



Cottonwood Whispers

By Jennifer Valent

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Chapter 1

I've heard the dead whisper.

Every time I tell my best friend Gemma that, she frowns at me, says, “There ain’t no such thing as ghosts,” and then tells me I’m crazy. But I’m not crazy. The dead really can whisper, only it isn’t their ghosts that do it. It’s the memory of them.

There’s a place around the bend from my momma and daddy’s house where a stone cross rests beneath a cottonwood tree. That cross is where I first heard the whisper. It’s not really a grave so much, but a marker to remind people of what we lost that day. I was only seventeen when we placed that marker there, but it still looks pristine, like it was made just yesterday. Only yesterday was a long time ago, and time has brought a whole lot of changes since—some good and some bad.

And that’s just what I was looking for in that summer of 1936 . . . changes.

The last day of the school year saw me and Gemma meeting up at the pharmacy for a soda to celebrate another year of my surviving school. When I got there, she was standing outside the building, swinging her purse by one hand.

“Where you been?” Gemma asked when she caught sight of me. “I’ve been waitin’ ten minutes.”

“Teacher took a long time givin’ her end-of-year speech. She sure does like to talk.”

“Sounds a lot like you.”

I wrinkled my nose and gave her a shove, but she was the only person who could talk sharp to me and not get an earful back. We were like sisters, Gemma and me, and the way I figured it, sisters should be able to say near about anything to each other.

We sat down at the pharmacy counter with confidence because Mr. Poppleberry, who ran the place, didn't have a thing against colored people, and he welcomed Gemma in all the time.

"I'm gettin' a job this year," I said determinedly once we were settled with our chocolate sodas. "I'm tired of not havin' money to do things with."

"Where you gonna work? Ain't much open around here these days."

"I'll find somethin'. Everyone in Calloway knows I'm a good worker."

She shook her head. "Work ain't so fun as you think. It ain't all independence and extra pocket change. It gives you backaches and weary bones, too."

"You've only been workin' at the Hadleys' for two months, and you sound like you're old hat at it." I took a long sip of my soda and sighed. "Heck, you get to spend your days in that big old mansion of theirs." I rested my chin on my hand and gave her a sideways glance. "All the same, you won't catch me workin' for no Hadleys. They're just a bunch of uppity do-nothin's."

Gemma shushed me with a kick on my shin, and I gasped, pointing an angry glare her way.

"What'd you do that for?"

She didn't say anything, but I saw her straighten up in her chair a little bit and look up past my head.

"You girls gettin' somethin' cool to drink?" a man's voice asked from behind me. "Sure is a fine day for coolin' off any which way you can."

I spun around in my seat and turned back just as quickly when I saw it was Joel Hadley walking our way. Joel was the youngest son of the Hadley family, but his dangerous reputation belied his twenty-one years. I knew Joel Hadley for a charming scoundrel, and I was disgusted that my end-of-school celebration would be marred by his presence.

Gemma smiled at him with an extra twinkle in her eye. "Just givin' Jessie somethin' special. She finished school today."

"Good ol' days," Joel said with a sideways smile. "Seems a long time ago, all that school stuff. Seem long to you, Gemma?"

"Not so much, Mr. Hadley. I'm not too long out." Joel patted my head as though I were a five-year-old instead of the almost-seventeen-year-old that I was. I sat up a bit straighter. "You got some business we're keepin' you from, Joel? We don't mean to hold you up or nothin'."

Gemma glared at me so quickly that I barely noticed it between the dumb smiles she kept giving that boy, but I knew it was there all the same.

“Well now, I was just takin’ a break from my work. I came on over for some cigarettes and lo and behold, I got an extra treat, seein’ such pretty faces.”

Charm oozed from his pores far too easily to be natural, and I couldn’t believe for the life of me that my wise Gemma could be taken in by such nonsense.

I fingered my straw and avoided looking at either of them. “Guess you’d better get back to the bank, then. Seein’ how it’s your daddy’s bank and all, we’d best not keep you from your work.”

Joel eyed me for a minute, slowly rolling a toothpick back and forth in his mouth.

After several seconds, I met that gaze with a forthright one of my own. “You got need of somethin’, Joel?” I asked innocently.

“Nope.” He stared at me for a minute longer, and I didn’t like his look one bit, all narrow-eyed like a rabid fox. I just looked casually back down at my soda, stabbing the cherry at the bottom of the glass. I fished it out and popped it in my mouth like nobody was even there.

Gemma cleared her throat. “Tell Mrs. Hadley we’re right grateful for the tub of strawberries she sent home with me yesterday. We all appreciate it, I’m sure.” With those words, she turned to me for agreement, nudging me beneath the counter.

As it was, I knew nothing about a tub of strawberries, so I shrugged and said, “S’pose we are. I ain’t tried one yet to tell.”

I could see by Gemma’s face that she thought me rude and undignified, but I was of no mind to give notice to men who put on faces that didn’t match their insides. Pretty pictures were all well and good, but if there wasn’t a good story behind the picture, it meant nothing. And that’s what I thought the whole lot of Hadleys were: just pretty pictures with no meanings.

Joel finally took his eyes off me to reply to Gemma, but his manner toward me remained charmingly hostile, and I was surprised that Gemma didn’t notice the coldness he showed me. Or maybe she did, I thought, and she just didn’t care. No matter what she thought, she was now giving all her attention to Joel.

He tipped his hat at her and smiled. “Plants are full this year. Don’t see any need in lettin’ them rot.”

Gemma nodded in reply, her docile mood making me doubt her true identity. The Gemma Teague I knew didn’t get flutters over men and strike fancy poses like she was doing now.

“Well,” Joel said, “best get goin’. Time and money wait for no man.” He tipped his hat at Gemma again, flashed me a wry sort of grin, and walked off to buy his cigarettes, leaving us to sit in a moment of tense silence.

It was only after Gemma had stirred her soda for about a minute that she looked up at me with chagrin and said, “Jessie, what’d you have to go and do that for?”

“Do what?” I asked, though I knew full well what she meant.

“You was downright rude to Joel Hadley. Downright rude!”

“Me?” I argued. “Did you see the looks he was givin’ me? He could’ve near burned a hole in my skull.”

“He had every right to after the way you talked to him. Sakes alive, Jessie, he’s a Hadley.”

“That make him the king of England or somethin’? I ain’t got to bow to Hadleys no more’n I have to bow to Peeboe the milkman. Since when do I got to give people extra respect just for bein’ richer than me?”

“That ain’t got nothin’ to do with it,” Gemma said in exasperation, though I could see she wasn’t quite sure herself what she meant. “It’s just . . . well, I work for them and everythin’.”

“Don’t mean you gotta worship them.”

“I don’t!”

“Way you looked at him, a body would think you did.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said in a huff. “I just don’t want to talk about it.”

We sat there for a bit in an uncomfortable silence while Gemma slowly sipped her soda, and I wished I hadn’t finished mine already so I’d have something to do. I leaned on the counter and tapped a rhythm on it until another thought came to my mind. “He smokes cigarettes too.”

“So?”

“So? It’s a smelly old habit. And Momma always says it’s a stumblin’ block.”

“There ain’t no commandment about smokin’.”

“There ain’t no commandment about tippin’ cows, neither,” I said abruptly, “but we ain’t supposed to do it.”

“Luke Talley himself works in the tobacco factory, and you want to marry him.”

“But he ain’t smokin’ it!”

“What’s the difference between smokin’ it and makin’ it for other folks to smoke? Besides, your daddy don’t smoke hay in that pipe of his.”

I glared at her, not sure which way to go in this argument since I’d only brought it up by fishing for something else to blame Joel Hadley for. I went back to tapping my fingers and avoided looking at her.

Gemma tossed her napkin down and grabbed up her purse. “I don’t want to talk about work today,” she announced. “I don’t want to talk about nothin’.”

That’s exactly what we did as we walked home. We talked about nothing. We didn’t talk about her job or school or anything else. To avoid the tension, I tried thinking of other things, like what I was going to wear to church that Sunday. I thought about asking Gemma if I could borrow her red hair bow, but I wasn’t sure I should speak to her about anything just then, much less about something so trivial as a red hair bow.

We often borrowed each other’s things for church seeing as how we went to different congregations and the people there wouldn’t realize we were swapping. Gemma went to a colored church a few miles down the road. It was a sticking point with me that four years after her momma and daddy died, Gemma still had to stay away from certain places we went to even though she lived with us. But the way Gemma saw it, we weren’t going to cure all the world’s ills in her lifetime, and the fact that we were at least untouched by violent prejudice lately was advancement enough for her.

“A body’s got to wait for change sometimes, Jessie,” she said to me once. “We done gone to hell and back just to get rid of the violence, and it’s a miracle itself for us to see Calloway at peace with me still livin’ at your place, even if some do turn a cold shoulder. I’ll take that to my heart and be happy we got this far.”

I’d assumed she was likely right, but I still had parts of me tied up in knots over people’s strangeness. Nonetheless, I’d had to get used to the fact that Gemma had gone to a different school and a different church and couldn’t freely walk into any store in town she wanted to.

I glanced over at her and studied her face, thinking it didn’t look so angry as it had before, so I cleared my throat to get her attention and said, “You wearin’ your red hair bow on Sunday?”

“Probably not,” she murmured.

“I was thinkin’ I’d wear my white dress.”

She swung her purse by her side and continued to watch her feet as we walked along, kicking up the dry dust. “Guess you want to wear my bow.”

“I was thinkin’ on it.”

“You can wear it.”

We walked on for a couple of minutes in silence before Gemma seemed to decide there weren't any real good reasons for us to keep fighting. She kept looking down at the ground, but her voice got a little lighter when she said, “Guess you think Luke will think you look right pretty in that red bow.”

I snapped my head up. “No ma'am, I don't! I just like lookin' nice on Sundays, is all.”

Her eyes glittered. “You talk a big talk, but come Sunday, you'll stew over how to wear your hair and whatnot. Just like you always do. And you'll swoon over Luke like always.”

“Don't matter none, I told you.” I took my own turn to watch the ground, since looking at Gemma only told me she knew how I truly felt despite the lying words I was saying.

“Anyhow, Luke wouldn't notice me in a month of Sundays.”

“If he did show you attention right now, your daddy'd kill him. You best be happy he don't see you as more than a sister yet.”

“I'm nearly seventeen,” I argued. “I'm enough of a woman to be courtin'.”

“Not courtin' a man of twenty-three. The minute Luke were to show you some attention, your daddy would be loadin' the shotgun.”

“Oh, he would not. Daddy wouldn't kill Luke.”

Gemma waved a hand in front of her face to dismiss the subject. “If it's meant to be, Jessie, it'll be. That's all there is to it. It just ain't meant to be *yet*.”

I shrugged, guessing she was probably right, though I hated to admit it. Gemma went on inside, but I stood on the porch steps for a minute giving a little thought to her idea that Daddy would have the shotgun on Luke if he came courting. I shook my head at the notion and sighed. It seemed every other day I heard my momma moan about how fast time was flying, but the way it seemed to me, I couldn't get old fast enough.

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