



## Chapter 1

There's nothing in this whole world like the sight of a man swinging by his neck.

Folks in my parts like to call it *lynching*, as if by calling it another word they can keep from feeling like murderers. Sometimes when they string a man up, they gather around like vultures looking for the next meal, staring at the cockeyed neck, the sagging limbs, their lips turning up at the corners when they should be turning down. For some people, time has a way of blurring the good and the bad, spitting out that thing called conscience and replacing it with a twisted sort of logic that makes right out of wrong.

Our small town of Calloway, Virginia, had that sort of logic in spades—after the trouble it had caused my family over the years, I knew so better than most. But

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the violence had long since faded away, and my best friend, Gemma, would often tell me that made it okay—her being kept separate from white folks. “Long as my bein’ with your family don’t bring danger down on your heads, I’ll keep my peace and be thankful,” she’d say.

But I didn’t feel so calm about it all as Gemma did. Part of that was my stubborn temperament, but most of it was my intuition. I’d been eyeball-to-eyeball with pure hate more than once in my eighteen years, and I could smell it, like rotting flesh. Hate is a type of blindness that divides a man from his good sense. I’d seen it in the eyes of a Klansman the day he tried to choke the life out of me and in the eyes of the men who hunted down a dear friend who’d been wrongly accused of murder.

And at times, I’d caught glimpses of it in my own heart.

The passage of time had done nothing to lessen its stench. And despite the relative peace, I knew full well that hearts poisoned by hateful thinking can simmer for only so long before boiling over.

In May of that year, 1938, the pot started bubbling.

I was on the front porch shucking corn when I saw three colored men turn up our walk, all linked up in a row like the Three Musketeers. I stood, let the corn silk slip from my apron, and called over my shoulder, “Gemma! Come on out here.”

She must have been nearby because the screen door squealed open almost two seconds after my last words drifted inside. “What is it?”

“Company. Only don’t look too good.” I walked to the top of the steps and shielded my eyes from the sun. “Malachi Jarvis! You got yourself into trouble again?”

The man in the middle, propped up like a scarecrow, lifted his chin wearily but managed to flash a smile that revealed bloodied teeth. “Depends on how you define *trouble*.”

Gemma gasped at the sight of him and flew down the steps, letting the door slam so loud the porch boards shook. “What in the name of all goodness have you been up to? You got some sort of death wish?”

A man I’d never seen before had his arm wound tightly beneath Malachi’s arms, blood smeared across his shirtfront. Malachi’s younger brother, Noah, was on his other side, struggling against the weight, and Gemma came in between them to help.

“He ain’t got the good sense to keep his mouth shut, is all,” Noah said breathlessly.

I went inside to grab Momma’s first aid box, and by the time I got back out, Gemma had Malachi seated in the rocker.

Gemma gave him the once-over and shook her head so hard I thought it might fly off. “I swear, if you ain’t

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a one to push a body into an early grave. Your poor momma's gonna lose her ever-lovin' mind."

Along with his younger brother and sister, Malachi lived down by the tracks with his widowed momma—as the man of the house, so to speak. He'd taken up being friends with Luke Talley some two years back when they'd both worked for the tobacco plant, and they'd remained close even though Luke had struck out on his own building furniture. Malachi was never one to keep his peace, a fact Gemma had no patience for, and she made it good and clear many a time. Today would be no exception.

"Goin' around stirrin' up trouble every which way," she murmured as she pulled fixings out of the first aid box. "It's one thing to pick fights with your own kind. Can't say as though you wouldn't benefit by a poundin' or two every now and again. But this foolin' around with white folks'll get you into more'n you're bargainin' for."

The man who'd helped Noah shoulder the burden of Malachi reached out to take the gauze from Gemma. "Why don't you let me get that?"

Gemma didn't much like being told what to do, and she glared at him. "I can clean up cuts and scrapes. I worked for a doctor past two years."

Malachi nodded toward the man. "This here man *is* a doctor, Gemma."

I was putting iodine on a piece of cotton, and I near about dropped it on the floor when I heard that. Never in all my born days had I seen a colored man claiming to be a doctor. Neither had Gemma, by the looks of her.

“A doctor?” she murmured. “You sure?”

He laughed and extended his hand to her. “Last I checked. Tal Pritchett. Just got into town yesterday. Gonna set up shop down by the tracks.”

Still dumbfounded, Gemma handed the gauze to him.

“What d’you think about that?” Malachi grinned and then grimaced when his split lip made its presence known. “A colored doc in Calloway. Shoo-wee. There’s gonna be talk about this!”

The doctor went to work cleaning up Malachi’s wounds. “I ain’t here to start no revolution. I’m just aimin’ to help the colored folks get the help they deserve.”

“Well, you’re goin’ to start a revolution whether you want to or not.” Malachi shut his eyes and gritted his teeth the minute the iodine set to burning. “Folks in these parts don’t much like colored folk settin’ themselves up as smart or nothin’.”

Gemma watched Tal Pritchett like she was analyzing his every move, finding out for herself if he was a doctor or not. I stood by and let her assist him as

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she'd been accustomed to doing for Doc Mabley until he passed on two months ago. After Tal had bandaged up Malachi's right hand, she seemed satisfied that he was who he said.

Noah slumped into the other rocker and watched. "It's one thing to get yourself an education and stand for your right to make somethin' of yourself. It's another to go stirrin' up trouble for the sake of stirrin' up trouble."

"I ain't doin' it for the sake of stirrin' up trouble. I done told you that!" Malachi flexed his left hand to test how well his swollen fingers moved. "Ain't no colored man ever gonna be free in this here county . . . in this here state . . . in this here *world* unless somebody starts fightin' for freedom."

"Slaves was freed decades ago," Noah said sharply. "We ain't in shackles no more."

"But we ain't free to live our lives as we choose, neither. You think colored people are ever gonna be more'n house help and field help so long as we let ourselves be treated like less than white people? No sir. We're less than human to them white folks. They don't think nothin' about killin' so long as who they're killin' is colored."

"Don't you go bunchin' all white people together, Malachi Jarvis," I argued. "Ain't all white folk got bad feelin's about coloreds."

Malachi waved me off in exasperation. “You know I ain’t talkin’ about you, Jessilyn.”

Noah had his hands tightly knotted in his lap and was staring at them like they held all the answers to the world’s problems. “All’s you’re doin’ is gettin’ yourself kicked around.” He looked up at me pleadingly. “This here’s the second time in a week he’s come home banged up.”

I put a hand on Noah’s shoulder and set my eyes on Malachi. “Who did it?”

He put his bandaged right hand into the air, palm up. “Who knows? Some white boys. You get surrounded by enough of ’em, they all just blend in together like a vanilla milk shake.”

“How’s it you didn’t see them? They jump you or somethin’?”

“Don’t ask me, Jessie. I was just mindin’ my own business in town, and then on my way home, they start hasslin’ me.”

“What he was doin’,” Noah corrected, “was tryin’ to get into the whites-only bar.”

Gemma sniffed in disgust. “Shouldn’t have been in no bar in the first place. There’s your first mistake.”

“Whites-only, too.” Noah kicked his foot against the porch rail and then looked at me quickly. “Sorry.”

I smiled at him and turned my attention back to

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Malachi. "It's a good thing Luke ain't here to see this. He don't like you drinkin', and you know it."

Malachi's eyeballs rolled between swollen lids. "I don't know why he gets his trousers in a knot over it anyhow. Ain't like there's Prohibition no more. And he's been known to take a swig or two himself."

"Luke says you're a nasty drunk."

"He is." Noah knotted his hands back in his lap. "And he's been at the bottle more often than not of late."

"Quit tellin' tales!" his brother barked.

"I ain't tellin' tales; I'm tellin' truth. They can ask anybody at home how late you come in, and how you come in all topsy-turvy. He comes home in the middle of the mornin' and sleeps in till all hours the next day."

"What about your job at the plant?" Gemma asked.

Malachi closed his eyes and waved her off, but his brother provided the answer for him. "Lost it!" He loosened his grip on his hands and snapped his fingers. "Like that. There goes his income."

"I said I'll get another job."

"Oh, like there's jobs aplenty around these parts for colored folk. And anyways, if you find one, how you gonna keep that one?"

Gemma had her hands on her hips, and I knew what that meant. I leaned back against the house and waited for the lecture to commence.

“You talk a fine talk about colored folks needin’ to stand up for equality, but you ain’t doin’ it in any way that’s right and good. You’re goin’ about town gettin’ people’s goat and tryin’ to get in where you ain’t wanted and gettin’ yourself all liquored up and useless. Now your family ain’t got the money they depend on you for, and why? Because you walk around livin’ like you ain’t got to do nothin’ for nobody but yourself.”

“I’m standin’ up for the rights of colored folks everywhere.” Malachi was angry now, pink patches spreading on his busted-up cheeks. “You see anyone else in this town willin’ to go toe-to-toe with the white boys in this county?”

“Don’t put a noble face on bein’ an upstart.”

Malachi pushed Tal’s hand away and sat up tall. “You call standin’ up to white folks bein’ an upstart?”

Doc Pritchett tried to dress the wound on Malachi’s temple, but Malachi pushed his hand away again. That was when the doctor had enough; he smacked his hands on his thighs and stood up straight and determined in front of Malachi. “I ain’t Abraham Lincoln. I’m just Doc Pritchett, tryin’ to fix up an ornery patient, and I ain’t got all day to do it. So I’m goin’ to settle this argument once and for all.” He pointed at Gemma. “She’s right. There ain’t no fightin’ nonsense with more nonsense, and all’s you’re doin’ by gettin’ in the faces of white

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folks with your smart attitude is bein' as bad as they're bein'." Then he pointed at Malachi. "And he's right too. There ain't never a change brought about that *should* be brought about without people standin' up for such change. And sometimes that means bein' willin' to fight for what's right."

Gemma swallowed hard and didn't even try to argue. My eyes bugged out of my head at the sight of her being tamed so easily.

"Now, I'm all for civil uprisin'," Tal continued. "I don't see nothin' wrong with colored folk sayin' they won't be walked on no more. I don't see nothin' wrong with wantin' to use the same bathroom as white folks or sit in the same chairs as white folks. Way I see it, none of that's goin' to change unless someone says it has to." He squatted in front of Malachi again and stared him down nose to nose. "But all this hotshottin' and showboatin' ain't goin' to do nothin' but get your rear end kicked. Or worse. You aim to stand tall for somethin'? Fine. Stand tall for it. But don't you go around thinkin' these battle scars say somethin' for you. You ain't got them by bein' noble; you got them by bein' stupid. All's these scars say is you're an idiot."

It was one of the best speeches I'd heard from anyone outside my daddy, and if I'd ever thought for two seconds put together to see a colored man run for

governor, I figured Tal Pritchett would be the man for the job. As it was, I knew he was the best man for the job he had now. Sure enough, being a colored doc in Calloway would be a challenge. But I figured he was up for it.

Regardless, he shut Malachi up, and for the next five minutes we all watched him finish his job with skill and finesse. When he'd fixed the last of Malachi's face, he stood and clapped his hands. "Suppose that should do it. Don't see need for any stitchin' up today. Let's hope there's no cause for it in future." Then he looked at me. "You got someplace out here where I can wash up?"

I held my hand toward the front door. "Bathroom's upstairs."

He hesitated. "I'd just as soon wash up out here."

I caught the reason for his hesitation but didn't know what to say. As usual, Gemma did.

"I done lived in this here house for six years now, and I'm just as brown as you. You can feel free to go on up to the bathroom, you hear?"

He looked from Gemma to me, then back to Gemma before nodding. "Yes'm." And then he disappeared inside.

"Ma'am," Gemma muttered under her breath. "Ain't old enough to be called ma'am, least of all by a man no more'n a few years older'n me."

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“You know what happens once you start gettin’ them crow’s-feet . . .”

Gemma whirled about and gave Malachi the evil eye. “Don’t go thinkin’ I won’t hurt you just because you’re all bandaged up.”

Noah got up and paced the porch until Tal came back outside. “Doc, you have any problem gettin’ your schoolin’?”

Tal shrugged and leaned against the porch rail. “No more’n most, I guess. There’s a lot to learn. Why? You thinkin’ about goin’ to college?”

You could have heard a pin drop on that front porch. Never, and I mean never, in all the days Calloway had been on the map, had there ever been a single person, white or black, to step foot at a college. The very idea of that mark being made by a colored boy was a surefire way to start war.

And Noah knew it.

He looked at his feet and kicked the heel of one shoe against the toe of another. “Ain’t possible. I was just wonderin’ aloud, is all.”

“What do you mean it ain’t possible? All’s you’ve got to do is work hard. You can get scholarships and things.”

But Noah took a look at his brother, whose face was hard and tight-lipped, and nodded toward the road.

“Nah, there ain’t no use talkin’ over it. We’d best get home, anyhow.”

Tal didn’t push the subject. He just picked his hat up off the porch swing and plopped it on his head. “Miss Jessie, Miss Gemma, it was a fine pleasure to meet you and a kindness for you to give us a hand.”

“You should stop by sometime and meet my parents,” I said. “They’re off visitin’, but I’m sure they’d be right happy to know you.”

“I’m sure I’d be right happy to know them, too.” He turned his attention to Gemma. “You said you worked for a doctor?”

“I worked for Doc Mabley. He was a white doctor. Died some two months ago.”

“He let you assist?”

“Only with the colored patients. Doc Mabley was kind enough to help some of them out when they needed it. Otherwise I kept his records, kept up his stock.”

“Well, I’ll tell you, Miss Gemma, I could sure use some help if you’d be obliged. An assistant would be a good set of extra hands, and I could use someone known around here to make my introductions.”

Gemma eyed him before slowly nodding. “Reckon I could.”

“Wouldn’t be much pay now, you know. Ain’t likely

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to get much in the way of fees from the patients I'll be treatin'."

"Don't matter so long as I have good work to put my hands to."

"That it would be. My office is right across the street from the Jarvis house."

Malachi snorted. "*Shack's* more like it."

"Room enough for me," Tal said. Then to Gemma, "You think you could stop in sometime this week to talk it over?"

"I can come day after tomorrow if that suits."

"Nine o'clock too early?"

"No, sir. I've kept farm hours all my life."

He grinned at her. "Nine o'clock then?"

"Nine o'clock."

Malachi watched the two of them with his swollen eyes, a look of disgust growing more evident on his face. He'd made no secret over the past year about his admiration for Gemma, and the unmistakable attraction that was growing between her and Tal was clearly turning his stomach.

"Mind if we go home?" he muttered. "Before I fall down dead or somethin'?"

Gemma tore her eyes away from Tal to roll them at Malachi. "Would serve you right if you did."

"And on that cheery note—" Malachi groaned on

his way down the steps—"I'll bid you ladies a fine evenin'."

I gave Noah a playful whack to the head, but he ducked, so I only clipped the top. "Luke will be back home tomorrow evenin'. He'll be itchin' to see you, I'm sure."

"I'm itchin' to see him." He took the steps in one leap, tossing dust up when he landed. "You tell him to come on by and see us real soon."

"And tell him to bring his cards," Malachi added. "He owes me a poker rematch."

I squinted at him suspiciously. "Only if you play for beans."

"I hate beans."

Malachi leaned on Tal for support, and Noah scurried to catch up and help. I watched them go, but I wasn't thinking much about them. I was thinking about Luke. It had been two months since he'd left to collect customers for his furniture-making business, and every day had seemed like an eternity.

The very thought of him got my stomach butterflies to fluttering, but one look at Gemma told me it was another man who had stolen her attention. "That Doc Pritchett's a fine man." I smirked at her. "Looks about twenty-five or so."

"So?"

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“Good marryin’ age.”

She crossed her arms defiantly. “Jessilyn Lassiter, what’s that got to do with anythin’?”

“Only what I said. I’m only statin’ fact.”

“Mm-hm. I hear ya. You’d be better off keepin’ your facts to yourself.”

She grabbed the first aid box and headed inside, but the sound of that door slamming told me I’d got to her.

It told me Tal Pritchett had got to her too.



## Chapter 2

We'd had all sorts of troubles in Calloway. We'd had violence, hate, sickness, and death. We'd seen droughts and floods, lost crops, and run out of money. But this late May day in 1938 wasn't a day I wanted to think about past pains or wonder about future ones. Today was the day I'd see Luke Talley for the first time in months, and there wasn't any room in my mind for sadness.

Which is why I scowled extra hard at the leaflet Gemma had found stuck to our porch rail with a thumbtack. Scrawled across the top was a ridiculous cartoon depicting a colored man reading the Constitution upside down. The text below read:

Meeting to discuss the potential uprising of Negroes in Calloway County. June 15 at seven in the evening. Cole Mundy's barn.

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“Cole Mundy’s barn!” I balled the paper up tight and threw it onto the table beside the rocker where Gemma sat. “Ain’t nothin’ but evil goes on in Cole Mundy’s barn, you ask me. I wouldn’t step foot there for all the world. It’d be like steppin’ off into hell.”

Gemma clucked her tongue at me for saying *hell*, but I just rolled my eyes.

“Anyways, what sort of confounded idiot goes tackin’ somethin’ like that up to our house, of all places? Makin’ colored men out to be dim-witted morons. Daddy sees that, he’ll be on a manhunt.”

“Then he best not see it.” She reached over to snatch the paper, but Daddy came out of the house and beat her to it.

“You got somethin’ I should know about, Gemma?” He stood there and looked from one of us to the other. “Reckon a man ought to decide for himself what he should and should not see.”

I looked at Gemma and shrugged. “Maybe it’s best he does see it.”

She put her hand protectively over the paper for about five seconds, but that was all it took for her to figure she wouldn’t win any sort of argument with my daddy. She sighed and handed him the wrinkled-up paper. “If you want, but it ain’t nothin’ but drivel.”

Daddy unfolded it, and I watched his face for a

reaction. It didn't take long for his cheeks to light up, for his jaw to start doing that little dance it does whenever he's riled. But he didn't say a word. He took one good, deep breath, puffed his cheeks, and then let it out with a long sigh. The paper got squished into a tight ball again. "I ain't goin' to dignify this with a remark" was all he said. "Where'd you get it?"

I nodded to the post I was leaning on. "It was tacked up to the porch."

He didn't say anything, just retreated into the house, threw the leaflet into the fireplace, and struck a match.

I watched through the window as he leaned against the fireplace and stared until every speck of paper transformed into black ash. Then he slammed his fist into the mantel so hard that Momma's candlesticks shook.

Gemma and I jumped at the noise of it, and Gemma turned around in her seat to look inside. "What in the world . . . ?"

Daddy stomped off into the kitchen, where I could hear him giving Momma a whispered earful. I stopped staring through the window and slid into the other rocker. "That was Daddy takin' his frustrations out on the fireplace."

"I knew it'd be best if he didn't see it."

"No, you knew he'd get upset about it; that don't mean it weren't best. A man ought to know what sort of

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nonsense is goin' on about him. How else can he protect his family from it?"

"The more we stay out of it, the better he'll be able to protect us."

"That's a coward's way, Gemma Teague."

She flashed me one of her angry momma looks that always made me feel pity for her future children. "Call me a coward, call me crazy, call me whatever you want, but one thing you can't call me is a pot stirrer. I ain't out there just itchin' to get white people mad at me. I know my place, and I keep it."

"Oh, and your place is livin' with a white family like kin?"

She put her head back down to study her needlework, but I wasn't letting up.

"You think you'd have had a good home after your momma and daddy died if we hadn't decided you belonged with us no matter what people thought? You wish we'd decided you should 'keep your place' then?"

We didn't say anything for a few minutes until she dropped her needlework in her lap and sighed. "Won't they ever just go away?"

"Who? Men who hate colored folk? Klan? Not unless someone makes them go away. There ain't no reason, Gemma, why a couple dozen men should be able to say what's what when there's a couple thousand able-

bodied people out there who could come together against them.”

“There ain’t a couple thousand hereabouts who’d fight for colored folks.”

“All right, a couple hundred. Any which way, they ain’t got the right to spread this sort of nonsense on our property. You see what they’re tryin’ to do, don’t you? They ain’t never wanted nothin’ but to tell colored people what they can and cannot do, and now that there’s some talk stirrin’ about colored people havin’ more rights, they aim to shut ’em down right off.”

I pointed through the den window in the direction of the charred remains of the leaflet. “That thing there weren’t no gentlemanly invitation. That was a threat. You think they thought in a month of Sundays we’d show up there? All they’re doin’ is bein’ heavy-handed with us, mockin’ us, and Daddy won’t stand for it.”

She shook her head. “I done told those boys they were askin’ for trouble, tryin’ to get into whites-only places and whatnot. Malachi and his lot . . . they should’ve known better.”

“Gemma Teague!” My whisper came out sharp between clenched teeth. “Them boys is just tryin’ to get somethin’ more out of life.”

“Oh, they’ll get it, all right. They’ll get it at the end of a gun barrel . . . or a rope.”

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“And what about Doc Pritchett? You’re plannin’ on workin’ for that colored doc, and you know good and well folks in this town don’t take kindly to what they see as a colored man goin’ above his proper station.”

She didn’t look at me, so I knew I had her. “That’s different.”

“Ain’t different nohow.”

Gemma couldn’t say much back. She couldn’t argue with me once I made it personal.

I stood up and remembered why I was out here waiting on the porch in the first place, then went back to pacing the whitewashed floorboards just like Momma always does when she’s anxious. It didn’t escape my notice how much I became like her as I grew older, but Lord knows I didn’t model her in all ways, and Gemma was first to say it.

“I swear you’re the edgiest woman I ever done seen. Why can’t you be more calm and peaceful like your momma?” She glared at me from her post on the rocker. “You got to do that? You’re makin’ the porch shake.”

I didn’t pause or reply. I just dug my eyes into hers as I paced in her direction, then spun around and headed back, nearly tripping over Duke, our ages-old basset hound. Years earlier, he would have scurried under the porch to escape my worrisome mood, but now it was all he could do to lift his eyes and glance at me.

“That dog may as well be nailed to the floor.” I looked down the road both ways. “You sure there weren’t any calls?”

“Would’ve told you if there were.” She had her needlepoint in her hands, her face so close to it I was surprised she wasn’t cross-eyed. “You ain’t gone nowhere all day, anyhow. Think you would’ve heard if the phone rang.”

I studied her face with squinty eyes, hands balled up on my hips. “You need spectacles. You can’t see a thing two feet in front of your face.”

Gemma rubbed the space between her eyes, though I guessed it was more in exasperation than eye fatigue. “You ain’t got to boss me, Jessilyn. They’re my eyes. I ought to know when they need fixin’.”

“You know full well they need fixin’; I ain’t arguin’ that. It’s just you won’t admit to it. You worried about lookin’ funny around Tal Pritchett?”

“I ain’t so vain as that, Jessie.”

I backed away from the fiery stare, worried she might prick me with her needle. “Then you’re worried about money.” I tapped my toe waiting for her to answer, but she ignored me and went back to her needlepoint. “I’m full aware why a colored doctor won’t be able to pay much, but I already told you I’d help buy you some spectacles. I been workin’ for Miss Cleta more and more, and she’s as generous as the day is long. I got me more than I need.”

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Her pointed focus on that needlework got under my skin, and after a good minute of silence broken only by the squeak of the rocker, my nerves were so raw my palms itched. But I was determined to play at nonchalance.

“Fine, then. Let yourself go blind. Next thing you know, you’ll be sewin’ your fingers together with that there needle. I reckon you’ll think twice then.”

A tuneful whistle off in the distance broke through our quarrel, and I nearly jumped out of my new shoes. I tipped a finger under Gemma’s chin and made her look at me. “How do I look? Is my hair still put up nice?” I pulled my skirt out by the sides and inspected it. “My dress wrinkled?”

Gemma sighed and set her needlework on the table beside her. “It’s only Luke, Jessie. Ain’t like he’s a stranger now. Don’t get so riled up. You look right nice.”

“I ain’t seen him in two months,” I managed to murmur even though my voice gave out halfway through. “Leastways, he ain’t seen me in two months neither. What if he don’t think I’m much to look at?”

“What d’you think’s changed so much in two months? You stopped growin’ two years ago, you ain’t changed your weight none, and your hair’s still long and golden brown like ever.”

“But I’m wearin’ it different.” I lifted one finger and

ran it across my forehead. “I added five more freckles, too. Before you know it, I’ll be nothin’ but freckles.”

“Age sure has made you vain.”

“I got to worry about my looks now. I’m runnin’ out of time to make Luke notice.”

“You’re not even nineteen years old, Jessie Lassiter. Time ain’t runnin’ out for nothin’.”

“And Luke’s twenty-five. How much longer you think I got before some city girl snags him up?” The whistling got louder, but I could barely hear it over my heart-beat. “Luke’s gone off all the time, now he’s all famous and whatnot. For all I know he’s got a sweetheart in every town.”

“Luke’s a carpenter. He ain’t Valentino.”

“Everybody within a hundred miles of Calloway knows Luke Talley’s furniture,” I argued. “Ain’t no one works wood better in this whole state.”

“I didn’t say there was.” Gemma looked up the road behind me and reached out to pinch my cheeks twice.

“Ouch!”

“You’re pale as a ghost. And he’s just about to turn up the walk, so you best get that silly, sour look off your face and put a smile on.”

The stupid grin I manufactured was enough to make Gemma have to bite her lip to avoid a laugh, but it was all I could manage without having my mouth quiver.

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Gemma gave me a shove and then stepped back into the shadow of the doorway, leaving me and Luke alone and chaperoned all at once.

Luke stopped whistling and walking the minute I managed to make it off the porch and step into the sunshine. There was a good early summer breeze, and it picked his golden hair up and skimmed it across his forehead. He was dressed up like it was a church day, a new hat gripped in his hands. I watched his eyes for any sign of affection; it was all I could do to keep from running down to toss my arms around his neck. I reminded myself that only happened in my daydreams and stood my ground, waiting for him to make up his mind what to do.

He strolled slowly up the walk, a smile building with each step, and when he came within two feet of me, he stopped. “Jessilyn, you’re a sight for sore eyes.” Then he tossed his hat on the porch step behind me and pulled me close.

Even though his arms didn’t embrace me in the kind of way I wished for, there was no better place to be in all the world, and I wanted to stay there for the rest of my life. Even at five feet seven and in my pretty new shoes, I had to stand on tiptoe to reach his neck.

“It’s been two long months,” I whispered in his ear.

He pulled away from me to look at my face, and for

one flickering moment I saw the brotherly smile slip from his eyes to be replaced by something far more to my liking. “Two *days* is too long.”

Ten seconds of bliss dissolved the minute the clomp of my daddy’s shoes rang off the new boards he’d nailed into the porch floor last week, and Luke let me go like I’d burnt his fingertips.

“You plannin’ on keepin’ the boy to yourself, Jessilyn?” Daddy asked, a glint of protectiveness brightening his eyes. He took Luke by the arm and nearly dragged him up the steps. “Come on in the house, son. Sadie’s itchin’ to see you, but she’s up to her elbows in supper fixin’s.”

Luke and I shared one last glance before he skittered off alongside Daddy, stopping only to grab his hat from the steps. “There ain’t no need for her to go makin’ somethin’ special.”

Gemma stepped out of the shadows, and Luke stopped and shook his head at her. “I swear, Gemma, you get prettier every day.” Then he swooped her up in a hug that looked far too much like the one he’d given me.

And he’d never said a thing about me being pretty.

A frown tugged at the corners of my mouth, but I gritted my teeth to keep from letting it have its way.

Gemma patted Luke’s back and chided him. “You talk a good line, Luke Talley. I ain’t changed one bit since you lit out of here a couple months ago.” She nodded

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in my direction. “Jessie . . . now, she’s the one doin’ the prettyin’ up. I swear her hair gets more like the wheat fields all the time.”

I felt a tug at my heart over her doing that, and the frown let go of its hold in time for me to turn up one corner of my mouth.

“Sure enough it does.” Luke looked back at me and let his eyes linger just long enough for Daddy to get antsy.

“Come on inside, boy. We got us some catchin’ up to do.” He pulled Luke’s arm so hard, Luke nearly tripped over the threshold, and as annoyed as I was about having him torn away from me, I couldn’t stifle a giggle.

“Same old, same old,” Gemma murmured once they’d disappeared inside with Daddy hollering, “Sadie, look what the cat drug in.” She held a hand out to get me to come up on the porch. “Your daddy won’t be restin’ this summer, I can tell you that. He’ll be watchin’ you two like a hawk.”

“I don’t suppose there’s much to worry about,” I said. “Luke hugged you just the same as he did me. Either he thinks of me like his sister, or he’s got a crush on you.”

“Oh, it ain’t neither, and you know it. He’s got eyes for only you, Jessie, so stop your worryin’. He’ll figure it out soon enough.”

“Don’t see how you can say things like that when he looks at me no different than he looks at a chicken leg.”

Gemma dug an elbow into my ribs, making me bend over and pull away from her side. “The way he feels about food, you should take that as a compliment.”

My halfway smile gave out into a full one, and I wrapped my arm around her waist as we made our way inside to the smell of Momma’s cooking.

“Jessie made the corn fritters,” Momma was saying when we came into the kitchen. “You should just see her in the kitchen, Luke. She’s becomin’ a real fine cook.”

“Yes’m, I know. She made me some tarts for my trip, and I ate ’em all up before I made it ten miles down the road.”

Gemma gave my side a pinch, and I nudged her with my hip.

Momma had put Daddy to work carving the roast, and as she talked up my cooking to Luke, the knife hit the cutting board a little more loudly with each slice.

As I set the table, I kept letting my eyes peer out their corners, checking to see what Luke was up to. I’d never seen him look more like a real man, and I hoped he was thinking that I finally looked like a woman. I’d pinned my hair up, but there was never a day I could put it up without little wisps falling out, and those strands kept sticking to the gloss I’d patted on my lips. There was always a fight between my tomboy side and my womanly side, and I felt awkwardly trapped in between.

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“You ain’t got to worry about neither, Jessilyn,” Momma’d said when I told her so one day. “You just let you show. Ain’t nothin’ better’n that.”

But I felt all mismatched despite her words, and it was all I could do to swallow each bite of food at supper. Between snatching glances at Luke and battling my self-consciousness, I was too busy to think about food.

Daddy took my bad appetite as proof I was lovesick, so he dominated the conversation, leaving me and Luke with no chance to talk. I pushed my peas around with my fork and cleared my throat several times to get Momma’s attention. It was clear by her face that she felt my pain, but even Momma’s well-practiced artistry handling Daddy couldn’t change the situation.

Gemma had plenty of sideways looks for me, and I knew she felt sorry for me.

I felt sorry for me too. I wondered if there’d ever be a day that Daddy would see me as a full-grown woman. After all these months of not seeing Luke, it was killing me to have to sit by so quiet and uncomfortable, and I was growing angrier with my daddy by the minute.

The only good thing to happen came with dessert, when Luke’s knee met mine beneath the table. That was no uncommon occurrence at our tiny table, but it made a difference to me that he didn’t move it, and the cobbler I’d made tasted even better than usual that night.

After supper, I grabbed an apron from the hook on the wall, resigned to an evening that didn't measure up even close to the one I'd imagined.

"Don't you go helpin' me," Momma whispered when I started to put it on. "You get on out and talk to Luke."

"Ain't no point in it, Momma. Daddy won't let me do no talkin'."

Momma planted her hands on her hips and sighed. "That man . . ."

"He ain't ever goin' to see me for nothin' more than his baby girl."

She cupped my cheek with her hand. "Yes, he will, honey. Don't you worry none about that. It'll come right; you'll see."

Gemma snatched the apron from my hand and pushed me toward the doorway. "Go on. I'll help clean up."

"You both go on," Momma said, grabbing the apron from Gemma. "I'll call your daddy in to help, and you three can go on the porch. It'll soothe things a bit if you're there, Gemma."

Momma walked on ahead into the hall and called for Daddy. "Harley, on second thought, why don't you come on and help me clean up so those girls can have a break. They did most of the precookin' since I got home late from town."

I made Gemma look at me close. "My hair okay?"

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“It’s fine. You look pretty and natural, like a real lady.” She tucked a loose strand behind my ear. “Ain’t no man who wouldn’t say so, neither.”

Daddy was staring at Momma with a furrowed brow when Gemma and I came into the den. He’d already lit his pipe, and the smoke was fairly floating up in question marks. “Can’t you leave them dishes till later?”

“Only if I want to spend an hour scrapin’ dried-up grease from them. Why don’t you give me a hand now so we can all sit together in a bit?”

There weren’t many times my daddy didn’t oblige my momma’s requests, and this wasn’t one of them. He put his pipe down on the tray next to his favorite chair and got up with a long sigh. I could hear him whispering something to Momma as they retreated into the kitchen, but I didn’t much care what it was now that I had Luke to myself . . . and Gemma.

“Why don’t we go outside?” I offered like the perfect hostess. “There’s a nice breeze this evenin’.”

Luke hopped up from the sofa and opened the door for me and Gemma, but once we were outside, Gemma retreated to the rocking chair, leaving the swing for me and Luke.

I made extra certain to be ladylike when I sat down on the swing, tucking my skirt beneath me with grace,

crossing my ankles perfectly. Luke took his seat next to me and got us swinging with one push off the floor.

“Was there any trouble on your trip home?” I asked, breaking a few moments of silence.

“Train left a little late, that’s all.”

“Business go fine?”

“Seems so.” He squinted and pointed off into the front yard. “What happened to that old maple?”

“Came down in a storm. You should’ve heard Momma yelp.”

“Good thing it didn’t come down on the house.” He tapped his foot to keep us moving. “Ain’t got your tree swing no more, then?”

“Oh, it made it out alive. It’s just stuck in the shed, is all. Figure there ain’t no need for a tree swing now we’re all grown-up.”

“Seems all wrong not seein’ it swayin’ in the breeze.” He put his arms behind his head and grinned. “I can remember you swingin’ on that thing like it was yesterday, your ponytail floppin’ every which way.”

“I loved that swing. I watched Daddy make it when I was four years old. He helped me carve my initials into the bottom, too.”

“Time sure does fly.”

A good five minutes of silence passed before I finally suggested we take a walk. “We could go see the new

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garden Gemma planted. She's got some fine flowers there."

"I didn't know Gemma liked playin' with flowers enough to keep a garden."

"She took it up of late. Says it relaxes her. Don't you, Gemma?"

But Gemma was asleep in her chair, her head tipped to the side. I didn't buy it for a second, but I knew better than to question her. She was just doing what any good friend would by letting me and Luke wander off for a bit of time alone.

I looked at him and shrugged. "She's had a busy day."

He smiled and held out his arm for me to take, and I walked down the steps beside him like I was walking down the aisle.

The sun was just starting to say good night, and the crickets and frogs were celebrating loudly. The breeze stirred up my hair, and I could feel even more strands start to drift down around my face. But I didn't care if my hairpins all fell out in a heap. All I wanted was to listen to Luke breathing beside me.

By the time we reached the garden, I was feeling a bit more at ease in his presence, like being silent together made me remember some of what we'd been to each other for the past six years. But that relationship had changed as I'd become more woman than girl, and

there was still a difference between us that we hadn't quite learned to cope with.

Luke was the first to speak when we reached the garden. "Looks like Gemma's been busy."

I walked away from him to finger a carnation. "Gemma says there's a meanin' to every flower she's got in here. I like the daisies the best." The rhododendron beside me rustled, playing into the spell between the two of us, and I kept my gaze on the plants rather than on Luke. "Did you meet anyone interestin' while you were away?"

"Just city folk. Can't say I met anyone who made me forget what I left behind."

I stood a little taller and let my eyes wander over to him. "Oh? Don't you like city folk?"

"They ain't Lassiters, is all."

A few more strands of hair dropped in front of my eyes, and I peered meekly through them.

Luke reached into his pocket and held out a small box tied with ribbon. "Brought you somethin' back."

I was pretty sure my feet came off the grass, but I steadied myself and did everything I could to keep from showing my excitement. "You didn't need to do that."

"I know I didn't." He sauntered up in front of me, stopping just beside the pink rosebush. "I *wanted* to."

I eagerly took the box from him and tried to untie the

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ribbon without letting my fingers shake. When I managed to fish the top off, I gasped at the necklace inside, a perfect pendant with one sparkling green stone in the center. My words got caught in my throat, but I managed to whisper, “It’s beautiful.”

“Ain’t a real gem or nothin’ . . .” Luke pulled it from the box and turned me around by the shoulders. “Let’s see how it looks on you.” He fumbled with the clasp, but once he’d secured it, he turned me back around and stared at me solemnly. A swatch of hair blew in front of my left eye and stayed there, impeding my view of his face. He reached up and brushed it away, tucking it behind my ear. “It matches your eyes.”

His hand lingered against my face a few moments, and while we stood there together, the sky lit up pink, casting color all around us. It was a moment to be stored away in memory for years, and I avoided breathing for fear of breaking the spell. But just as quickly as the last bit of sun dropped out of sight, so did the moment between us, and he stepped away as though some forgotten thought had suddenly crept into his brain.

I bristled at the change. It seemed it wasn’t only Daddy who had trouble noticing I’d grown up. The past two years had been endless days of the same: Luke giving me ideas that he had feelings for me and then pushing me away. The only way I’d found to cope was

by purposely torturing him, mocking his discomfort; and necklace or no necklace, it was still the only way I could see my way out of the moment.

I fingered his gift and watched the remnants of the setting sun glint off the stone. “Sure is a pretty thing.” I walked toward him and held the pendant next to my eye. “You think it matches, you say?”

“That’s right.”

“You must spend a lot of time admirin’ my eyes if you could remember just how they look after two months without seein’ them.”

He looked away. “I’ve seen them for six years now, Jessie. I ain’t color-blind, after all.”

I stepped up in front of him and smiled. “So there weren’t no city girl with green eyes that modeled for you or nothin’?”

He was blushing right to the tips of his ears as he always did when I taunted him, but he looked at me seriously. “Ain’t nobody with eyes like yours, Jessilyn.”

And there it was, the truth I always managed to pull out of him with my taunts. I could feel the fire in my own cheeks, and I stepped back to hide them. But as we watched the pink and orange sky together, side by side for the first time in months, that small bit of truth was enough to tide me over.

For now.