the girls. Ma Peters is

quite old. She looks a hundred, and her house smells musky. There is a hint of acrid body odor and old paper and grease.

“I have some cookies and punch for you little ones and tea for you, dear.”

We sit on a damask beige fabric sofa with rolled arms. Before it, holding our plates of cookies and glasses of punch, is a coffee table made of dark wood with a glass inset. I look around the walls and see all the nick-knacks hanging with different sized pictures of the family. It looks like a grandmother’s house for sure.

As I eat my cookies and sip an unfamiliar strawberry punch, I listen to Mama and Ma Peters with one ear and Maggie with the other.

“Yes, she’s livin’ in Denver. It’s an awful drive up there,” says Ma Peters.

“What do you think that old man was up to?” says Maggie.

“No, my parents are passed away. It was a car accident,” says Mama.

“I bet he has somethin’ on Butch, the way he treats him,” says Maggie.

“He’s doin’ poorly,” Ma Peters says. “I keep him in the back room. I don’t expect him to last long.”

“I’m glad Jamie’s doin’ better,” says Maggie. “We gotta be lookin’ for that murderer.”

So the ping-pong match of words went on from one ear to the next until my cookies ran out. Then I answered Maggie.

“I think we ought to show Daddy that button you found in the ally,” I say. “He seems to know Butch’s father. At least, I think he’s his father.”

“I think we need to give it to the police,” Maggie says.

“My daddy knows the police. He works with them a lot,” I say.

“I thought your daddy was a car salesman.” Maggie stuffs another cookie into her

mouth.

“He is, but,” I hesitate, “he knows *some* policemen, like I said, and if you give it to him, he will know what to do with it.”

“Okay. Here. You give it to him.” She carefully takes it out of her dress pocket.

“You been carrying that thing around with you?”

“Yes.”

“You could have lost it.”

“But I didn’t, did I?” Maggie places it into the palm of my hand. I thought she was going to stick her tongue out at me, but she didn’t. I guess she’s growing up a little.

Ma Peters sees we are handling a button. “I’ll sew that back on if you would like.”

“Oh, no, Ma’am,” I say, quickly slipping it into my pocket. “It’s just a memento.”

“I see. Just a girl thing, eh?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Maggie says.

In another two minutes, Mama rises and says, “It’s time to go, girls. I hear the car outside.”

We all get to our feet, and Ma Peters escorts us out the back door of the kitchen.

“Bye bye, now,” Ma Peters says.

“Bye,” Mama says.

“Bye,” I say.

We tromp out through the snow to the car. Daddy has opened the doors for us, We get in, slam the doors, and we’re off. “Daddy,” I say. “We have something important to tell you.”

“Okay, darling.”

I lay my folded arms up on the back of the front seat. “Remember I told you when

Jamie found that bicycle behind Kress?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well, what I didn’t tell you is that Maggie here found a button that came from old man ‘s jacket. Don’t worry, I was close enough to his jacket before we went to Kress to know it was his button.”

“I see.” He hummed a little tune, and then said, as we pulled into our driveway, “How were you that close?”

“Because before we went to Kress Jamie ran into him with the bicycle.” I know I have told him that before, but I guess he forgot.

“We want you to take the button to the police,” interjected Maggie.

We all get out of the car and I hand Daddy the button. He winks, and says in a low tone, “I’ll see what I can do.”

Chapter Six

Last year when I was twelve, Maggie moved down to Abilene to live with relatives, so now I only have Jamie to talk to. I walk over to see how he's doing. I spy him out in the front yard building a snowman, rolling the second ball. The first ball was near the sidewalk going up to his porch.

"Hi, Jamie," I say, waving my mitten. "May I help?"

"Sure," he says, grunting as he tries to lift the second ball.

"Here." I give him a hand. I didn't know snow could be so heavy, but we lift it onto the first ball, and he straightens it.

"You go and get some smooth rocks from the garden. I'll start on another ball for the head."

As I stoop down by the steps near a spot without snow, I see a carrot sitting on the top step. "Your lunch?"

"It's the nose for the snowman."

"Oh, what a dummy I am. Here's some rocks. I guess they are the buttons?"

"Yeah. And the eyes and mouth."

Jamie puts everything together and places his own hat on top. Before us is a fat grinning snowman with shiny rocks for teeth, eyes, and buttons and a bright orange carrot nose. The old black hat makes the right accent.

"Let's go to the back yard." Jamie runs back to the left. "We have a slide."

The cellar door lies at a steep angle near the back entrance. It is covered with snow, and it appears that Jamie had placed some large storage cans and paint cans together to make

stairs on the side of the cellar door to reach the top.

Jamie says with a wave of his hand, “Behold my slide.”

I laugh and immediately climb up, sit down on the top of the door, and slide down, screaming with delight. Jamie follows suit, climbing over to the other side where there was more snow. He slides down with a hearty laugh. Then we do it all over again. It wouldn't work if the doors weren't made of sheet metal. We take snow from the foot of the cellar door and pat it back onto the doors to replace what we wiped off with our bums. We do this for the next hour until we realize our bums are all wet and freezing.

“I am shaking all over, Jamie,” I say, dropping down into the snow. “And I am so tired.”

I lay there trying to get my breath, and Jamie lays down beside me.

I instinctively sweep the snow with my arms and legs. I just feel like doing it. It gives me energy somehow. Jamie copies me. He gets up and grabs my hand to help me up. We look back and see what appears to be angels. It's near Christmas, and I just laugh.

I realize that Jamie is holding me a bit close. There is something between us I have never noticed before. Oh my god! I'm growing breasts, and his face is less than an inch away from mine. We are breathing each other's air, just standing there panting. All of a sudden, I am filled with giggles, push him away and pick up a hand full of snow. I wad it up and throw it right into his face. Now we are having a snow fight!

We run all around the backyard, stopping only to grab a snowball from the ground and throw it. At some point, we sit on the back steps and just huff and puff, trying to get our breath, laughing as much as we can. I lay my head on his shoulder. His ears are all red. I turn and cover them with my mittens. He gently puts his hands over my ears. Somehow our faces

grow closer together.

“It’s been a lot of winters, hasn’t it,” he asks.

“I’m thirteen now, and you’re what, fifteen?”

“Yes.”

We kiss for the first time.

“Funny thing that brought us together,” he says.

“A murder. How morbid.” I straighten, sort of shake and fold my arms.

“Butch’s father’s in jail.”

“Yeah.” My jaw starts to shiver. “But he’s not his father. He’s his uncle.”

“Who says?”

“My daddy.”

“Let’s get inside. There’s hot cocoa to make, and I have part of a chocolate cake.”

We rise, he opens the screen door and then the back door on which white paint is peeling.

“I know. I made that cake.” I stomp my feet on a mat and slam the door.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot.”

I hit his shoulder and grin. I stroll over to the table as he starts up some hot chocolate.

“I don’t think he did it.”

He looks back from the gas stove. “Who was that?”

“Well, my dad knew the guy. You know, who we thought was Butch’s pa. I think they are both criminals.” I sit at the table and rest my numb chin on my fists. I feel my body thawing and enjoy the warmth.

“You mean your dad?” Jamie stirs powdered cocoa into the pot of milk and adds sugar.

“Yes, my dear daddy.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Maybe not a crook, but he sure has acted like one at times with all his secrets and secret meetings.” I scratch my nose.

“Secrets, huh?”

“Yeah, but one time he showed me ... ahhh. Another secret. I’m not supposed to tell.”

Jamie leaves the pot quickly and drops to my feet. “Can’t tell what?”

“You can torture me and I won’t tell!”

I try to rise, but Jamie starts tickling me and I scream. At that point I hear a clod-clomp, clod-clomp. Jamie’s daddy has risen and comes into the kitchen.

“What is all the commotion?” He scratches his head. “Oh. Hi, Rachel.”

“Hi, Mister Holcomb.”

“You makin’ enough fer me too?” Mr. Holcomb asks.

“Yes Pa. We have enough.” Jamie ladles the hot cocoa into three cups and hands them out.

Mr. Holcomb sits by me.

“I’m sure glad you two are friendly together,” Mr. Holcomb says, sipping from his cup. “We need more Holcombs in this family.”

My face turns beet red. “Mr. Holcomb! I’m not old enough.”

“Well, just hang in there, gal. You will be. I’ve gotten used to your comin’ and goin’.

We wouldn’t want to spoil that, now would we.”

“I like your son a lot, but, well!” I stand up to go.

“Dad, now look what you’ve done.”

“Well, I’m just sayin’ ...”

“Well, I think you’ve said too much.”

Mr. Holcomb goes back to sipping his hot cocoa and doesn’t look up any more. I sit down and don’t look at him. I try to sip my cocoa, but when I meet Jamie’s eyes across the table, I start giggling, thinking of having babies, then trying to suppress a laugh, I spew cocoa all over him. We all three laugh, and I am not embarrassed anymore. I do love this family.

Jamie cleans himself up with a dish towel and brings out the chocolate cake. We quietly eat that with our cocoa.

After all the commotion, and when the cups and plates are empty, Jamie’s father goes to work on the graveyard shift as the school janitor, and Jamie and I move to the couch.

“I remember,” I say, resting my chin on his shoulder, “a little boy peeking at me through the bushes.” I yawn.

Jamie blushes. “Well ... You were pretty.”

I smile. “And you were interesting.”

We sit there a moment staring at each other until a new thought comes to me.

“Miss your mom?” I clasp his hand.

“Yeah. She was an okay mom, but she had the wander lust. I think she grew up next to a railroad. Listening to that train day and night must have done something to her mind. She could never stay put. She had to always be visiting her mom in Dallas or trying out new houses. We must have moved into a new house every year when I was growing up. This last time, she said she wasn’t coming back. I think it was the new sports car that got her.”

“Ran off with a man?” I ask, feeling a bit sad for him.

“Yup.” Then he changed subjects. “What ever happened to Maggie?”

I scratch my head, not knowing whether I should tell. But she wasn’t coming back anyway. “Can you imagine a baby having a baby?” I close my eyes for a bit.

“No. You don’t mean ...” His eyes widened at the thought.

“Yes.”

I can feel Jamie turning red as I cuddle up to him. I raise my head and look straight into his eyes. “You know something, don’t you?”

“Butch took her out last year and got her drunk. He was laughing about it.”

“That must be when she wouldn’t come visit anymore,” I say. “I thought I had offended her.”

“What makes you think that?”

I don’t want to look at him, and close my eyes. “I told her what my daddy told me. He said for us kids to stay away from our murder investigation.” I fold my arms and pout. “We had a big argument, and she wouldn’t talk to me anymore.”

The conversation paused awhile and then Jamie asked, “Did your dad do anything about that button you and Maggie had?”

“Yes. He said it was only circumstantial evidence and wouldn’t amount to anything in court. But something happened. That old man was thrown in jail anyway. That’s the day Daddy said he was Butch’s uncle, not his dad.” I sigh. It’s nice to be by a warm body.

“Well, the papers said they caught the murderer,” Jamie says, placing his arm around me. “They didn’t mention your dad or anything he might have had to do with it. It was some guy named Jenkins, not Mr. Albright. That was the old man’s name, Albright.”

“Daddy didn’t have anything to do with the murder. Just the investigation.”

I am irate and about to stand up to go when Jamie says, “That’s what I mean. I didn’t say he was a crook or anything.”

“My daddy is just the opposite of being a crook.”

“Do you mean ...?”

“Don’t say it!” I say angrily. “I gave my word. This conversation is at an end if you say anymore.”

Jamie takes a deep breath. I do the same. I smile. “We had fun today, didn’t we?”

“Yes. Now it makes me a bit nervous, knowing about you and your father.”

“Well, I’m not a Nancy Drew if that’s what you mean.”

“Yeah. But you remind me of her, always trying to solve a crime.”

“But I’m not as pretty.”

“She’s rather plain looking.” He smiles and gives me a hug.

“You better keep thinking that.”

We both laugh.

I know I have dozed off, for I suddenly wake up. “I better go help Mama. She hasn’t been feeling well lately.” I look at the clock on the wall. “It’s getting dinner time.”

I rise. He comes to my side. “Don’t go.”

“You can come over for dinner.”

“Okay. Set a plate for me. I’ll go wash up.”



“Rachel,” Mama says rather sharply, “I don’t want you to be alone with Jamie any more.”

“Yes, Mama.” I help by setting the table. “Is it okay if he comes for dinner? He’s all alone.”

“That’s all right. He can be alone. You’ve been with him all day. You need to stay with me for the rest of the evening.” Mama sets down a casserole of sliced franks with macaroni and cheese. The side dish is green beans. I guess Jamie wouldn’t enjoy such a fabulous meal. She gives herself a little glass of sherry. There is no milk, so I have a glass of water.

As we sit down and Mama starts to pray over the food, we hear a knock at the door. Her eyebrows pull down into a frown. The rest of her face is straight laced. I don’t know what happened to Mama. She used to be a fun loving person.

“Rachel, answer the door.” She takes a sip of her sherry and says, “If it’s Jerry, tell him we’re eating now.”

“But Mama, that’s why he’s knocking. I invited him to dinner. And his name is Jamie.” I get up and go to the door.

Mama calls out, “Rachel?”

“Okay!” I say as I open the door.

“Hey,” we say together.

“Sorry. I spoke too soon,” I say through the screen door. “Mama’s in a dither. I’ll see ya tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Jamie pretends to kiss me through the screen. “See ya tomorrow.”

My heart feels like someone has grabbed it and is squeezing. Maybe it’s my mama. Maybe she’s a witch and can reach into people’s hearts and snuff the life out of them.

As I come back to the table, I say, “He’s gone.”

“Good,” is the only thing she says. She eats her casserole slowly and stares at me.

Chapter Seven

I have to see Jamie only at school and not mention him to Mama.

I explained it to him, and now every time he sees me he says, “How are you doin’?” and I say, “Fine.”

Today he comes up to me as I retrieve my books from my locker and says, “Have I got a mystery for you.”

With a half smile, I ask, “Wha-a-at?” and place my hand lightly on his shoulder.

“Butch and his sidekick Richard were rummaging around in an empty building downtown and found a suitcase full of cash.” He waits for my reaction. “In large bills.”

Well the first thing I ask is, “Did they contact the police?”

“Heck no. They went on a spending spree.”

My heart starts to pound. Maybe I am related to Nancy Drew. I start to say something, but the bell rings. “I am late for class! I’ll see you in the lunch room.”

We both race off to our different classes. I can’t concentrate on English, and when Mrs. Wright asks me to conjugate something on the board, I stumble and fail. She has a surprised look on her face and asks Jody Parker with her long blonde curly locks next to me. Jody does it without thinking. Then in math, I duck my head, wondering where Jamie is. After class I am greatly relieved that I wasn’t called on to explain what a mantissa and an abscissa is. I recon that they are something a dentist works on in surgery.

At lunch, as soon as I pick up my tray, Jamie cuts in line behind me, grabbing his tray.

“Hey,” complains the boy next in line.

“Don’t mention it pip squeak,” Jamie says. Then he turns to me, grabbing his fork and

knife. “Have you seen Butch and Richard?”

“No,” I say in a low voice. I point to the mashed potatoes, and the matron splashes a big blob onto my plate. “Are they missing?”

“They weren’t in gym.” He skips the mashed potatoes.

We get to the end of the line and I am handed a plate of meatloaf, green beans, gravy and mashed potatoes.

“I guess they skipped school,” he says, grabbing a glass of milk.

When we sit at a table, I ask, “How did you find out?”

“I ran into them downtown.” Jamie washes down a bite of meatloaf with his milk. “He paid me off. He owed me. I asked him whose lunch money that was. Then he told me about the suitcase. Boy. I wish that had been me. I could use a fat wallet.”



At home Daddy approaches me. “Darling,” he asks, “could you come to the kitchen?”

I wonder what have I done now? Mother is always telling him she wants him to punish me for this or that ... just small infractions of the law. I’m not a bad girl. I wish Mama would loosen up. He never has taken the strap to me as Mama wants him to. I think he considers me a buddy more than a daughter. He never has lifted his hand against me.

The other day I came home late because I had to help decorate the halls for Christmas. Mama started shouting at me, blaming me for being at Jamie’s house when she told me to stay away from him. When Daddy got home she got into him for not handling me right. Now I am afraid Daddy is going to limit my freedom even more.

Daddy and I sit down at the kitchen table opposite each other. The table is butt up against the wall by the back door, and I have my back against the other wall. I wait nervously for him to lay down the law.

“Darling,” he begins. His kindness just tears me up inside. “Have you seen Butch and Richard Tarr?”

I am so relieved I want to spurt tears. It isn’t about poor little me. “No, Daddy. I haven’t seen them.”

“I am afraid they are in trouble.” He even smells like a G-Man. But it hasn’t been affirmed that he is. I would rather him be that instead of caught up with gangsters. “They have stolen something of mine. Something very important. A small black suitcase that had some personal items of mine.”

Why do you lie, Daddy? What’s going on?

“No Daddy. I haven’t seen them, but Jamie,” I say, “told me they were missing from school. Probably playing hooky.”

I didn’t see Mama standing behind me in the doorway. “So! You have been seeing that boy!” She comes in here and stands by Daddy and yells, “I told you ta stay away from that boy. He is no good. He does not have good intentions towards you. He has ruined many a girl.”

“Now, Mama,” Daddy says as he rises. He puts his arm around Mama and escorts her out. I follow. She keeps on complaining until they go into the bedroom. Daddy shuts the door so I can’t hear, but I hear. They yell at each other, and there is a scuffle. Tears come to my eyes and I go to my bedroom, lie down and weep into my pillow. Mama hates me and Daddy ... oh, Daddy! Is Daddy in trouble?



Jamie and I sit next to each other in the corner of the school lunchroom. I take hold of his hand with both of mine, place it in my lap, and lean on his shoulder.

“I’m really worried about Mama,” I say. “Daddy had to take her to the hospital last night.”

“What happened this time?”

“Mama and Daddy had a row. I don’t think Daddy hit her, but he seems to have wrestled her down, and he took her out in handcuffs.” I wet his shoulder with my tears and wipe my eyes on his sleeve. “Going out, he didn’t even look at me, but she did. It was a weird kind of look. Some kind of wild look, like she was really scared.”

“Did he arrest his own wife?” he asks with peaked interest.

“Of course not. He just took her to the hospital.” I sigh. Daddy says they want to keep her there. It could be a year or more before she can come home.” I sniff and hold my stomach against the shakes that want to come out. I sigh again and say, “Daddy says I have to be brave and take care of myself because he can’t. He’s going to be gone a lot, especially on the weekends. It’s his job, you know, driving cars to customers all around the panhandle.”

My thoughts go to the inconsistency of Jamie’s story as opposed to Daddy’s story of what was in that suitcase. If I were a Nancy Drew, I would follow my Daddy as much as I would Butch. “We could follow Butch,” I say.

“What good would that do?” he says, slurping his spaghetti. “What we could do is find out where they found the suitcase and stake it out.”

“Yeah, we could do that.” I poke my fork at my lunch, but I can’t get myself to eat.

“Can’t eat?” Jamie asks, looking at me with puppy dog eyes.

“I’m just worried about my mother.” There, I said it. She is my mother, and I love her, but is Daddy really my father? There are too many mysteries in my life. I cover my eyes with my fingers and rub my forehead. “I want to go home and go to sleep. Sleep for a long time and wake up and everything will be fine.”

“I know what you mean,” he says, squeezing my hand. “We both have lost our mothers, for whatever reason.”



With my mother gone, I could do what I like, and be with Jamie whenever I wanted. We take this time, though, to investigate where all that money came from. We first look up Butch. We find him down town dressed in a sharp suit and tie and wearing a wide rimmed hat, turned down. It didn’t seem to fit right, sort of bouncing on top of his thick, blond curls.

“Where’d you get the money, Butch?” Jamie asked, matter-of-factly.

“You know, punk.” Butch lit a stogie. “The suitcase. You know.” He blew smoke into Jamie’s face.

“What I mean, Bugsy,” Jamie said in a fake gangster slang, “is where did you find the stash. Where did you pick up the suitcase?”

“That old warehouse near the crossroads, across the railroad. It’s empty, you know. Abandoned.” He emphasizes, pointing with the cigar.

Jamie and I head in that direction, ignoring the wolf call from Butch. I’m not that pretty. I don’t know why he would do such a thing.

As we walk along, I look at my reflection in the store windows. Well, I am getting

shapely. My mother said she did that quite early. It must be something I ate. Jamie doesn't seem to notice. Maybe he's being polite.

We come to what we think is the warehouse. It is old and abandoned. A large red "Dyer's" covers the side with a white background. The paint is mostly gone, but there is enough to recognize the word. The building is surrounded by small windows just below the corrugated roof which has a low slant. There are two pairs of large doors that swing out in front with an entrance door near the corner. We look into the building through the windows on the door. We see a couple of cars and a large truck. Men are unloading the truck, putting cases into the trunks of the cars.

I spot my daddy. I turn from the window fast. "It's Daddy!" I whisper.

We run around the corner to some lower windows which prove to be an office. We peek inside to see if anyone is there. We only see a desk and chair, filing cabinets, and pinup girls tacked to the walls along with a lot of papers and charts. The desk is covered with papers and ledger books. A man smoking a thick cigar walks in. We duck down into a bunch of tumble weeds and crawl to the other side of the windows. Jamie points, and we run to the back of the building.

No one is back here, but there is a ramp that goes down below two doors that roll up. It is steep enough to let the wheels of the truck duck below the doors so trucks can be loaded.

"It's a loading bay," Jamie says. "But there is a door on the other side."

We race over to the other door. Its glass window has been broken, and the door is slightly ajar. We can hear the men talking. We brace ourselves against the wall that extends along the ramp, trying not to be seen.

“Don’t get all heated up,” I hear my daddy say. “You’ll get your money back.”

“You were much too careless,” another man says, using a lot of rough language.

“I know the two kids who took it,” my daddy says. “Butch and Richard Tarr.”

“How do you know?” another man asks as he places a crate into one of the cars.

“My daughter hears things at school.” My dad goes back to the truck and signs a paper on a clipboard.

“You told yer dad?” Jamie whispers.

“I didn’t say a thing,” I whisper back. “He came to me and asked. He already knew about the money.”

“Then why did he mention you?” Jamie looks at me with creased eyebrows.

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s just trying to throw the scent off himself.”

We put our ears back to the door.

The man that seemed to be the boss, said, “Or you know what will happen to your girl.”

He ran his finger across his throat. My heart almost stopped.

I slammed my body against the wall and looked up at Jamie.

“We’d better get out of here,” he whispers.

We look around and see a back alley that leads between two buildings and out to a street. We run through the alley and kept on running. By the time we come to downtown, I was out of breath. We enter Kress and order ice-cream sodas, five cents each.

Either my daddy’s in with these gangsters, or he’s an undercover agent. My heart is pounding. I don’t know what to do or how to handle what I know about my daddy.

Jamie and I sit there, sucking on our straws, looking at each other. His soda is

chocolate. Mine is strawberry.

“So,” Jamie says, with a blank expression on his face, “do you think your dad is a secret agent?”

I take a sip through my straw and swallow. “I have no idea.” I take a deep breath. “I once thought he was, but I catch him lying to me and knowing things he shouldn’t.”

“Such as?” Jamie sucks out the last of his soda, making that irritating noise.

“I don’t know if I should tell you,” I say, stirring my soda with my straw. I study his face for a second. “What if he is a G-Man and he’s undercover. If I tell things about him ... it’s like I would be a stool pigeon, and somehow the gangsters will find out, and things will be in a mess.”

“Oh, I see,” he says. “You love me, but you can’t trust me.”

I grab his hand, trying to be reassuring. “It’s not like that.” I take a deep breath again. This is hard. “He has never told Mama what he really does. Why should I tell you. If he doesn’t get into trouble, I surely will.”

He starts to pout, and sigh really loud, like when I blow air out my nose. “Oh, all right! He said the suitcase was his. But that doesn’t say what he was doing with it. I saw it in a movie once where a secret agent had to give government money to the mob, but it was recovered after the gangsters were arrested.”

Jamie leans his elbows on the table and rests his head in his hands as though he were giving up. “That could happen, I suppose.”

I smile, still trying to assure him, taking his hand with both of mine. My stool continued to rotate and I almost lost my balance. “Wow!”

We laughed.

Then I said, "Let's think positive."

"Okay."

"I guess we'd better get home," I say. "I want to be there when Daddy comes home."

"Sure."

As we left, I could tell he was disappointed I didn't say more, and we walked most of the way home in silence.



I find myself laying on my pillow again. I'm not crying, but my heart aches. *Daddy, oh, Daddy, what are you doing?* Should I confront him or follow him? I can't hide in his car again. He's wary of that. I want to stuff my pillow into my mouth and bite down hard, but I know chicken feathers don't taste that good. I stuff my fist into my mouth instead. Then I get an idea. I'll go snooping alone, without Jamie, because he may be a part of the puzzle.

I've always wondered about Jamie. Sometimes I see him and Butch together on the playground of the school or on a corner downtown. He will glance at me and walk away as though he didn't see me at all. Being naive, I never thought about it until now. What is it about my life? Am I surrounded by thieves and liars?

I wipe my tears, get off my bed and walk slowly to the kitchen with all these thoughts running through my head. Better get dinner ready. Daddy will be home soon ... maybe.

Chapter Eight



I can remember when I was small that Mama was so gentle and caring and treated me as if I was her delight. She would read to me, draw pictures for me to color with my new crayons, sing me to sleep, and take me out on picnics.

I think the depression got inside her. It started with not having enough to eat and Daddy stealing food for us. I know he stole it, because he and Mama always argued about not having enough money. I always wondered why Daddy had a job when no one else did. If he didn't steal the food, maybe he was doing something dishonest to get some money. Men would come to the door and talk with Daddy in low voices. Daddy would always end the conversation with, "Okay." Does that mean okay to steal? Whenever I asked him what the men wanted, he would just say, "Business," or "Work."

Daddy comes home for dinner. We have macaroni and cheese with little Vienna sausages. He sits a can on the table. "I had a dime in my pocket, so I bought a can of spinach."

"It's not hard to keep my figure on what we eat," is what Mama always said.

"I'm sorry, Ginger," Daddy says, "but times are tough." He winks at me, and says, "Don't worry though, a war will come along anytime now and business will be booming."

"Is that what happened in the World War you were in?" I place some macaroni and cheese on my tongue with my fork, shut my mouth and let the fork slip right out. It tastes

like Heaven.

“Lots of people got rich.” He sips his coffee ... which is the first pot I ever made.

“Did I make it right?”

“Yes, honey.” He places his cup down in its saucer, grabs his napkin, wipes his mouth off, all the while staring at me. “I have to go now. Thanks for the dinner.”

He stands, and holding onto the back of his chair he asks, “Have you visited your mother?”

“No, Daddy.” I look down at my plate.

“Well, don’t you think you ought to?”

I take a deep breath and let it out. “I’m scared to.”

“Rachel,” he says tenderly. “She’s your mother.”

“Why’d ya have to take her out in handcuffs?” I sob.

“I had to wrestle her down to make her stop hitting me.” He pushes his chair in.

I take another deep breath. “You said you didn’t hit her, but you had to take her to the hospital.”

“Not that kind of hospital.” He has the most apologetic look in his eyes.

I place my fork on the table and look at him with tears streaming down my face.

“Then what kind of hospital?”

“When I saw that wild look in her eyes, I knew she had turned feral. I have seen it in animals. There is a fear that is so great in some people that their mind breaks. I saw it in the war.” Daddy seems to be searching with his eyes backward in time. “... and there’s nothing you can do for that person. You see, your mother’s mind broke, so I had to take her to the hospital here in Amarillo. They have a special ward where they watch people to see if they

need to go to the mental hospital in Midland.”

“It’s almost Christmas,” I say, “so I guess I ought to go see her tomorrow.”

“I would appreciate that,” he says. “Good girl. Take care of yourself tonight.”

I follow him to the door. He kisses my head and leaves. I watch him through the door window, holding the blinds out of the way. I wave.

Grabbing my coat, I wait till he can’t see me and run outside. I race to Jamie’s, take his bike, and rush down the street. My thought is to follow Daddy and see if he is connected to any gangsters or if he goes to the police. He gets several blocks ahead of me, and I lose him. After cycling a few more blocks to see which side street he went down, I have to stop and catch my breath.

I am shocked at where this chase has led me. I am at the hospital. I sob right here on the spot. I know it’s providence. I have to go in and see my mama now. I can’t back out of it.

I walk the bike up to the main door and lean it against the wall. I take a deep breath and enter with trepidation. There is an information desk to my left.

“Hi,” I say. “Is there a Pearl Merkle admitted? It was a few days ago. I was wondering if she is still here.”

The gal looked through some papers she had on a clipboard. “Pearl ... Pearl ... Pearl.” She glances back up at me. “No. No Pearl Merkle.”

“I’m her daughter, Rachel,” I say. “My daddy brought her in here. He said she’s not in the regular part.”

“Oh, the mental ward?” She shuffles through some more papers. “Let’s see. Oh, here she is.” She turns her head to the side. “Family only.”

“I said I am her daughter,” I say emphatically.

“Oh, yes. You did.” She smiles broadly.

“I didn’t get a chance to come until now.”

“You will have to talk to the resident before you can see anyone. It’s up on the third floor. The whole floor. Go up the elevator,” she points to my right, saying, “right there. The desk will be right in front of you when you come out. They can take care of you there. Good luck.”

I hope it doesn’t take luck. *God help me.* I nervously take my coat off and enter the elevator. The operator is a young boy my age. “Floor?” he asks.

“Third,” I say, staring at the door as it closes.

“Loony ward?”

“Not funny.”

“Ooooo ... so serious.” He shakes his fingers as though there is something sticky on them.

The elevator dings. “Third floor. Loony Bin.” He grins like the Cheshire cat.

The nurse sitting at the table wears her nurse’s cap back on her hair and held on with bobby pins. Her large eyes are round, her nose prominent, and her large red lips cover rodent teeth. When she talks, it’s an eastern accent.

“Yes, deary?” She stares, not blinking. “May I help you?” I think it’s a New York accent that I’ve heard in the movies.

“Peal Merkle, please,” I say, leaning my hands on the desk.

“And you are?” She stops shuffling papers and holds them upright.

“Rachel Merkle,” I say. “I’m her daughter.”

The nurse presses a button somewhere. I see a red light come on, and then she speaks

through a desk microphone. “Doctor Bradshaw. Doctor Bradshaw. You’re wanted at the main desk. Doctor Bradshaw.” She smiles, winks at me, and says, “Sit over there, honey, against the wall. He’ll be right here.”



I must have been sitting here a long time just staring into space. I have no memory of what I have been thinking or doing. I could have been doing something very wonderful or very wicked. I just don’t know. I come to the conclusion that I have been having a hiatus. I feel I could fit in very well with the people in this ward. The doctor is finally here to take me away.

He is short, balding, has a double chin. He is wearing small wire-rimmed glasses, and is covered with a white lab coat that is too big for him. “Rachel Merkle?” he asked, bending over as if I needed help getting up.

“Yes.” I stand on my own. “I’ve come to see my mama.” I hold onto my coat as if it were a shield to protect me from getting mental germs.

“I have seen your mother.” He folds his hands as a minister or monk would. “She is doing well. We have kept her on sedatives for the first week. She was in need of a good rest. I have been talking with her. She talks a lot.” He grins.

“May I see her?” I ask, tilting my head.

He starts walking down the hall. I guess he wants me to follow. He walks hunched over as if worrying about something. “If you must talk, use your church tones. Don’t say too

much. Listen mostly. She has a lot to say ... lot on her mind.”

“Okay,” I say.

He comes to a door with the number 324 above it. He unlocks it and opens it slowly.

“Must she be locked up?” I ask. It really worries me. Is she dangerous?

“It is only for her safety. You may go in. Don’t stay too long. Ten minutes.”

I take a deep breath and approach my mama. She is sitting on the far edge of the bed, staring out the window. There is a soft chair next to the window. I sit down, crossing my legs. It’s green leather and is most comfortable. I wait.

Mama turns her head slowly and stares at me. “Rachel?”

“Yes, Mama.” I place my clasped hands over my knee.

“Have you been there very long?”

“No, Mama.”

“Did I get sick? I don’t remember getting sick, and the doctor doesn’t say much, but I assume I had a nervous breakdown. I am sorry if that’s embarrassing, but people do have nervous breakdowns.”

“I could see you were troubled about something.” I sigh.

“It wasn’t one thing. It was just things piling up, and I couldn’t stand it any longer.”

She beckoned to me with an outstretched arm. “Come.”

I get up and sit next to her on her right side. She embraces me with her arm.

“I’m sorry if I have been rough with you. I just didn’t want you to experience the horrible things I have.”

I should be angry with her because she has not acted nice toward me for years that I can remember. I don’t want to upset her. I like the hug and her warm body. She feels like

home again.

“I didn’t know I was suffering inside. I guess when I met your dad, I shoved all the bad things down a deep hole inside me. But when I saw that you had a boyfriend, I guess it all came to the surface.”

“What was it, Mama?” I look up at her so I can see her eyes. “If you would.”

“I don’t mind, but I hesitate because it involves you. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I give her a squeeze. “I’m a big girl now, Mama.”

“Weeel, take a deep breath.”

I breath deeply and try to prepare my mind. What could it be that troubles her so about me?

“You see,” Mama says, looking away, “your daddy is not ... well, he is just not your father.”

“Am I adopted?” I say, grabbing my pounding heart. “I always knew I was. That’s it! isn’t it?” I am ready to be completely depressed, but I know I am stronger than this.

“No, dear. That would mean that I wasn’t your mother, and I am definitely that.”

I hug her tightly with both arms. “Oh goody goody. I am so glad.”

“I was raped.”

I can’t swallow the lump in my throat. My face goes all tingly. That one statement hits me like a car running through a red light, and me in the crosswalk. I am left feeling bludgeoned. I grab Mama’s pajamas with my fists, dig my face into her bosom and sob. “Oh Mama, Mama!”

She grabs me with both arms and cuddles me, rocks me. “It was when I was as young as you are now. I got kidnapped by a dirty old man. It was after he killed my boyfriend,

Rufus. But I later escaped. I didn't think I was ever going to be all right until I met your new daddy. He made me feel whole again. Now it all comes back to haunt me, and I can't help hating men. I can't get it out of my mind."

I wind up taking a nap with Mama, and am awakened by a nurse saying, "Um humph!"

I get up carefully, not wanting to wake Mama. I grab my coat and tiptoe out. As I walk down the hall, the nurse vomits a whole lecture on the protocols of the mental ward. She is the true chatter box. I don't know why the doctor thought my mother was. I will always cherish the time we had together. The nurse wouldn't understand.



It has been two weeks now since Daddy took Mama away, but today, he's bringing her home, and my heart feels a little lighter.

This morning Daddy said, "She will need a lot of attention when she comes back. That means you."

Mama told me one time the reason she wanted to leave home is that she had to take care of Grandma Tess all the time. Will that happen to me? Will I get tired of caring for my mama? Not today. I can't wait. My heart is racing, and I can't concentrate on my studies. This whole year has been messed up, and my grades have plummeted. I hope they don't kick me out of high school. I got here because of being a straight A student. I even look like I've been here a couple of years because of my early development. I take a deep breath and bring

my attention back to Miss Wright.



Walking down the sidewalk toward home, I see Daddy's car in the driveway. My pace increases as well as the beats of my heart. When I arrive, I run up the steps, push the door open and find Mama and Daddy standing near the kitchen door talking in low tones.

I fly into Mama's arms. "Mama, Mama," I cry, giving her a big bear hug.

"My gracious, child," she says. "Don't break my ribs. I know I'm not an old woman, but right now I feel like one."

I let go after kissing her cheek. I can't stop smiling until Daddy says, "Put yer things in yer room, and remember to be gentle with your mother."

I half smile and say, "Okay," and go to my room to do my homework. I have two feelings; one is elation because of Mama being home, the other is caution and wariness lest I cause any trouble. I don't want to take a wrong step and upset a delicate balance between joy and responsibility, between pleasing Daddy and pleasing Mama. I know they have differences of expectations. I am taking a social studies class, and there are two chapters on marriage and family or how families are created in different societies, and getting along just has a lot of rules, ones that are hard for me to remember.

Coming out of my bedroom, I hear Mama calling me to come into her room. "My pillow isn't right," she says.

She is laying there propped up in bed with her legs covered. I guess I am the one to make dinner.

“Daddy is a man, Mama,” I say, rearranging her pillows. “They don’t know how to fluff the pillows and arrange things just right for comfort.”

“Your daddy just has a lot on his mind. He’s out there in the garage working on someone else’s car.” She turns her head and smiles at me. “Thank you. I think I’ll rest now. Jack said there is a chicken in the icebox.”

I can cook up a chicken, but I wonder what else we have ... maybe some old potatoes. I look under the sink. I have remembered correctly.

At the table during dinner, Daddy says, “You did good, little girl. This chicken and the potatoes are delicious. You will make a fine cook for this family.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” I say, wondering if this is going to be the rest of my life. Not if I can help it. I have college in my future.

“Better take a plate into your mother. I think I hear her stirring.” He winks.

Chapter Nine

Daddy is working out in the garage. Dinner is ready, and I know he will not hear me if I call to him, so I step out into the sultry spring air. We have had an unusual season of rain this year. Everything is wet. I am glad Daddy placed paving stones along the path to the garage. I look up at the boiling dark clouds above. I have had enough of Heaven's weeping. God must have heard my anguish during the Christmas holidays which came and went. We missed it somehow, I cried for several days, and then the rains came. I'm ready for something joyous to happen. I look for a robin, but I see none.

As I enter the garage, I say, "Daddy, you are making such a racket!"

He stops hammering on a fender and looks up. He smiles, but I don't know anymore if it's genuine. "Dinner ready?"

"Yes," I say, wondering about what he is doing. "The car seems to be getting back into shape."

"It's coming along." He lays the fender on its side on the table near the wall and places the hammer next to it. He wipes his dirty hands on his pants.

"You better wash up before coming in. You know how Mama complains."

"Your mama also has asked you to stop seeing Jamie, but you don't obey." He goes to the sink he installed some years ago. "I'll wash up just for your ma."

"I don't agree with not seeing Jamie. We've known each other since we were little."

I scan the garage and take in the sights. Motor parts and tools are scattered over the table. The wheels are missing from the car which is up on racks. Its smells in here like engine and transmission oils and grease mixed with red earth.

“I’m ready,” he says, wiping his hands on an old dirty towel. Then he comes right up to me, putting his face into mine. “I think your mother is right about Jamie. You ought not to see him. He is going to be busy anyway ... working with me, and I don’t want him to be distracted.”

“Well, I can see him at school,” I say getting my dander up.

“He won’t be coming back to school.” He turns to go, throwing back in a whisper, “He’ll be working with the Patriots.”

I run up to him and grab his arm. He turns and I see a face I’ve never seen before. He looks at me like a complete stranger. “Who’s the Patriots?” I ask with bated breath.

“We are someone you don’t want talk about. We are the remnants of the rebellion, not the Civil War, but the Whiskey Rebellion during George Washington’s reign.” He stares at me. “We are a secret, and we want to keep it that way. If you spill just a syllable ...” He cuts across his throat with his finger. “For the both of us. But since they are holding you hostage against me, I thought I should tell you. Can I trust you to keep quiet?”

“Yes,” I say. “But about Jamie.”

“Leave Jamie alone. He needs to concentrate on his job.”

“You can’t tell me what to do!” I blurt out. “You’re not my father!” I am shocked I said that. I don’t know where that came from.

He takes my arms with his big hands, and his stern face softens. “I am the only father you have ever known. I love you as my own daughter, but I won’t let you get in the way of a very important work. Now let’s go into Mother with a calm attitude.” He smiles. “I don’t want her upset. I want to see a smile on your face. Okay?” He waits.

“Okay,” I say, trembling inside. I take a deep breath and smile.

“That’s my daughter.” He releases his grip. “Now, let’s go in to dinner.”

I rub my sore arms as I follow him in.

Mama is in a rare mood tonight. She sits at the table with the rest of us. We eat the fried chicken and talk amiably. I wind up doing the dishes while Daddy goes back to work in the garage. Mama sits in the living room staring at the new radio entertainment set as she listens to *The Creaking Door*.



Next morning, the first thing I do after I get out of bed is to run to Jamie’s house. I am in my p-jays and haven’t brushed my teeth, but when he opens the door, I grab him and kiss him. He pulls me inside.

“You shouldn’t be seen with me,” he says softly.

My arms and hands press into his back, and I lay my head on his chest. “Why? Because my daddy says so?” I look up at him. “I don’t want to leave you. I love you.”

“You want to have a baby?” is all he says.

“Not right now, thank you.” My heart is racing.

“Well, you will if you keep this up. You better sneak back into your house before anyone sees you.”

“Why can’t we be together?” I hold him closer.

“We’re too young to get married, and your dad wants me to work with him. I have to

leave. I have to go to Dumas. It's only a little more'n an hours drive. I have to ride up there on my bicycle, though. Anyway, I'll be home on the weekends, I'm sure."

"I don't know if I can take this," I say, feeling the tears come.

Jamie pulls me away from him. "I'm expecting your dad any minute now. He's going to take me on this first job."

"What job?" I ask.

There is a knock at the door.

"Go! Go out the back door," Jamie whispers. I grab one more kiss from him and run out the back. I hop over the fence and through the bushes. I peek through and see my daddy just entering and the door closing.

I can't finish out this school term. I can't concentrate. I feel sick to my stomach all the time. I have night sweats. I want to marry Jamie in a really bad way. If he moves up to Dumas, I think I will just leave home and move in with him. Maybe we can go to Mississippi and get married. They let young teenagers marry there.

The Patriots Daddy spoke of are still fighting for their liberty to live as they see fit, but who will fight for me?



I haven't seen Jamie in over four years now. I left Mama and Daddy after I graduated early. I put my nose to the grindstone as a way to fight for my freedom. I am a freshman at

Berkeley, California now. Daddy is a true patriot. I heard that he is fighting the Germans over in Italy. America is rescuing Europe from that most horrible gangster Hitler. Mussolini is in hiding. I am sure we will be victorious soon. Mama is living alone, playing the organ for the church. I guess that is her only income until Daddy gets back ... if he does.

Chapter Ten

I am at a sorority party in a ballroom I didn't know existed on campus. It looks more like a political party with all the flags hanging, the balloons tied in groups of thirteen everywhere. Everything is tied up in ribbons, people are drinking and swinging their rattles in the air. Students are blowing confetti in my face all the time. I feel a bit giddy, having my third glass of champagne. Everyone is laughing and celebrating. The war is over, and oh, I've just been kissed.

"Butch!" I say, very startled. "What are you doing here?"

"I just got released from the Navy. I came with an old friend to the party. You know Richard Tarr?"

"Richard!" I say, as Richard steps in and stares me in the face. I back off some so I can see clearly. "And what are you doing here?"

"Studying math and physics. I've seen you here and there, but you've got to keep your nose in the books if you want to succeed, so I don't socialize much."

Richard was tall and skinny with bushy black hair. He looked like he was trying to grow a mustache under that long beak of a nose, but it was patchy. He wore wire rimmed glasses which I have never seen him do before.

"I'm sorry, Richard, but I wouldn't have recognized you." I turned back to Butch. "You are still kissing the girls, I see."

"Say," Butch started out, "what ever happened to you and Jamie? Weren't you deadly in love with each other? I was sure you two would get hitched."

I put my glass down on a nearby table where two girls and a guy are kissing and

mauling each other. “He abandoned me for a greater cause. He moved to Dumas. I followed after him, but I could never find him at home. It hurt, but I put my time to good use and wound up here. Studying journalism, you see.”

“Going to be a writer, are you?” Richard asks.

“A foreign corespondent,” I say licking my finger and wiping the air with it for good luck.

“Goody for you.” Butch grabs me with his arm. “Let’s dance.” He leads me right into the middle of the dance floor where it is a wonder we don’t bump into everyone. We dodge this way and that way, so the dance becomes very wild.

“I ought to hate you,” I yell over the music, as we slip between two couples.

“Why is that?” he asks.

“For destroying Maggie’s life.”

“Wish I hadn’t. Would marry her on the spot now.”

“I thought you would laugh.” Our bodies gyrate from side to side.

“I am a changed man, my dear,” he says, “a changed man. War does that to you.”

“Changed to what?” I ask. “A wolf to a tiger?”

Now he laughs. “I am the perfect gentleman ... when I’m sober.”

“I can believe that.”

The music dies down a bit and we find ourselves in a slow waltz. I am so tired that I rest my head on his shoulder. Yes, I have grown a bit. I come all the way up to a man’s shoulder. I strangely find comfort in the arms of this beast. At least he used to be a beast. I guess I have changed too. I don’t find him repulsive at all. In fact we have had a lot of fun tonight.

Butch walks me back to my dorm, strolling along slowly, hand in hand. “You going back home?” I ask.

“Tomorrow,” he says, staring straight ahead. “Getting the first train out of here.”

“That’s funny,” I say, almost laughing. “So am I. I’m all packed and ready to go.”

“I left my sea bag in a locker at the YMCA. The train station is not far from there.” He looks down at me, squeezes my hand, and smiles. “Maybe I’ll see ya there, kid.”

“Got yer ticket?”

“Not yet.”

“Me neither. Maybe we will bump into each other.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” I stop and give him a hug. “Thanks for a nice time. This is my dorm.”

“Oh. Okay.” He puts his arms around me. “One more kiss goodnight?”

“Sure.” We kiss like brother and sister. “Goodnight.”

It’s the funniest thing, though, as I walk up the sidewalk to the steps, I feel like I’m walking on air. I’ve had such a nice time it takes me forever to get to sleep.



Butch and I do bump into each other. I start laughing as I walk up to the ticket line. I can’t help it. I set my suitcase down at my feet. He smiles as he leans on the ticket counter and turns his head to look at me. He turns back to the cashier and points me out. “We two are together.”

“Okay. Here’s two seats at the back of this car.” He hands the tickets to Butch.

“Let me pay for mine.” I slide my suitcase past two irate women who grumble at me.

Butch pays the cashier. “Hold onto that money, girl,” he says. “I know students are

poor, and you will need that to eat.”

I want to kick him in the shins, but I don't. “Alright. You're right. I guess I won't have to fast today, but I will tomorrow.”

We walk together, he carrying his sea bag over his shoulder and my suitcase in his free hand. “Don't worry. I have a lot of back pay. I'm loaded.”

We wind up at a little cafeteria inside the train station. It's just like being back at school in Amarillo. I choose mashed potatoes and gravy and ... I'll be ... there's meatloaf. I ask for some ... and green beans. It is deja-vu. Butch orders chicken fried steak with gravy on everything. He is a man after all. We sit at a little table and talk about home.

“Guess what I found this morning,” I ask, digging into my meatloaf.

“What?”

“An unopened letter from my mother. I was looking around to see if I had left anything. I was actually,” I say, chomping down on my meatloaf, “cleaning up the mess my roommates left me, and I found the letter. I don't know how I missed it. Well, yes, I do. My mother and I had such a row before I left, it takes me a long time before I can open one of her tirades. Anyway, I found out in the letter they have moved to Dumas. I guess it has something to do with Daddy's work.”

Butch starts laughing and spitting his chicken fried stake everywhere.

“What's so funny?”

“Your pa's work. It's a joke. Do you know that he was no car salesman?”

I stare in disbelief. What does he know?

“He was a liquor runner for some moonshiners.”

He stops laughing when I bow my head and look demurely into his eyes. I smile as

wide as I can.

“You know!”

“We don’t talk about it. You know ...” I take my finger and run it across my throat.

“Oh! I see. Top secret stuff. But you know ... everybody in town knows it.”

“Well, still.”

“Yeah. Who’s got the still?”

I wrinkle my eyebrows.

“Okay. I’ll stop.” He finishes off his steak and asks, “So, I guess you’re headed for Dumas instead of our old stomping grounds.”

“Yes, for sure. I’ll catch a bus from Amarillo.”

What am I doing? Butch has always been the enemy. He’s the gangster in the black suit and white tie, wearing a broad-rimmed hat, like in the movies, which I rarely got to see. I had to take care of Mama all those years. I was in love with Jamie. Now, I’m going to board a train with Butch, him in his Navy blues, and me feeling very comfortable about it. Have I gone loony?

We go through a swinging door, lower half wood, upper half glass window, and there is our train waiting for us.

“All aboard!” the conductor calls out long and loud.

“Just in time,” Butch says, handing his luggage to the negro porter dressed in black coat and tie. He steps up and gives me his hand.

“Yeah,” I say.

My memories go back to the first time I got on a train in Amarillo, heading for the gold fields of California and a new life. Mama had been sobbing and blaming me for

deserting her. I guess that's why I enjoyed stepping onto that train with its new smells, leather seats like a new car, perfumed air, and the smell of adventure. What was my new life going to be like? I am still trying to answer that question. I sat in that seat by the window, not looking out at my old memories, but seeing Amarillo for the first time as an old western town gone modern. As I pulled out of that station, I also pulled out of my life and entered someone else's. Going back to Amarillo, especially with Butch, is like stepping into a pair of old shoes. I wonder if anyone will be there to greet me. Of course not. I will be invisible again.

The porter helps us find our seats, actually, our seat, a padded bench facing another bench with a window between the two. He lifts our luggage into the rack above and punches our tickets. Butch sits by the window facing forward, and I sit next to him. I don't know why I am so tired. It must have been last night's party. I lean my head on Butch's shoulder to rest and an older woman sits facing us.

"I enjoy seeing all you young couples. War does that, you know ... brings people together."

"Oh, we're not ..." I say in my defense.

"Not yet, anyway." Butch puts in his two cents.

I look up at Butch, grab his sleeve, and punch his arm. "We're just friends."

"Pretty close friends, I gather." The old woman smiles, showing off her laughing eyes. "I understand. You know, my late husband and I met on this very train."

I doubt that very much because cars are always being switched, and locomotives being replaced. She must mean this particular railway line. I don't respond, just close my eyes and rest. There is a jolt, and I feel the movement of the car. It feels nice and smooth as the train

pulls away from the station. I let the train carry me away into my dreams.

I expect something restful, but I dream of the train taking me back into the kitchen at home with me and my mother arguing.

“I raised you to be respectful, young woman!” Mama exclaims. I had told her I was not her maid.

“Mama. I am a grown girl now. I will not stay at home and be an old spinster, taking care of a mama who can do things for herself.”

“I can’t help it if I’m sick. It’s not my fault. But what do you care? ... going off gallivanting around, caring only for yourself.”

“Mama,” I say, defending myself, “I am only going to college. I’ll be back on visits.”

“I know what goes on in those colleges. You’ll meet a man and wind up pregnant.”

“Married more likely.”

“Well, married then! And I will be left high and dry ... all alone.”

“You have Daddy.”

“He’s not here most of the time. Even when he’s home he’s outside workin’ in the garage.”

Being a gangster, I think. I groan. I didn’t want to rehash that. My stomach growls. I open my eyes. I meet the smiling stare of the old woman. Butch is asleep. I thought he was, but he winks at me and gives me a squeeze with his warm arm. I snuggle underneath it. *What am I doing? Why am I so attracted to gangsters?* I sigh and close my eyes again. But my stomach won’t leave me alone.

I jab my elbow into Butch’s ribs. “You hungry? I am.”

“There should be a dinning car.” He sits up and retrieves his arm, holding my hand

instead.

The porter is visiting each passenger, whispering, “Breakfast? Breakfast? You want on the list? What’s yer name?”

I guess he’s putting everyone on a waiting list. He finally comes to us. “Breakfast, Ma’am?” He asks the old woman. “I brought my own. Thank you just the same.”

We put our names on the list. “This car will be announced shortly,” he says.

I sigh. I hope they have strawberries and pancakes.

Chapter Eleven

Well, that was a whirlwind romance. By the time we arrived in Amarillo I was ready to marry Butch. I mean, the way I feel about him is as though I were putting on a well fitting glove. He is very comfortable to be with, yet, it is like we are on our honeymoon, and something comes up and tears us apart. We both have previous commitments. Some people get married and have jobs in different cities, and after the honeymoon, they have to separate, saying, "See you later," and after they get to their destinations they have to ask themselves if they are really married.

I am standing here in the Amarillo train station sobbing. I have nothing to say. Butch holds my hands and reaches down and kisses my unresponsive lips. He has this longing look in his eyes.

"I can come with you to Dumas," he says.

I am thinking what if I see Jamie, so I say, "No. I have to face my monsters alone."

"I bet," he says softly, "your ma and pa will be glad to see you."

"What are you going to do?" I sigh.

"Apply for a GI loan, look for a job and some property. I want to make a good home for someone. Maybe you."

"You ought to look up Maggie." I say this because I have no hope for us. I am not destined to greatness. Besides, I want to travel, and as a foreign correspondent I could do that.

As I continue to stare at Butch, his face turns a bright red. With his short blond hair sticking straight up, he looks like a turnip. Maybe he's thinking of Maggie. I smile and he kisses me again. This time, the temptation is so strong to stay that I turn and leave.

“I’ll see ya,” I hear him say.



I get off the bus in Dumas at a truck stop. Why trains and buses leave you stranded in the early morning with an empty growling stomach is one of the mysteries of the universe. It always happens with me, and I am not a morning person. I hypnotically follow the other passengers into the restaurant with its smell of grease and cigarette smoke. Among the other smells is sizzling eggs and bacon.

I sit down with a small family, and when the waitress asks what I want, I say, “I’ll have some of that.”

“Some of what, sugar?” she asks, chewing gum and ready to write my ticket.

“That heavenly smell,” I answer.

“Two eggs sunny side up, three slices of bacon, and two toast,” she says in that long forgotten Texas accent. As she writes, she asks, “How d’ya like yer coffee?”

“With cream and sugar, please,” I say, smiling as if I were in love.

With the waitress gone, I take notice of the girl and her baby to my left and the boy sitting across from me. The baby, sitting in her mommy’s lap, grins at me and raises her hands as though she wants me to pick her up. “Ya ya,” she says.

“May I?” I ask.

“Sure,” the mother says. “She loves ever’body.”

I lift her up and place her bum on the table. She tries slapping my face, saying “Gi gi.”

“Hey,” says the boy. “Yer Merkle’s kid, ain’t cha? Jack Merkle. Yeah.”

“That’s me,” I say, bouncing the baby in my lap, making her laugh.

“Back from college, are ye?”

“That’s right. How’d you know? I don’t remember seeing you on the bus.” I’m sure I look puzzled, because I am.

“No, we just meet here for breakfast,” he says as the waitress brings him a plate full of pancakes and sausages. She gives the girl eggs and grits.

“Yer’s is comin’ up pretty quick, sugar,” the waitress says to me.

The baby sees the food and reaches for it, saying, “Ma ma.”

The girl takes the baby, and the boy says, with his mouth full, “Known yer daddy all my life, but he just moved up here last year.”

“You work with my daddy?” I ask.

“My pa does,” he says, stuffing more pancakes into his mouth. “An die been workin’ with my pa all my life.”

“I see,” I say. I have this funny feeling in my gut. I know what kind of business his pa is in ... just like my daddy. A moonshiner. I certainly raise my eyebrows at this. I can hardly think this was a coincidence. I smile with a little laugh.

There is a knowing that passes between our eyes. He smiles and keeps on eating.

The mother is busy feeding her baby grits and grunts. I don’t know who is grunting, but I assume it’s the baby. Then, without looking at me, the girl says, “He sent us here to meet chew, he being busy.”

“I been working with him and Pa all night,” the boy says.

The cat is out of the bag.

“Your pa’s payin’ for the food,” says the girl, “so you don’t need to pay.”

I almost get up and leave. The nerve of that man! Why didn’t Daddy come? Of course,

he's busy. The waitress bringing my breakfast bars the way, so I just sit there and gobble up my eggs as if I were starving. I don't talk, and the couple waits for me to finish.

"Our car is just outside," the boy says. "We'll take ya home."

I want to tell them my home is in Amarillo. I stand and stretch my legs and back. "I'm just visiting for the summer," I say.

We all three smile at each other. The baby is babbling.

Outside, the boy opens the back door for me after his wife and baby are seated up front. "Ever'one calls me Junior."

After I get in and Junior slams the door, the mother says, "And this here's Molly Bergen," showing off her baby. I can tell they don't share their names freely.

I guess Junior took my bags. I hear the trunk slam, so I guess they are in there.

"Nice to meet you Molly." I say. And Molly peeks over her mommy's shoulder and says, "Heh heh," while biting down on a rubber ring which obviously belongs in a car engine somewhere.

I am dropped off on a dusty corner at the cross section of two dirt roads. Junior deposits my two suitcases at my feet and drives off.

There is a white washed house with a wide front porch. The whole lot is bordered by a white picket fence. I can see beyond the house that there is a garage surrounded by several old cars at the end of a long back yard used for growing vegetables. There is a half grown tree in the yard by the corner, and several green bushes surrounding the porch.

I pick up my bags and head for the front door through the little white picket gate. I go up the steps, set down my bags and wonder if I should knock or go right on in. Then I see my mother push back the curtains of the window next to the door. She peeks out with a look

of surprise. I am disappointed because she is looking so old. But she opens the door and we give each other a hug.

“I’m so glad. I’m so glad,” she says, smacking me on the lips with a great big kiss. “Come in. Come in.” She seems so pleased to see me that I’m taken aback. I pick up my bags and wonder if she has an extra room.

“We have a room all fixed up for ya, honey.” She guides me to the back of the house. It’s the room right behind the kitchen and looks out onto the side street. The other window looks out onto the garden.

“Looks like you’ve been working as hard as Daddy,” I say.

I set my luggage on the bed.

“Don’t have nothin’ much to do but work in the garden and make soap. Your daddy has planted several fruit trees, as you can see.” She points out through the window.

“You make your own soap?” I sit down next to my bags and push my shoes off with my toes. Folding my hands, I stare at Mama.

“I remember how my mother made soap. She used ashes from the fireplace. Thought I’d try it. The mice like it.” She grins.

“The mice?”

“Yeah. If I let a bar lay around, the next mornin’ you’ll see tooth marks on it.”

She stands there like she doesn’t know what to do. She fidgets a moment and then asks, “You want to help in the garden? It’s a beautiful day outside.”

“If you don’t mind, Mama,” I say, feeling exhausted from the long trip, “I would rather unpack and put my things away. Then I think I’ll take a nap.”

“You can do those things later. The garden will be refreshing.”

I give her a look of exasperation and sigh heavily. *Really Mama!*

“Okay. I’ll go out and work alone ... all by myself.” She gives me this expectant look. I hold my ground. “Okay. I’ll be outside.” She hesitates before she leaves the room. “Can I call ya for lunch?”

“If I’m awake, Mama. If I’m awake.” I smile at her, not wanting bad feelings between us. “Look in on me.”

“Okay. I’ll do that.”

The window is open and a cool breeze ushers in the songs of birds, insects, and passing cars. It is a lullaby to my ears. I find empty drawers and fill them with my stuff. Then I lay down and let the lullaby sooth my nerves. The smell of Texas dirt is nostalgic. My reveries of school, Butch, the train ride home, and Dumas turn into dreams. I hear a souped up car outside. I look out the window and see Jamie climbing out of the homemade racer. My heart races like a galloping horse. *Jamie!*



I hear my mama’s voice quietly calling me. “Rachel? Rachel? Are you awake? I made you a sandwich.”

I open my eyes, yawn, and push myself up with my arm. I quickly look out the window, expecting to see a black sedan with flames painted on the sides. “Where’s Jamie? Did he leave?”

“Jamie?” she asks with disdain. “I haven’t seen him in years.”

I sigh, take a deep breath, realizing it was just a dream, and smile at Mama. “Let me

splash some water on my face, and I'll be right in."

I eat a sandwich made of leftover brisket and mustard. I listen to Mama tell all about her moving up here to Dumas and finding a church. Everyone is friendly. The Church in Amarillo helped her get the job of organist here. She had to wait a year before becoming the replacement.

"Mizz Williams is gettin' too old. She'll be retiring soon and I'll be the organist full time."

"That's good, Mama," I say, sipping the strong lemonade she made.

Mama goes on talking about the people and the town. "I feel more at home here. I don't know why. Maybe it's more like the little town I grew up in."

Sitting here talking with Mama is nostalgic. It also relieves my nerves. I left for California in such a temper like a dog with rabies, but now I am able to be more relaxed around Mama. She is more like herself. I hope it's not just naivete. I wonder if she knows what goes on in the garage.



The dream I had earlier in the day must have been an omen, because late in the night I hear Daddy and Jamie talking in the kitchen. They must have just come in from a job. I can't just run in there in my nightgown, but I can take a peek, so I get up and tiptoe to the kitchen door and poke my nose in. There he is ... the man I would have married. It's strange to see him there all grown. I back up and accidentally kick a bucket.

"Is someone there?" Jamie asks.

“I don’t know,” Daddy says softly. He stands up and I run back into the bedroom.

Daddy opens the door of my room and lets in a splinter of light that reaches across the darkness and touches the back of my neck. It gives me chills as I lay scrunched up under the covers, waiting for him to go away. I have to hold my breath to keep from laughing. I used to do this as a child, and sometimes Daddy would come in and tickle me, because he knew I wasn’t asleep.

Daddy walks away, leaving the door ajar. After he sits down again in the kitchen, I can just barely make out a few things they are talking about.

“That souped up car did the job,” my daddy says.

“Sure left them state troopers in the lurch,” Jamie whispers. He laughs a little.

“Shhh!” Daddy says. “Someone will hear you.”

I must be psychic, because that’s what I dreamed about, and that motor that sounds like it lost its muffler is what really woke me up, if I remember correctly, unless it was another dream. That was right before I heard Daddy and Jamie talking in the kitchen.



I must have worried all night because all I remember dreaming about is the highway patrol chasing Jamie in his, what did the guys in California call them, hot rods?

I wake up this morning having tossed and turned all night. I feel so tired. Well, I came here to visit, so visit I shall. I yawn and stretch and make my way to the bathroom. It’s locked. I knock on the door. “Mama?” I ask.

The door opens and to my astonishment, low and behold, Jamie stands before me. He

is sporting a manicured and thick mustache. My affections have forgotten him. He stands there like a stranger, but I cannot run nor speak. It is Jamie who breaks the silence.

“Oh. Rachel. I’m sorry. I thought I would be in and out and you wouldn’t know I was here.”

“Well, Jamie, you are all grown up,” is all I can think to say.

“I slept on the couch. Got in late last night. Have to go right back out this morning with your pa, so I didn’t go home.”

“I see.” I lean on the door post as he wedges himself out and into the hall. “Heard your hot rod last night.”

“Is that what you call it?”

“Yeah. Quite a few students from the school make ‘em and race ‘em. It’s become quite the craze back there.”

“Um hum.” He smiles and says, “Well, have to go. Glad to see you again.”

I slip into the bathroom and close the door. I really wanted to ask him if he has a girl or is married yet. How about that. Jamie. Oh my gosh. What do I do about Butch?

At the breakfast table, I confront Mama about Jamie.

“Well,” she says, “I lied. What I really meant to say is that I don’t see him very often, and it’s none of my business if I do. All I know is that he has your father’s job of driving cars, and your father has more garage work.”

If my mama suspects what’s really going on, she isn’t saying.



I spend the weeks helping my mama in the garden and going to Church on Sundays. She also makes a batch of soap so I can see how it's done. She still does it like the old pioneers, using ashes from the cook stove, but since she has a gas stove, she burns old limbs from the trees that she saves out near the garage. She uses the ashes for the potash that turns the fat into soap, which comes out a dark gray. She doesn't use a big iron kettle, but she does have a rather large stock pot on the stove. Her arms are stronger than mine. She lets me stir it for a minute, and when I give in, she calls me a wimp. I guess I am compared to her. Another thing I am a wimp at is that I can't stand the smell. It's worse than doing her laundry in which she uses her homemade soap and bluing. Yes, I am down to doing her laundry again.



I didn't go to church when I was in California, but Mama insists I go with her here in Dumas. The church has a nice organ, but the building isn't as nice as the one in Amarillo. It smells the same though, like old paper. I don't know, maybe all churches use this cheap off white paper for their programs or thin magazines they give out. I sit in church listening to Mama playing the organ with everyone singing, but I have found this interesting story in this soft magazine they gave me at the door. It is of a little boy in India who was rescued by the missionaries. He had broken his arm, and the medicine man had stuffed his arm full of broken glass, thinking that would heal his bone. He was in a lot of pain, but the missionaries cleaned out his arm and set it properly, endearing the boy to them. Thus they won another little one to Christ.

Some rude person interrupts my reading. "Scoot over," he says and sits down beside

me. I get my dander up and furrow my eyebrows. I take a glance at him just out of curiosity. I start laughing with such a light heart. The man has a wide grin on his face. His hair is a bright blond. It's Butch.

"Where'd you come from?" I whisper loudly. I get frowns from the surrounding songsters.

"Wanted to see you," he whispers back.

"Shhhh!" says someone behind us.

Butch stands to sing and everyone sits down. After singing one word, Butch sinks to the bench, and I whisper, "What a beautiful color," meaning his red face. He grins out of the side of his mouth and shrugs his shoulders.

After the meeting, we walk up to the organ, sit in the choir seats, and wait for Mama to finish playing the postlude.

"I didn't know your ma could play the organ," Butch says with some approval written on his face and in the tone of his voice.

That is such a contrast to the Butch I knew way back when he would make fun.

Mama stops and turns her head. She stares at us two.

"Is this he whom you talked about without ceasing, this past month?" she asks in imitation of someone who knows what they are talking about.

"Yes, Mama," I say matter-of-factly. "This is Butch."

"Butch." She stands and we stand with her. "Would you do the honor of walking us home and having dinner with us? I'm afraid my dear husband and his friend Jamie will not be dining with us." She winks. "It's their business, you know."

"In that case, Ma'am," Butch says as though his soul had become lighter, "I accept

your invitation.”

How about me? No one bothers to ask how I feel about this. If Butch stays long enough, he is bound to hear that roaring of Jamie’s hot-rod and have a runin with him.



While walking myself and Mama home, Butch reaches down and takes hold of my hand. It feels nice. He’s as comfortable as a big Teddy bear. I look up at him and sigh. He just smiles.

“I hear,” Mama says, “that you’ve moved back to Amarillo and yer out of the Army.”

“Navy, Ma’am.”

“Huh?” Mama asks absent mindedly.

“Navy. I just got out of the Navy. Been serving in the Pacific Theater. We slammed them Japs good.”

“That’s nice,” she said. She is looking straight ahead as though her mind is elsewhere.

The walk is short, seeing this is Dumas, hardly a town at all. When we reach the house, go through the little picket gate and step up to the porch, Mama says, “I’m tired.” She opens the door and enters. We follow. “I’m goin’ in and take a nap,” she says, “You two can fix the dinner.”

That’s not like Mama. Invite someone over for dinner and he has to fix it. She must be getting old. I bet she’s in her fifties now.

“You have any beef?” Butch asks, stopping at the kitchen door as I pass through.

“Let me look in the ice box,” I say. I open the ice box door, noticing the copper coil

resting on top of it. It must be part of the refrigeration. "I spy a chunk of meat in here." I bring out a plate of leftover roast nestled in its own jelly.

"I can make a mean stew," he says.

"Well, come on in. There's knives in that drawer and a pullout carving board above that. I'll get some vegetables from the cooler out on the back porch. Same as a root cellar I imagine."

I open up the cooler and see what veggies there are. Most of them are trying to grow themselves. There are a few potatoes, carrots, a couple of turnips, and one onion that hasn't molded. I bring them in and Butch says, "That will do fine."

He has already chopped up the meat into bite sized pieces and placed them into the stew pot. He makes short work of the carrots and potatoes. I wrestle with the turnips, trying to peel them. My knife isn't as sharp as his. He uses a large butcher knife ... just like a man. I use a paring knife.

It is a small kitchen and we are either bumping into each other or rubbing each other's shoulders. He's in my way and I bump him with my hip and he bumps me back with his hip, and we wind up in an embrace, kissing.

"You love me?" he asks.

"Yes," I say.

"But things are complicated, aren't they?" He has such a longing in his eyes.

"The meat is sizzling," I warn.

He grins. "So am I."

I wrestle with him for a moment to get free. "Yer goin' to burn the dinner."

He lets me go somewhat. He has his arm around me while he stirs the meat. I put in

the vegetables and add flour. He sprinkles everything with salt and pepper, and I add the water. “A little more lard, he says.” We add that and cover the pot.

I feel like I’m that pot and he’s my lid. Then I am thinking of how I felt about Jamie before he left. Chills run across my face. I back off from Butch and stare at him as though he was a stranger. Tears come to my eyes and I run to my bedroom.



I wake up, having taken a forced nap. I wonder if Butch has finished making dinner or if he ran home. I’m afraid to go out there and find out. Then I hear that hot-rod and the back door open. I can hear Daddy and Jamie talking, someone saying, “Ummm ummm. That shore smells good.” It must be Jamie, because he adds, “Your sweetheart sure is making a powerful stew.”

Mama’s up because I hear her walking into the kitchen and saying, “It’s not me. I smelled this fine cookin’, and it woke me up.”

Then, “Dog gone it! If it isn’t my old pal, Jamie.”

I hear slaps on the back. “Butch! How is my old friend doing?”

Old friend? My childhood suspicions were right. They were buddies after all, but they sure kept it secret from me. I can’t stand it. I have to join the crowd.

I look into the kitchen and everybody is talking. Daddy is telling Mama about why they are home so soon. Mama is finding out that Butch made the stew, and Butch and Jamie are talking about old times. When I poke my head in, everyone stops talking, looks at me, and addressing me, tells me everything all at once what they have been saying to each other.

The last line is Mama saying, “Why on earth did you leave Butch to cook dinner all by himself for?”

“I’m sorry, Mama,” I say, “I’m sorry, Butch. Hi Jamie. Glad to see you.”

“Glad to see you too.” Jamie smiles with his hands in his pockets as though he were the shy one.

“Rachel,” Mama says, “you set the table. I’ll make some lemonade.”

All the men march off to the living room and fill it with cigarette smoke.

During dinner, I don’t know who to look at, so I eat quietly, staring down at my food.

Daddy says, “You’re awful quiet, child,” meaning me. “You haven’t even said ‘Hello’ or anything.”

“Sorry, Daddy. I got two mules pulling me apart,” I say, “and my mind’s a blank, ‘cause that’s all I can feel right now.”

“I see,” he says, above the clamor that is my mama, Jamie, and Butch. “Did you have a good time at church today?”

“I had such an experience, Daddy,” I say, “such an experience.” I cross my legs because I can’t cross my fingers, hoping my daddy will not get the message of my being so hung up on Butch as much as I am hung up on Jamie. I want to go to bed with both of them right now, and it’s driving me crazy.

I chew rather fast, thinking I might get out of here and go for a walk. When I’m finished, I say, “May I be excused?” I get up and walk out without hearing any permission.

Outside, Jamie and Butch catch up to me, each one wrestling me, trying to put his arm around me.

“Will you both stop?” I say so exasperated. I stand there facing them with my hands

clenched.

“You love me, don’t cha?” Butch asks.

“No, she loves me,” Jamie says. “You can see it in her eyes.”

“You didn’t travel with her on the train and get to know her,” Butch says.

“I’ve known her most of my life,” Jamie says.

“Why did you leave her then?” Butch cuts below the belt.

“Yes! Why did you leave me?” I hear myself ask.

“It was your pa,” Jamie says.

“You leave my pa out of it,” I say, ready to punch him.

“Yeah,” Butch adds, “leave her pa out of it.”

“Shut up,” I say to Butch.

“I couldn’t cross your pa,” Jamie says. “I would never get to have you then.”

“Don’t cha think it’s my choice?” I ask. “And no one is goin’ ta HAVE me, unless they have my fist in their face.”

Butch grabs my arm. “Let’s run,” he says.

We run away from Jamie, and even though we are laughing, I feel my heart sinking like a ship that has had a hole blasted into its side by a torpedo. I’m afraid Butch is the torpedo. We stop to catch our breath under the water tower, a landmark that is always in sight.

Butch embraces me, and I wet his face with my tears as he gives me the sweetest kiss.

“I’ll always love you, Rachel,” he says as the bright orange sun settles down to bed.

“You will always be my big Teddy bear,” I say, “but I’ve got to marry Jamie. It’s like I was promised to him by the angels in Heaven.”

“I know,” Butch says. “But I had to try.”

“Aw, Butch. I’m sorry,” I say. “My lips want you so bad, but my heart’s tied up in knots and won’t let me.” My hands don’t want to let go of his shirt. The smell of his body is like opium to me.

Butch grabs my hands with his giant paws. He grins. He’s like a siren. I cock my head.

“You’d better go now,” I say. “Thank’s for makin’ the dinner.”

“Yer welcome. See ya around.”

“Yeah. See ya around.” He walks off, and I ask, “How you gettin’ home?”

He sticks up his thumb. “Same way I got here.”

“Oh,” I say.

I watch a broken man walk away into the shadows with his head down.

I walk back home and see Jamie leaning against the lamppost on the corner of Mama and Daddy’s house. The cone of light shows a lean figure with one foot against the post. He puts a cigarette up to his mouth and blows out a long stream of smoke, white against the shadows. He throws it down and smashes it with his foot. His black leather jacket melds with his shadowy figure.

As I approach, he says, “I knew you would come back.”

Before he can put his arm around me, I grab his hand with both of mine and lay my head on his shoulder. We walk through the little picket fence, up the sidewalk, onto the porch, and he kisses me. I see Mama’s nose between the curtains, eyes watching us. When she sees me watching her, she shuts them really fast.



Mama waits until after dinner and after Jamie leaves, and Daddy goes out in the garage to go into her diatribe.

“You *can't* marry Jamie!” she says.

“I have always had that intention, Mama!” I say.

“He’s not for you. You need to marry a decent man like Butch.”

“Mama, you’ve always been against Butch.”

“I know, but he has become such a nice young man. Now Jamie on the other is a different matter. He has become a juvenile delinquent and irresponsible. He will break yer heart someday. You don’t know what he is like now. He and your daddy!”

“Running liqueur?”

“How’d you know?”

“Mama, I’ve always known. I found out when I was a little girl. I hid out in Daddy’s car one night when Jamie went missing.” I wait for what she will say next. While she is staring at me, I say, “How did *you* find out?”

“I found out. That’s all you need to know. And talking about being missing, I think Jamie needs to become missing again, missing from yer life and ours.”

“You mean yours,” I say. “You have just gotten used to me taking care of you all over again.”

“That’s not true.” Mama pauses. “I like having you here. We’re good for each other.”

I can see that this argument is fruitless. I look at her and she looks at me, both holding onto our resentments. I know this argument will continue at another time.

Conclusion

I really have the jitters this morning, and a cup of coffee isn't helping. My wedding dress is more efficacious and functional than beautiful. It is merely a light pink affair, slim, and without sleeves, cut down the middle to show a little more than my neck. Mama wanted to add white lace around the edges, but I had to put my foot down. I want it to be simple, just like my wedding.

We are not having a large wedding, and it will be here at home with the preacher from Mama's church, Mama, Daddy, and some neighbors. Everyone else we know lives too far away or is too busy.

Mama made the dress. I had to fight her to keep it simple. She dreamed up something you would find in a bride's magazine, something appropriate for walking down the aisle at church, but I told her "No." She wanted to be there to play the organ and see the whole procession. She said that she wanted me to have a joyful wedding. Well, my views are different. I don't care for much ceremony. Just tying the knot is all I am interested in.

Jamie has to borrow a Sunday suit from one of Mama's friends, but then I wonder what the friend will wear.

The time will be 2:30 this afternoon. That will give people enough time to get ready, I'm sure. Then there will be refreshments from the kitchen. I will demand there be no smoking inside the house.



“Honey,” Mama calls from the kitchen. “Help me with this icing.”

I scurry into the kitchen. “This is just like when I was little. Remember those times? You always let me help you with the icing.”

“Well, I’m so nervous I could scream,” she says. “I don’t want to ruin yer wedding cake.” She stops trimming the edge with the pink frosting and hands me the icing tip. I finish the top edge for her.

“How do you want me to decorate it?” I ask, standing over it in my wedding dress.

“I didn’t mean fer you to get yer wedding dress dirty,” she says.

“I won’t.”

“Do you know how to make flowers?” she asks, sucking each finger in turn. “I’ve seen it done, but I can’t get myself to do one.”

“I think they do it on some wax paper first,” I say, staring at the white icing on top. It’s a simple double layer cake. Smells like spice cake. I think it usually has raisins in it. “You think this is big enough for all the people?”

“It had better be,” Mama says with her hands on her hips. “But I will cut it in thin slices just in case. You know, not like you do a pie.”

“Yes, Mama. I know.” I stare at it some more. “It don’t need no flowers. How about I just write ‘Happy Weddin’ on top?”

“Can you make medallions on the sides?” Mama sucks on her index finger.

“Yeah.”

“Go ahead. It’s yer cake. I’m just too nervous.”

“You said that.”

I make the medallions. I just pretended they were flowers. I am surprised they came

out evenly spaced. Then I write on top “Happy Weddin’.”

“Your wrote ‘Weddin’.”

“I know.” I lick pink icing off my finger. “There was no room for the ‘g’.”

I let Mama make the punch. There is more likelihood I would spill it on my dress. I make some pimento and cheese sandwiches and fill candy dishes with salted nuts and mint cremes. Mama wants to bring out some chocolate cremes and chocolate covered nuts, but that reminds me too much of my childhood and all the Nancy Drew mysteries I went through. We always met at Kress Five and Dime and bought chocolates. Besides, I don’t like chocolate any more.



Preacher Simmons shows up. He is a middle-aged man with gray temples, slightly balding in front, clean shaven, and big lips. I guess it’s really just a big mouth ... large jaw bone. I have heard him speak several times. He has a really loud voice ... doesn’t need a microphone.

Jamie comes prancing through the door with two of his friends. He gives me a kiss and introduces me. “This is Jimmy, and this is ...”

“I know,” I say. “Junior, isn’t it?”

“Yes Ma’am,” he says. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” I say. “I guess you two work with Jamie?”

I get nods and smiles.

Jimmy is tall and slanky, dressed in blue jeans and a blue plaid shirt. He asks, “Isn’t it

bad luck for the bride and groom to see each other?”

“Old wives tales,” I say. I grab Jamie by the lapels and kiss him a huge long time.

Junior clears his throat. When I don’t respond, he takes out a cigarette.

“No smoking,” I say as Jamie and I take a break from kissing.

Suddenly, a large hand grabs my shoulder. I see a hand on Jamie’s also. “Not appropriate, young’uns.” The preacher guides us to some chairs that have been set up on the far end of the living room. “You, Miss, sit here, and you, Sir, sit here.” He sits us on each end of the row of chairs.

I start to say something, but the look in his eyes is so belligerent that I back down. Jamie looks at me, smiles, and shrugs his shoulders.

We wait patiently while the peanut gallery fills up with people. I recognize some people I have seen my mama associate with. I smile and wave my hand while it rests in my lap.



I giggle through the whole ceremony. The preacher’s eyebrows are furrowed. The tone of his voice is a bit angry. But I can’t help it. I will have my Jamie. I say “yes,” and then Jamie says “yes,” and when the preacher says “I pronounce you both husband and wife,” I grab Jamie to kiss him, but the preacher grabs my arm, looks at me with a scowl and says, “You may now kiss the bride,” and we sure do. We kiss and kiss and kiss until we have everyone laughing ... except the preacher.

We run out of the house with me screaming and leave Mama and Daddy to feed their

neighbors. Leaving in Jamie's hot rod, we find the nearest motel, tell the clerk that we just got married, and that we wanted the biggest bed they have. With a chuckle, the clerk, an older man, not very tall, leads us to our honeymoon suite. We close our door and don't come out until late the next morning. The cleaning girl has to wake us up.



Jamie and I show up on the doorstep at Mom and Dad's feeling really happy and proud of ourselves. We greet Mama with all smiles then Mama scolds us. She says, "I am ashamed at the way you acted yesterday, after all I went through to give you a nice wedding."

"Mama, it was my wedding," I say through the screen door. "I'm sorry. I was so excited I even forgot to stay for cutting the cake. Can you forgive me?"

"I don't know," she says. "I guess you want to come in."

"We want to get my things," I say with the palms of my hands stretched out, pleadingly.

"Here you go, leaving me again," she says like Eeyore, Christopher Robin's stuffed toy. Mama opens the door, and we slip in.

While packing my things in the bedroom, I hear Mama from the kitchen. "I saved you two some of the cake. I'll put it in this Tupperware container. You heard of Tupperware? It's really nice to store things in ... all kinds of sizes and shapes."

"No, Mama," I call back. "Don't think so."

She comes into the bedroom. The change in the clarity of her voice startles me. "Here it is. You can put it in your suitcase just as it is. It won't open and spill on your nice things."

“Mama, I swear,” I say. “You sound just like a commercial.”

I turn to Jamie. “Take these out to the car.”

He takes the two suitcases and says, “Married one day and already giving orders.”

I punch him in the ribs and all he does is laugh. “Mama, was Daddy this ornery when you first got married?”

Mother is just laughing under her breath, “hmm, hmm, hmm.”

As we make our way to the door, I ask, “Where is Daddy? I wanted to say goodbye.”

“Honey, if you want to talk to your daddy, you have to get up a lot earlier than this.”

She waves her hand in a back stroke. “He’s gone. He’s left. He always does this, and is gone all day.”

I bite my lips, and my stomach ties in knots. I have grown so distant from my daddy. I hold back a tear.

I take Mama’s hands. “Mama, you tell Daddy I love him.”

“I will,” she says.

I walk down to the hot-rod. I turn back and shade my eyes with my hand from the rising sun. “Mama, tell Daddy he can pick up the car from the bus depot. We’re going down to take the train from Amarillo.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry to leave so soon, but I have to get back to classes.”

“Okay.”

We get into the car and pull away from the house. Leaving Mama all by herself sours my whole insides. I feel ashamed that I have to live my own life now and not be her little girl any longer. The tears come.

Jamie glances my way. “Now, we’ll have none of that. Your Mama can take care of herself. She’s done all right this far.”

“I know,” I say. “She just makes me feel this way.”



It takes four days on the train to Los Angeles and a short bus ride to Berkeley. Jamie has to stay at the YMCA where Butch stayed for a while until he can find an apartment for us. When I get back to the barracks, what we call the student housing, I am handed two letters. One is from Mama, the other from Butch. I take them up to my room, set my bags down and sit myself down, immediately opening Butch’s letter. I’m so excited to hear from him.

“Dear Rachel,

I originally came up to Dumas to tell you this, but I wasn’t expecting my old friend, Jamie. I was walking by your old house the other day, coming from the direction of Jamie’s house. It looks deserted, really run down. But what I was going to say is that I found Maggie at home. She and her little boy were outside, and they came out of the yard and met me on the sidewalk. She’s back from Tennessee. She had been living with an aunt. Her boy is as blond as can be. He is ten years old and very ornery. (I think I spelled that write. I had to look it up.) He kicked me in the shins. Maggie apologized and swat his bottom, sending him running back into the house. She said that at first, she was really angry with me, but as little Ronny grew (that’s his name), she decided that he was such a special gift that she forgave me. She said that she didn’t know what she was going to do or say if she ever met me again, but here we are, together again. We have been dating. I thought that if I courted her enough, that I could make it up to her and marry her. So we agreed to go on dates, I mean, we have been going out every night this week. Sometimes I just go to her house, and we eat dinner with her parents. They seem to be happy with me. I can’t see why. I guess I have bowled them over with

my manly charm.

I found a preaching job in a local church here in Amarillo. That's another thing I was going to tell you. Since I got out of the Navy, I have wanted to be a preacher and help people. It's not a good paying job, so I found a second job as a carpenter. I was ship's carpenter when I wasn't a gunner. The ship I was on needed a lot of repairing while fighting out there in the Pacific.

I am still in love with you, Rachel, but as I have been converted to Christ, I have to do the right thing. I think Maggie is still in love with me, and that will make it easy. I want to care for my boy. She told me he is my boy, and I believe her. So here I am, trying to do what the Lord wants me to do.

I have to go now. I hope you and Jamie will have a fine marriage. I couldn't wish a finer girl on him.

With love,

Butch.

PS: I forgot. I returned that suitcase of money to your dad. I kept it all these years. What money I spent I replaced. I put it where he would find it."

This letter has shocked me, and I don't know whether to cry or jump up and holler. I love that man. I hope he and Maggie will make it together. I love Maggie. I think I will write her. It was nice of Butch to return that money.

Now I take a deep breath and wonder what Mama's letter is going to hold. I saved hers for last, because I know she can go into her tirades. I open it slowly and just know she is going to bawl me out for leaving her. But what I read is a bigger shock.

"Dear daughter,

Your daddy died last night in a car accident."

What? I don't believe it. I shake the letter as if there were some wrinkle in it that has played a trick on my eyes. I raise it into the air to see it better, resting my arms on my lap.

Trying not to go into a bawling fit, I continue reading it to see if it's true. Is my daddy dead?

Tears come to my eyes. It makes it hard to read.

"I'm sorry to have to be the bearer of bad news."

I sniff.

"He was out on a run with Jamie's car. The highway patrol found him. The car had flipped over into the ditch, and he was crushed to death."

I raise the letter to my face and cry into it. *Daddy! Oh Daddy!* After I stop crying, I lower the letter and continue reading.

"He must have fallen to sleep. He had been working a lot of hours straight. I don't think we will open the casket at the funeral. I'm sorry Jamie's car got wrecked. It was totaled. That's okay. I don't drive anyway. I have never driven a car, never attempted it, and never will. I don't think there was any insurance on it. Your daddy didn't have regular insurance either. It's not enough for me to live on, not nowadays. But your daddy left a surprise for me. I had dropped a bracelet in the car he was working on in the garage. You know, I was just reminiscing there in the garage like I sometimes do when your daddy is gone. I was rubbing the car door. It was quite polished and smooth. I love that. The window was down, and something caught my bracelet, tearing it off. I guess it was the push-down lock. It's a tricky little stick in the corner of the window. Anyway, I opened the door and got down on my knees to look for the darned thing. Well, I saw this suitcase under the seat. I had a Dickens of a time trying to get it out. When I did, it fell to the floor and opened up. Some dollar bills fell out. At first, I thought that my Honey was planning on going on a long trip, and I didn't recognize that bag. Well, I opened it, and lo and behold, it was full of cash. Twenties, fifties, and hundreds. So, Honey, I thank the Lord, and I am now well enough off. I have enough money to spend the rest of my life in comfort. I can buy anything I want with cash. I hear a lot of people around here live on credit, but not me. Not anymore. I forgot all about my bracelet. I did go back a couple days later and retrieve it.

I am going to be mighty lonely without you and your daddy. I hope you will come and visit

me again, maybe when you and Jamie get settled.

I love you so very much.

Your loving mother.”

I put the letter down. It is true. I sigh. I raise the letter to my eyes and continue crying.

Daddy. When I’m done, the letter is wrinkled and tear stained.



I haven’t recovered from yesterday, and Jamie is so very sympathetic. He came to the dorms to visit his wife and found me in a very melancholy mood.

“We were a happy couple when I left,” he says, “and now you are so sad. What happened?”

“This happened.” I hand him the letter.

“It must be from your mother,” he says, “from the condition it’s in.”

He reads it at a glance and embraces me. “I am so sorry,” he says. “Do you want to travel all that way back home? Will they hold the funeral for you?”

“I’m not going back there,” I say with my head on his shoulder. “I can’t. There is too much water under the bridge.”

“A letter only costs a nickle.”

“Yes. I will write. I just have to gather my feelings so I can be rational.” I sniff and wipe my nose with Jamie’s handkerchief.

I pull away from Jamie so I can see his face. “There is another letter. It’s from Butch.”

“How’s the old bugger doing?”

“He’s fine. Better than fine. He’s marrying Maggie.”

“He should have in the first place. I’m glad he’s got his head on straight.”

“But there is something that is bothering me.”

“What is that? About Butch?”

“About Mama ... because of Butch.”

“What do you mean?”

“Butch tried to replace the money he and Richard found in a that suitcase.”

“I thought they would have spent it all by now.”

“Well, Butch replaced what he spent and hid the suitcase under the seat of a car Daddy was working on so he would find it.”

“Did he?”

“No. That’s what’s troubling me. Mama found it and thinks it’s a gift from Heaven. Oh, Jamie! She’s going to live off it.”

Jamie sighs and takes me into his arms again.

“I will have to write her and tell her to give it to the police. The Feds are sure to show up at her door ... or the Patriots.”

“Now, now. I wouldn’t fret. Maybe it is a gift from Heaven.”

I confront Jamie face to face. “I don’t want Mama to get into trouble. With that amount of money! Oh, Jamie!”

Jamie grabs me again. “I will fix it. I know someone.”

“You, you, know someone,” I sob.

“Yes.” Jamie looks at me. There is something deep I can see in his eyes. “Let me tell you something about your father. You see, he was an undercover agent for the

Feds. Everything has worked out for the best. He was actually an arbitrator between the Patriots and the Feds. They worked together, made deals, and one of the deals is that I move as far away as possible without having to go overseas. I'm not supposed to tell you, but I feel I can trust you. I work for the FBI, recruited by your father."

"Jamie Holcomb!" I say.

He shushes me with his finger to his lips.

I whisper, "What do you mean?"

"Just as I said. I'm working undercover. Now don't worry about income. We'll get everything we need. I do have to get a regular job, though ... part of my assignment. Now you forget everything I've said. Cross your heart."

I cross my heart, grab him and kiss him with as much romance as I can muster.

"What about Mama?"

"As I said. I'll take care of everything so your mama won't have to worry."

"Okay. Then what?"

"We will settle down and have lots of kids and retire when we get old."

Jamie and I go out to dinner and then to a movie. The next day I get busy with school, registering and all, and go apartment hunting with Jamie. I don't write Mama, and I don't write the next day or the next day.

Sunday comes and Jamie asks, "Have you written your mama?"

All I can do is shrug my shoulders.

"We're not going anywhere until you write her a letter." He pulls the chair out from under the desk and points with his nose. I sit down, grab some paper and a pen I put there the other day, and write:

“Dear Mama,

Please forgive me for not writing sooner. I got so busy. I don't know what to say. I can't come to the funeral. We spent all our money on the train tickets. I mean, we have a little left over to get an apartment and groceries, but if Jamie doesn't find a job soon, we will be living on the street. I guess I could sneak him into the dorm, but that wouldn't last very long, maybe one night, and then we will be thrown out. He's living at the YMCA, spending our money. It's going to be hard for us the first couple of months.

I wish I could say something to comfort you. I can't say for sure Daddy is with God. I guess you have greater faith than I do. I hope he is with God. That's as far as my faith goes. Maybe you could write and give me greater encouragement.

I'm glad we got to spend some time together. I have one more year of school, and I will graduate. Maybe we can come and see you next summer. I hope we can if Jamie's job will allow it.

Mama, as one of my assignments, I have to write a history. I realize I don't know much of our family, where we come from and all that. If you could please enlighten me and write a little history of our family, I would appreciate it.

God bless, Mama. God bless us all.

Your loving daughter,

Rachel.”

I hate to lie to my mama, but you know. She can't know the truth. It could hurt her. I mean, they will hurt her. When we can, we will send for her and she can live with us out here in California. We can do that for her so she won't be so lonely.

The End