

GREAT JEHOSEPHAT AND GULLY DIRT!

By Jewell Ellen Smith

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Chapter 1

An usher I'd not seen before carefully wheeled my chair down the center aisle and over to the right so that I would be facing the pulpit. Most Sunday mornings I sat on the opposite side of the church. But this usher didn't know that. Oh well, no matter.

The usher was saying something to me, but before I could adjust my hearing aid, I had to push my shawl back and slip a glove. By then, he had quit talking.

He let my chair roll to a stop so close to the chancel rail. I could have reached out and kicked it with my foot—that is, I had been in the mood to kick a chancel railing and if I could have moved either foot.

I was almost in a kicking mood!

No, no! I shouldn't think of such a thing as kicking that brass rail. I should be wishing I could kneel down before it. Somehow, though, my mind wasn't on praying.

The usher stepped back, then hesitated.

"Will this be all right, Mrs. Goode? Can you hear Dr. Shirey's sermon from here? Or would you rather be a little over toward the choir and the organ?"

"This is fine. Thank you kindly." I was surprised the man knew my name.

He smiled and handed me the morning bulletin.

The minute the usher's back was turned, I clicked off my hearing aid so that I wouldn't have to listen to the pastor's sermon, the organ, or anything else. I just wanted—well, I didn't know exactly what I wanted.

The only reason in this round world I kept coming to Central Avenue Church was that it was right across the street from Crestview Rest Home, and I had to get out and away from that place once in a while. Crestview wasn't so bad, as nursing

homes go. In fact, it was all right. Still, any rest home is a sad comedown from one's own house—and such a change.

As the congregation filed in, I looked about me. The sanctuary, quiet and beautiful with its stained-glass windows, its high, arched ceiling, and its deep carpets, was the only serene spot I had found since I came to the city. Out on the streets all was rush, confusion, turmoil—enough to drive one to distraction.

Here, too, I managed to block out for a little while the feeling of helplessness I'd had since I became so frail. The doctors kept saying that my general condition was good and my arthritis might improve some. But as yet I couldn't see much change.

To make myself lift my head and quit looking at my stiff, swollen knees, I turned toward the nearest window. I liked those green velvet curtains and the matching cushions on the pews. Both were the exact color of an Arkansas pine in early spring, when it takes on new life and puts forth myriads of tender buds, each a creamy, candle-like shoot, lovely enough to adorn a sacred altar.

I gazed at the candles on the altar and at the open Bible, crisscrossed with its narrow scarlet ribbons. The sight of that Bible was always a pleasure. It brought back memories my old church down at Drake Eye Springs—small, standing so calm in its grove of aged white oaks.

That little church had everything a big church has—except a steeple. But the colored folks up at Sweet Beulah Hill had a steeple. They had built a tall belfry and spire for church, and Sweet Beulah's bell could be heard for miles.

But it wasn't green curtains or candles or the memory of old country churches with their Bibles and bells that drew me to this large sanctuary. And it wasn't the quiet beauty of the room that made me want to come. It was my duty to be in some church.

Besides, the young minister had invited me to attend. I didn't care for Dr. Shirey's sermons. Not yet. But I did like him, and no doubt his sermons would improve. After all, a preacher is like wine. To warm the heart, each must age.

Young Dr. Shirey visited the nursing home every Tuesday afternoon, talking and passing the time of day with each of us. He always let me talk of my late husband Wallace, of our children and grandchildren. Lovely youngsters, little Vic, Nan, Jodie. Dr. Shirey seemed to understand why I refused to go live with any of my children after my health failed so.

Sometimes the young preacher and I discussed religion. One day I took up practically an hour of his time with the tales about my preacher grandpa, Grandpa Dave. Dr. Shirey was intrigued with the old man's ministry. And for some reason or other, he was delighted to hear about Grandpa's double buggy and his matched white mares, Martha and Mary. He said it made him wish he could have been a country preacher back in horse-and-buggy times.

I was much concerned for Dr. Shirey. Standing there now behind the pulpit, he looked bone tired. And no wonder, for besides his parish work he was forever running here and there—to the juvenile detention home, the clinic for alcoholics, the mental health center, the Black ghetto. Often, he told me, he got discouraged over it all.

Never did I mention to him how I felt: bewildered, lost, like an autumn leaf caught up in an angry storm and carried far away from its forest, a leaf that longed to stay where it was, there to turn golden yellow, then brown, and finally, late on a winter evening, to flutter to the ground and to its sleep beneath the trees.

Nor would I ever breathe to my young pastor that some days I was utterly cast down, so broken in heart that I wished I were a little girl again and could run and hide under my grandma's bed.

I couldn't confide such a thing to Dr. Shirey. It would show I had lost courage—as so many older persons do when change comes with the years. Half the patients at Crestview are like that. They don't want to keep up. They want to look back. My roommate has that attitude, and I try to tell her not to give up, to face the present, to look to the future. It's all right to remember bygone days with a grain or two of nostalgia, but there's no need living in the past.

I was doing just that—remembering bygone days—while I waited for the choir to finish its anthem. When I was a little girl in Arkansas, in the section of low Ouachita hills that lies between the Mississippi River and the Red, our manner was slow and simple, down to earth as gully dirt. The horse-and-buggy days were already fading away, but we didn't sense it. The swift pace that was to come, virtually overnight, was still undreamed of. There were not many automobiles, no superhighways, no jets, and no spacecraft. In south Arkansas, the fastest thing on wings was a thieving chicken hawk, and anything in the sky bigger than a buzzard was referred to as a "flying machine."

There seemed to be fewer problems then. Nobody had yet thought to build nursing homes and institutions for this, that, and every other kind of person with a complaint. The elderly, maimed, halt and blind were sheltered beside the hearth of their blood kin.

The Negroes I knew—Shoogie, Doanie, Sun Boy, Ned, Little Stray, and all the rest—lived out in the country close by us. I couldn't have managed without Shoogie, for she was my main playmate, even though my sister Mierd and my brother Wiley were still living at home. Why, if it hadn't been for Shoogie, I never would have learned to build a good frog house in the sand. I'd love to see Shoogie again. After she married Doanie's oldest boy, they went off to the West Coast. I'd like to be with her, climbing pine saplings, wading in the branch, and jumping deep gullies!

We were all eating our white bread then and didn't know it.

There were no alcoholics. A heavy drinking man was a sot, a sinner. Women didn't drink—or if they did, they didn't tell it. And as for mental health, it was an unheard-of term. Any persons slightly off were said to be "curious," or at worst, "touched in the head." They were tolerated by family and friends, while those considered dangerous were sent off to be locked up in the state asylum.

Ah, old man Hawk! He must have had a mental problem! I hadn't thought of that old coot in years. I wonder what a psychiatrist would have said about him. And Miss Dink. She didn't have a mental problem; she was just blind and had to be looked after. Fortunately her niece, Miss Ophelia, gave her a home. And Ward Lawson, Miss Ophelia's husband! Now he was sure a sot drunkard—an alcoholic if there ever was one.

One summer afternoon Mama had let me ride with her in our buggy to visit Miss Dink, who, at that time, was living with the Lawsons on the run-down Crawford place some few miles beyond Rocky Head Creek.

I had a gourd dipper in my hand and was skipping along the edge of the woods on my way down the path to Miss Dink's spring. My hair, braided tight, was tied with ribbons that flipped and rippled as I bounced along the trail. I could smell honeysuckle blooms and climbing jasmine, and I was wishing I had the time to chase the yellow butterflies that were swooping and fluttering zigzag from bush to bush. But Miss Dink had wanted me to hurry to the spring and bring her a gourdful of fresh water. She had said, "It ain't far from the house here to the spring, sugar. Just stay in the trail till you hit the branch and turn down left a little ways."

Then she had skimmed her bony fingers over my face and braids to find out how I looked. "Ah, Nannie," she said to Mama while she still had her hands on my cheeks, "I can tell you and Jodie won't have no trouble a-tall marrying your baby off. She's pretty as a pink. What color's her eyes and hair?" Miss Dink patted my head.

"Her eyes are sort of greenish blue, like a gander's. And her hair's about as yellow as a crooked-neck squash when it's good and ripe. But that don't matter. If Bandershanks does as well as she looks, she'll fare fine."

"Just so she ain't got buck teeth. Many's the old maid I've seen with teeth like a beaver."

"Well, we can't be sure about her teeth yet. She's still got her baby set." Mama looked down at me.

I kept thinking about Miss Dink's eyes. Mama had told me she was losing her sight. Poor thing. The minute she said I was pretty as a flower, I knew she was plum blind, for I wasn't pretty. It hadn't been two days since Wiley had told me I looked exactly like a billy goat.

Mama was saying, "Bandershanks, you take Miss Ophelia's gourd out of the water bucket on the porch and run get some fresh spring water. Follow the trail now, like Miss Dink said."

I was following the trail, but I was beginning to think I wasn't ever going to find that spring. Then I heard Mister Ward Lawson yelling at his wife.

"Good God A' mighty, Ophelia! Damn you! What in God's name are you doin' down here, roamin' round at the branch this time of the evenin'?"

"Just looking for berries, Ward."

"Berries, hell. You're lookin' for my still, that's what you're doin'. Huckleberries ain't ripe yet!"

"Still? What still?"

"My whiskey still!"

Miss Ophelia dropped the basket on her arm. "Lord help my time. You must be lying to me, Ward."

There they were, right down the trail in front of me—Miss Ophelia wringing her hands and twisting them up in her flimsy apron, Mister Ward shaking his fist at her.

I darted behind the nearest sapling.

"Naw, I ain't lyin'! I'm aimin' to turn out some first-rate whiskey and roll in big money doin' it!" Mister Ward grinned and let his clenched fist unfold so he could push his hair up from his eyes. His fat, sweaty face was as red as his hair.

"Don't you know somebody'll turn you in so quick it'll make your head swim? Folks in this settlement ain't gonna allow no whiskey-making!"

Mister Ward spit out a wad of tobacco and wiped his shirt sleeve across his mouth. My papa didn't ever let his shirt get as dirty as Mister Ward's.

"You wanta bet?"

"There ain't a drinking man in Drake Eye Springs, 'cept you! They'll ride you out on a rail, even before the Law gets wind of it."

"Hell, gal, that's where you're wrong! Ain't nobody findin' out about my still. It's gonna be hid good. Quit wringin' your damn hands! That's all you know to do ever' time I try to tell you somethin'. Com'ere. Lemme show you the spot I got picked for settin' it up at." He grabbed his wife's arm and they started up the branch. The bottom of her skimpy skirt caught on a briar vine, but Mister Ward wouldn't wait for her to untangle it, so it got torn.

I had already noticed when Miss Ophelia lifted her apron that her dress was stretched so tight against her stomach it was like a sack on a rooster. But Miss Ophelia didn't look much like a rooster. The freckles, thick on her face and arms, made her look more like a poor little brown speckled wood thrush wearing a bonnet and being dragged along by one wing.

She kept stumbling on with Mister Ward, and he kept shouting to her about some contraption he wanted to build. I couldn't figure out what he was talking about. But, whatever it was, Miss Ophelia didn't like it.

"See this level ridge? My platform for the mash barrels is gonna be right 'long here under these willows. Ah, here's where I'm gonna set my drum. It'll be pure copper. That's what I'm gonna buy—a pure copper drum! Won't that be a beaut? Undergrowth's so heavy in here even you couldn't spot at first! Now, could you?"

"Oh, Ward, you can't do this! It ain't right to make moonshine!" Miss Ophelia was beginning to cry. "It'll ruin us! Think what could happen! All our young'uns need clothes so bad, Ward! If you've got money to—"

"Shut up, Ophelia! Stop that Goddamn cryin' and sniffin'!"

Now that they were out of sight, I tiptoed back to the narrow, winding trail. I dropped the water gourd, and it got sand and grit inside. I didn't know whether to pick it up and run back up the hill to the house or whether to skedaddle on to the spring and dip up Miss Dink's cool water, like she had told me to do.

I grabbed the gourd and swiped it out as best I could with the tail of my underskirt. I could still hear Miss Ophelia and Mister Ward. Her sobbing and his yelling sounded like they had stopped close by, but there were so many dogwood bushes and briar vines and pine trees growing tangled together on both sides of the trail that I couldn't tell for sure where they were. I ran on down the hill.

When I got even with Miss Ophelia's berry basket I slowed down to look at it, but I didn't dare touch it. It was lying bottom side up, but I couldn't see any huckleberries spilling out.

The more Mister Ward shouted at Miss Ophelia, the faster I scooted on down the steep hillside. Once I stumped my toe on the root of a sweet gum tree and fell. But I held on to the gourd. As I was getting up, I saw the spring just ahead.

I decided I'd better wash the dipper in the branch water before I stuck it into the deep, clear spring. As I waded out to the middle of the branch, cool sand oozed up between my toes, and for a minute I forgot all about Mister Ward's loud, ugly talking.

But I heard him again.

"I don't know why in hell you can't get it through your thick skull, Ophelia! I got it all figured out. All I gotta do is rake up money to buy the copper cooker, and I'm sure gonna get it, one way or another. 'Course, this summer I'll have to buy chops and rye too. But come another year, I'm gonna plant a heap of corn. I ain't gonna raise a stalk of cotton on the whole place. That won't set so good with old Ned. But hell, if that nigger don't like it, he can lump it! I got new plans for him anyways."

"New plans?"

"Yeah. He's gonna be helpin' with the runs. And them burr-headed boys of his are gonna be cuttin' wood and keepin' up the fires. Ah, I tell you, it's gonna be a

perfect setup! Like Hicks said, I got plenty of water and a nice spot here in this hollow, 'way down the main road. Even the smoke ain't gonna drift far! Can't figure why I haven't done rigged me up a still long ago. Like Hicks said, ain't no need of a man with my brains workin' hisself to death walkin' behind no plow!"

"Who's this Hicks you're talking about?"

"You don't know him, Ophelia. He's sorta my business partner. Lives down below the State Line Road. Now, he's a moneyed man! He's got him one of them automobiles! Me and him's goin' in together fifty-fifty. I'm gonna take the whiskey to him in big batches—gallons and five gallons. Naturally, I'll be obliged to get myself a automobile! Then Hicks—"

"A automobile?"

"That's what I said! A automobile! I'll buy me one soon's the money starts pilin' in. Then, by God, when I ride through Drake Eye Springs, folks won't say, 'Yonder goes *Old Ward*.' They'll say, 'Yonder goes *Mister Ward Lawson*.'"

"And I'll say, 'Yonder goes the biggest red-headed fool the Lord ever let breathe!'"

"Makin' easy money ain't bein' a fool, Ophelia! Like I was fixin' to tell you, after we get the whiskey 'cross the Louisiana line, Hicks can sell it retail—you know, in fifths. And sometimes by the drink. We'll get a sight more for it that way. He's gonna get regular customers lined up and see to it that I'll have plenty of sugar—two or three hundred pounds at a time. He can arrange with a fellow so there won't be no suspicion round here. You know yourself if I was to go to Drake Eye Springs and start buyin' a heap of sugar at Mister Jodie's store, that'd be a dead giveaway. Say, he might be the very one to loan me some money! Providin' I don't let on to him what it's for."

"Ward, you ain't talking sense! You're just—"

"Dammit, woman, shut your mouth! This is the first sensible thing I ever—Good God A' mighty! Ophelia, look down yonder at the spring! Who in hell's that? Heerd ever' damn word I said! Why didn't you tell me somebody was around? Looks like some young'un!"

"I didn't know nobody was here. I sent the young'uns to fetch the cow, and I left the house just a minute ago to come look for berries."

"Ophelia, that's that damn little gal of Mister Jodie's and Miss Nannie's! I swear to God, if she tells her pa, I'll kill her! I'll kill her! So help me!"

It was me, all right! I snatched up the water gourd and started streaking back up the trail!

"Good God, Ward! You're drunk, or crazy! Don't say such a thing! Anyhow, she's so little she wouldn't know what's going on! See how little she is? Just look at her spindly legs!"

I didn't have time to look at my spindly legs. I just tried to go faster!

"Ain't no little gal gonna stop me! Dammit! I'm gonna set up my still come the devil to my doorstep! And if the Law comes bustin' it up, I'll know exactly who turned me in! Woman, you get on to the house and see who all else's up there. I swear to God! Don't nothin' ever go right for me! Get!"

"I'm going, Ward. I'm going. Miss Nannie must've come to set with poor Aunt Dink."

"Poor Aunt Dink! Poor Aunt Dink! That's all I hear! When's that old blind bitch ever gonna die?"

"Ward, she's my aunt! She raised me from a baby!"

"Yeah, yeah! From a bastard baby. You've told me ten times how your ma died a-birthin' you and didn't nobody want you, so Miss Dink and her old man taken you and raised you. Then, fool me, I come along and married you! My pa told me I'd rue the day. He said I ought to marry me a big rawboned gal—one that could plow a mule and do a day's work in the field. Pa was a blame fool about lots of things, but he sure know'd women. He said these little stringy ones like you ain't good for a confounded thing but birthin' young'uns, and he was sure right. Here I am thirty-nine years old, goin' on forty, and ain't got a damn thing but two old mules, some wore-out plows, and a houseful of young'uns—and you expectin' another one."

I was so far up the slope now I didn't try to hear any more Mister Ward said. Nearly half of Miss Dink's water had sloshed out of the gourd before I could get it back up to the house, but Miss Dink and Mama didn't seem to notice, or care either. Mama wouldn't even listen when I started to tell her Mister Ward was going to kill me. She just shushed me and whispered she was proud of me for being so smart and for me to sit down on the floor by her straight chair.

Mama and Miss Dink were talking about the World War and about Miss Dink's nephew, who was already fighting way across the waters in some place called France, and about my two big brothers, who went off to the army camp. Then they got started telling one another of long-time-ago things, with Miss Dink doing most of the telling.

"Well sir, time's a-flyin' fast. It fair scares me to think it's already 1918. The Mister, he's been in his grave ten years, Nannie. He passed in the summer of 'aught-eight. Come the first Sunday in June—and that'll be next Sunday—it'll be ten years, even."

"Mama, Mister Ward said—"

"Shh, Bandershanks, Miss Dink's talking, hon."

Miss Dink talked on and on. Mama just nodded her head or said, "Yes'm, that's right" or "Well, I declare to my soul!" or "I reckon so."

"Mama, when is Mister Ward gonna—"

"Bandershanks, get up here in my lap and be quiet! How can me and Miss Dink talk if you don't be quiet?"

Miss Dink started telling about hound dogs stealing goose eggs and about how it's easier to pick a goose than a gander when you're making feather beds. She told all about her drove of geese that nipped off the grass in the cotton fields, and that made her think about the summer the lice crawled off the geese and got all in her hair.

Then Mama remembered that once when she was a little girl, way back in Alabama, she and all the other pupils at Clay Hill School got lice on their heads. The teacher sent word home that every last young'un had to have his head shaved.

Miss Dink laughed. "Makes me recollect the time Ophelia caught the seven-year itch over at Calico Neck School. I never was so put out over nothing in all my born days. And 'course, Ophelia just know'd she was disgraced for life! But, like I told her, getting the itch ain't nothing, but it's sure a disgrace to keep it! Well, sir, Nannie, I didn't have no notion of what to do. And I couldn't let on to a soul that Ophelia had caught it, not even to Doctor Elton. Finally, I smeared hog lard on her, and that cleared it right up."

Mama let me slide out of her lap so she could stand up and take my hand. "I hate to leave, Miss Dink, but I promised Jodie's pa I'd take his new *Gazette* by the Goode place so's to read a piece to Mister Malcolm—something about Woodrow Wilson and his League of Nations ideas. Mr. Thad couldn't go himself, this time. You know he walks over there ever so often to read the war news to Mister Malcolm."

"Mister Malcolm will be proud to hear you read. He's like me: setting there blind as a bat, with no way of knowing what's going on, 'less somebody comes and tells him."

"Mr. Thad says the weekly's got a right sensible column about this new law they're getting up to let women vote. I left the paper out yonder in my buggy, but I'll go get it."

"That rigamarole is all beyond me, Nannie. I'll never live to vote. Anyhow, that ain't women's business! Set back down, Nannie, just for a minute."

Mama let go of my hand and sat down again in the worn-out chair, the only one in Miss Dink's room.

"Nannie," Miss Dink whispered, raising herself up on her elbows, "I oughtn't to breathe this, but I know you ain't gonna talk it. Nannie, that devil Ward is running after the Bailey girl!"

Mama caught her breath! She grabbed my hand.

"You know which one I'm talking 'bout, Nannie—Wes and Lida Belle's daughter."

"Not Addie Mae!"

"Yeah! The darkies here on the place—Ned and Eulah—I got it straight from them. Folks say the girl is slow-witted. She must be, to be fooling 'round with Ward."

"Bandershanks, baby, you hurry on out front and be climbing into our buggy."

I was so glad to get to leave I didn't even ask Mama why she wanted me to be in a rush.

Old Dale was standing there in the shade of the tree where Mama had hitched him, his ears dropped down, his eyes half closed, all his weight on three feet. Once in a while he would give his tail a swish to scare away the two horseflies that kept settling on his hind legs.

He didn't even notice when I climbed up into the buggy seat and started playing with the reins. I put one forefinger between the flat, slick leather lines and juggled them up and down with both hands. Then, stretching my legs so I could prop one foot up on the dashboard, like Papa always did, I practiced saying "Glick! Glick!" out of the corner of my mouth, just exactly like Papa.

I eased the whip out of its holder and waved it round and round high in the air. That whip was as old as the buggy but it looked brand new, for Papa and Mama wouldn't ever use it. They said Dale was too decrepit to be whipped. The whip's green tassel on the wrist loop was still fluffy and soft as silk.

I was squeezing the tassel to make finger waves in it when I saw Mama coming. I put up the whip quick!

It didn't take Mama long to get Dale untied, waked up, and headed around toward the Drake Eye Springs road.

"What do you know, Bandershanks, Dale actually wants to trot now!"

"How come?"

"His head is turned towards home!"

"Mama?"

"What, hon?"

"Mister Ward's gonna shoot me."

"What?"

"Mister Ward's gonna kill me with his gun."

"Child, what on earth are you talking about?"

"Mister Ward said it!"

"Bandershanks, sometimes I wonder about you! When did you see Mister Ward?"

"I didn't see him good, but—"

"Well, then, you quit imagining things—or telling stories. It's mean to tell stories, and a sin, besides. You don't want the Old Bad Man to get you when you die, do you?"

"No'm!"

Mama had told me a long time before who the Bad Man was. When Brother Milligan preached about him, he called him "that Old Split-Foot Devil." But Mama said "devil" is an ugly word for ladies to use, so she always said "the Bad Man." No matter what his name, I didn't want him to get me and burn me up, so I quit talking about Mister Ward.

Soon we came to the main road, where we turned into what Mama said was the left fork. She told me if we were to go the other way, and kept on riding eight or ten miles, we'd wind up down in Louisiana.

I never had been to Louisiana.

A few minutes later we met Old Mister Hawk in his narrow wagon. Mama said he was the only man for miles who had a one-horse wagon. He didn't have a horse, though, just a mule.

Mister Hawk made his old, bony, gray mule go over in the weeds and grass so there would be lots of room in the road for our buggy. When he said "'Evenin', Miss Nannie," he took one hand and lifted his hat clean off his head.

Next, we came to the Baileys' house. Miss Lida Belle was sitting on the front porch, and she waved and called out for Mama to stop. Mama drew up the reins, slowing Dale to a walk.

"'Evening, Lida Belle."

"Lord, Nannie, here I sit barefooted as a yard dog! You caught me resting my feet! Tie up your horse and come on in!" Miss Lida Belle took her snuff brush out of her mouth and started putting on her shoes.

'Td love to, Lida Belle, but it's getting on over in the evening. I'll have to come another day."

"Do that, Nannie! I'd sure be proud."

"I will. And y'all come!"

"We will!"

Mama flapped the reins ever so lightly against Old Dale's back. He trotted on.

"Mama, where's Addie Mae at?"

"I don't know, hon."

"Is Mister Ward gonna run after her like our rooster chases hens?"

"Bandershanks!"

"But Miss Dink said—"

"I declare to my soul! You hear too much. Now quit asking questions."

Mama didn't talk any more for a long while.

"Mama, Miss Ophelia said I don't know what's going on."

"What?"

"But Mr. Ward said I'd tell Papa."

"Bandershanks, I don't know what in Heaven's name you could be worrying about! When did you ever hear Mister Ward or Miss Ophelia talking about Papa, or anything else for that matter?"

"At the spring."

"This evening?"

"Yes'm."

"What'd they say?"

"I don't know."

"Well, surely you remember something—if you heard them. Just tell me one thing they said."

"She was crying and crying. And he said, 'Shut up.' And she said, 'Don't do it.' And he said he's gonna get lots of money and buy him a au-something."

"A automobile?"

"That's it! And he saw me squatting down by the spring dipping up water, and he said he'd kill me."

"Good Heavens!"

"Miss Ophelia said I wouldn't tell!"

"I declare to my soul! Tell what?"

"I don't know, Mama!"

Mama yanked the buggy whip from its holder and gave Dale a quick, sharp whack that made him fairly fly on up the road! It was the first time I'd ever seen Mama do that. She wouldn't let him slow down, not even when we got to the Goode place.

"Ain't we gonna stop and read none to Mister Malcolm?"

"No, hon. I've changed my mind."

"I want to play mumble-peg with Wallace! Mama, Wallace can throw mumble-peg knives better'n Wiley, or anybody!"

Mama didn't answer or say another word. She kept Dale trotting on, fast as he could go.

In a few more minutes we were going up the hill in front of our house. Dale started turning off the road to go to our wide gate, just like he always did, but Mama made him pull the buggy back into the sandy ruts.

"No, Dale, we need to go on up to the store!" She gave him another hard flip with the reins.

"We're going to Papa's store?"

"Yeah, hon. I've got to talk to your papa. But you won't even have to get out. When we get there, you can just sit in the buggy while I run in and speak to Papa a second."

"I gotta get me some candy!"

"I'll bring you a piece of candy. You just stay in the buggy."

When Mama came out of the store, Papa was with her. Papa was frowning and looking down at the ground, and Mama was looking at Papa. He rubbed his hand across the back of his neck and whispered something I couldn't hear.

He walked on over to the mulberry tree to untie Dale's bridle, while Mama gathered up her skirt and climbed back up into the buggy.

"Did you get my candy?"

"Your papa's got you a piece."

He handed me a long peppermint stick. "Bandershanks?" he said.

"Sir?"

"I want you to tell us what all you heard Mister Ward say to Miss Ophelia this evening when you went down to their spring. Every word. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." I turned my peppermint stick over and licked the other side.

"Well? Start telling us."

"Miss Ophelia was crying."

"What had Mister Ward said to make her cry?"

"He said, 'Won't that be a beaut?'"

"What was gonna be so pretty?"

"I couldn't see nothing, Papa. Just the branch. And tadpoles in the water."

"What else did Mister Ward say?"

"He ain't gonna plant no more cotton. Just corn. And he ain't gonna buy no sugar from you."

"Sugar? And corn? Hmm. Hon, what did Miss Ophelia say about the corn and sugar?"

"She said, 'Ward, don't do it.'"

"Don't do what?"

"Don't say nothing about shooting."

"Yeah? Go on! What else?"

"Don't make the moon shine."

"*Moonshine*? Great Jehoshaphat and gully dirt! Nannie, take this baby home! Don't let her out of your sight!"

"Papa, you mad at me?"

"No, hon. You're a sweet girl. You and Mama go on home now, and you help her milk the cows and fix supper. I'll be there directly, and maybe I'll bring you another stick of candy."

"Peppermint?"

"Yeah. Peppermint!"

On the way home, Mama kept the buggy lines clenched tight with both hands, yet she allowed Old Dale to walk or trot slow, suiting himself. She seemed to be thinking about something far off down the road.

By the time we got back to our hill, the sun was all the way down. The sky, way across Papa's cotton field, looked red. Mama said that was the glow of the sun against some sinking clouds.

"It's a sign of no rain, Bandershanks, when the sky's red in the evening."

We could see the moon, too, rising over the walnut trees, between the top of our wagon shelter and Grandpa Thad's house. It looked just like always, when the moon is full, and I didn't think Mister Ward had anything to do with it.

Chapter 2

Next morning, nothing was said about the moon shining or about Mister Ward. Instead, while Mama was fixing my breakfast, she told me it was a perfect day to make sauerkraut.

"How come, Mama?"

"Our cabbages are ready, and Doanie and Huldie are up here to fix them."

"Did Shoogie come?" I jumped out of my chair to run to the side window.

"Probably so."

"I see her! I see her! She's out yonder in the well lot. Mama, lem'me go play with Shoogie!"

"Not till you eat your biscuits and fried meat. You and that Shoogie have got the whole morning before you. Come away from the window, now, Bandershanks. You want syrup on your biscuits?"

"No'm. Just smear on butter."

By the time I got out to the well lot, cabbages were piled everywhere, and Doanie and Huldie had gone back into the garden to cut more. Shoogie was sitting down in the sand, leaning back against a big water tub.

I picked my way toward Shoogie, being careful not to bump into the mounds of cabbages or the kraut-making stuff spread all the way from the well curbing to Mama's wash shelter. Even so, I stumbled against a sack of salt.

Shoogie saw me and grinned. I squatted down beside her to watch her rake together some sand for a frog house. She already had one black foot buried in the sand and was heaping a stack of wet dirt on top of her other one.

"My frog houses fall in, every time!" I said.

"I told you, get water and sprinkle hit on, and pat the sand hard. Pile hit up high and pat some more. Then, wiggle your toes just a little speck 'fore you eases out your foot!"

Shoogie knew how to make the best frog houses in the world. So I raked up a pile of sand and shoved my foot down under it. I smoothed the sand over, then gave it a pounding with both fists. Next I reached around behind Shoogie to get some water out of the tub she was leaning against.

"Let hit trickle 'tween your fingers on the sand. You is doin' good!"

"Look, Shoogie! My house! It's staying up!"

"Get you a dab o' wet sand and patch that little cave-in at the door."

Before Shoogie could show me the best way to fix my door, Huldie called her to come help with the kraut. I hadn't even noticed that Doanie and Huldie were back from the garden.

"Get a hustle on! Girl, you is big enough to flop one of these churn dashers!"

"I'm big too, Huldie! Can I flop some?"

"Sho', baby. We's got two churns and two dashers, and more nice green cabbage heads than you can shake a stick at!"

Huldie handed one of the churn dashers to Shoogie, the other to me. Then she and Doanie dumped a thick layer of sliced cabbage leaves into the bottom of each churn and sprinkled on lots of salt.

"Now, you girls can start beatin' hit down. Here, baby," Huldie showed me, "make the dasher go up and down just like this was a churn o' clabbered milk. That's the way! Wham hard! We's gotta mash them leaves till the water runs out and melts that salt. Then we can put in some more."

Shoogie and I kept pounding away. I saw her reach down into her churn and get a handful of the salty, bruised cabbage and eat it, so I tried some. It was good!

I ate more and more of it, but after a while I got to where I couldn't bear to put another bite of the briny shreds into my mouth. Jogging the dasher up and down wasn't fun any more, either.

Shoogie's arms got tired, but Huldie said we couldn't quit. As soon as her grandma wasn't watching, Shoogie sidled over to me and whispered, "Bandershanks, tell her your arms is wore slap out. Say, 'Huldie, my poor little arms is a-killin' me! Please let me and Shoogie quit!' She'll pay you some mind. Then we can go play!"

"But, Shoogie—"

"Say hit! You wants to play, don't you?" Shoogie scooted back to her churn.

"Huldie?" I said.

"What, baby?"

"My poor little arms is a-killin' me. Shoogie said— I mean, let Shoogie— I mean, please let me— My poor little arms is—"

Huldie and Doanie started laughing so I couldn't finish what Shoogie wanted me to say.

"Law, y'all is a pair o' sly ones! Shoogie, you the one what's puttin' this baby up to tellin' such as this. Her poor little arms! Why, you is got the child talkin' just like you does! Tell you what: me and Doanie'll let you both rest them poor little wore-out arms right now! Y'all trot down yonder to the gully at the syrup mill and fetch us two good-sized rocks so's we can hold down the kraut in the brine water. Don't just pick up the first ones you sees. Find some that is nice and flat and smooth."

Shoogie grabbed my hand. "Come on, Bandershanks, let's go. I's gonna show you how I can jump clean 'cross that gully—where hit's way deep!"

We ran through the horse lot, past the pigpens, and down the lane as far as the calf pasture. Then we climbed the rail fence and went farther on toward Huldie's house and the syrup mill, till we came to the place where Shoogie wanted to jump across the gully.

The gully was deep, and wide—too deep and wide for me. But Shoogie leaped back and forth across it so many times she was out of breath.

"Let's get them rocks now, Bandershanks. I sees some just right, there in the bottom. All we's gotta do is pick 'em up and wipe off the gully dirt."

The two rocks Shoogie picked out were so heavy it took us a long time to lug them up to the well lot. When we did finally get back, we saw that Huldie was in the garden again, and Doanie was gone. Shoogie said she must be in the kitchen helping Mama cook dinner.

"Bandershanks, you reckon they gonna cook cake?"

"No. We don't have no cake or pie, 'cept on Sunday."

"Let's make us some more frog houses."

"I wanta play like we're big. You be Huldie, and I'll be my mama. Let me tell you to stir up nice 'tater pies and cakes, 'cause the preacher's gonna come!"

"Iffen we plays like we's wimmins, where we gonna get some snuff? When I's Grandma Huldie, I gotta have me some snuff!"

"Run in the garden and ask Huldie."

"Bandershanks, is you outta your head? Snuff's too good. She ain't gonna gim'me none o' her'n. You gotta go get hit from your grandma! She got some, ain't she?"

"Yeah, but Grandma Ming says I must never, never in this round world take a dip."

"Tell her hit's for me. That'll be the truth."

"I better not. I know what! I'll get Mama to stir up sugar and chocolate. It's just like snuff."

"Is it good?"

"Yeah. Gooder'n candy!"

Mama wasn't in the kitchen; neither was Doanie. So I got the chocolate box and the sugar bowl by myself. I grabbed a spoon too and ran outside before I filled my mouth.

"This sho' is sweet!" Shoogie mumbled after she had packed three spoonfuls of the mixture down between her lower lip and her front teeth. Then she handed the bowl and spoon back to me.

"My mama don't dip snuff. She's a nice lady. She says nice ladies don't dip—just old grandma women."

Huldie walked up while I still had the spoon in my hand. She was puffing, wiping sweat off her forehead, and talking to herself.

"Mercy, this is one more hot day!"

The basket Huldie balanced on her head was heaped up with cabbages. If she was going to make me and Shoogie churn them all down, we'd never get to bake Preaching Sunday mud pies!

"What's you girls doin'?"

Shoogie's eyes got big. She gulped, stretched her neck, and beat herself on the chest. In trying to answer, she nearly choked!

"We're dipping snuff," I told Huldie, as soon as I could swallow.

"Good Lawd 'a mercy!"

Huldie grabbed for Shoogie! She caught her arm, but she was having such a time trying to get the basket down from her head that Shoogie snatched away. The basket tipped over, spilling cabbages all over the well lot.

Huldie whirled around and grabbed Shoogie with both hands. She started screaming. I hid behind a tub.

"I'll learn you! I'll learn you! Cuss your black hide, young'un, I's gwine to break you from this snuff-stealin' and dippin'."

Shoogie wasn't listening. She was shrieking and kicking as if her grandma were tearing her apart, and Huldie still hadn't hit her the first lick. The next second, though, she bent Shoogie over her knees, yanked up her dress tail, and started giving her pink bloomers and her bottom one hard "whap, whap, whap" right after another!

"What's going on out here?"

Mama had come flying out the kitchen door!

"Is somebody hurt? Bandershanks, where're you at? Huldie, what's wrong?"

Huldie slacked up on beating Shoogie, but Shoogie didn't slack up on bawling. She got louder and louder!

"Miss, these chillens done stole my snuff!"

"Stole your snuff? I declare to my soul! Bandershanks, come here!"

"Yes'm. They both been dippin' hit up! See all on their faces? This Shoogie brat, she so black snuff don't show on her'n, but just look 'round that baby's mouth!" Huldie pointed at me and began spanking on Shoogie again.

Mama pulled me toward the garden fence, where she jerked up a Jimson weed!

"Mama! It's chocolate, Mama! Just chocolate!"

But Mama couldn't hear me for all of Shoogie's loud bellowing! She started stinging my legs to pieces!

"Mama! It ain't snuff!" I screamed louder. "It ain't! It ain't! Mama! Mama!"

She kept flailing my legs.

Shoogie, still bucking and rearing like a young colt, broke loose from Huldie and ran streaking toward the wagon shelter. All I could do was dance on one foot and then the other and cry, "Chocolate, Mama! Chocolate!"

"Come back here, you little heifer!" Huldie screamed at Shoogie.

When she whirled around to see which way Shoogie was running, she stepped on the sugar bowl. She didn't break it, but she bent the handle of the spoon and kicked over the chocolate box.

"Law, Miss, how come your pretty sugar bowl settin' down here in this dirt? And here's your chocolate, all spillin' out!"

Mama stopped switching my legs.

"I declare to my soul! Bandershanks! Huldie, they was just playing like they had snuff. See? It's sugar and chocolate!"

"The Lawd help! What chillens won't do! That Shoogie can drive me outta my head!"

Mama used the hem of her apron to wipe away the tears and grit on my face. She got off all the smeared sugar and chocolate, too, while she was at it. Then, she kissed my cheek and told me to run on and play.

As soon as Shoogie came slipping out from behind the wagon shelter, we settled down in the sand and made frog houses until we heard Mama calling me.

"Ma'am!"

"Com'ere, hon."

"What you want, Mama?"

"Papa's coming home to eat his dinner now in a few minutes. After dinner, you can go back to the store with him."

"And ride Jake? And help Papa sell stuff?"

"He might let you do that. Come on in here in the side room. I want to get you on a clean dress. My, you look like you've been playing with the pigs, instead of Shoogie!"

"Is Shoogie going to Papa's store?"

"No. Just you."

"Mama, you going somewhere?"

"Yes, hon. I want to drive over to see some folks and try to get them to come to preaching this Sunday, and to Protracted Meeting, when it starts."

"Who you gonna go see?"

"Nobody that you know. Come on, let's get you ready."

"Mama, lem'me stay here and play with Shoogie."

"No, no. You've got to be with me or Papa one all the time now."

"Cause Mister Ward wants to shoot me?"

"Bandershanks, just hush about that! We're not gonna talk about it any more!"

After dinner, Papa and I rode Jake back to the store. "Papa, my bonnet's choking me! It won't come undone!"

"I'll untie it for you soon as I hitch Jake. Where'd you get that fancy bonnet, anyhow?"

"Grandma Ming made it."

"It's so blessed hot this evening I think I need a sun bonnet! I know Jake ought'a have one! Look how he's sweating!"

"Do horses wear bonnets?"

"I was just talking. Now, here we are. Jake, boy, I'm gonna put you on the East Side of the store, and in about an hour you'll have yourself a good shade."

As soon as Papa had looped Jake's bridle over the hitching rail, he lifted me straight from the saddle to the store porch, without my feet even touching the ground.

"Lemme see if I can help you with that bonnet, Bandershanks. Shucks, these little strings tied under your chin are plumb wet. There you go! Now, if I can just find my key, we'll unlock the doors and be ready for business."

"Lemme twist it!"

"All right. No, Bandershanks, turn it the other way."

The lock clicked. Papa turned the knob and gave the thick double doors a shove. Inside, it was much cooler, but I could hardly see a thing. I rubbed my eyes good, and still the room was black and I couldn't half see.

I could smell plenty of stuff: hoop cheese, chewing tobacco, coffee beans, musty sacks of chicken feed, and Papa's coal-oil drum with its old pump that always squeaked so loud. All those smells were mixed up with the good smell of the leather harness and the big pretty saddles hanging across the back wall.

"Papa, let's light the lamp."

"Your eyes will get used to the dark. I'll go open up the back door. That'll help."

I followed Papa around behind the counters and down the aisle as far as the candy showcase. I stopped to see the candy, but he kept going—and talking.

"If we don't have any customers this evening, Bandershanks, I tell you what we can do: we can sweep and clean up and start taking inventory. It's a good day for that."

"Take what, Papa?"

"Inventory. We'll count things. Go from shelf to shelf to see how much flour and salt and all such as that we've got on hand. Then, next week when I'm in town, I'll know what all to buy. That's taking inventory."

"Oh."

"For one thing, I've got to lay in a good stock of sardines and soda crackers. Lots more cheese, too, 'cause when cotton ginning starts, men will be flocking in here at dinner time—'specially on days when they have to line up their wagons to wait their turn at the gin. That's when I make my money, Bandershanks."

I wasn't half listening to Papa. I had already lifted the lid of the candy showcase and poked my head inside so I could see all the boxes of good candy.

"Fact is, Bandershanks, fall of the year is the only time folks in the settlement have any cash to speak of. See, when they sell cotton, they can settle up what they owe me. 'Course I have to turn right around, get on Jake, and go to town to straighten up my own debts. Most times, there's not much left. But thank the Good

Lord, looks like crops are pretty good this year. I'm expecting to come out even—maybe better."

"Papa, we gonna count candy?"

"Gal! I see what sort of inventory you'd take! Get your head out of that showcase, hon, before you break my lid!"

"I ain't gonna break nothing, Papa."

"It'll be one piece of candy today! That's all. You want an all-day sucker or a gumdrop?"

"I want a jawbreaker!"

"Which color?"

"I can't see 'em."

Papa held me up so I could poke my head farther into the wide glass case.

"Give me yellow!"

"One yellow jawbreaker coming up!"

"Papa? Lemme have a green one too? Please?"

"Good grannies! Just this one time, now mind you."

Papa started laughing as soon as I popped the hard candy balls into my mouth.

"You look just like a little fox squirrel toting two big hickory nuts!"

My mouth was so stretched I couldn't answer a word. I could move my tongue, but not my lips. And I wanted to tell Papa the candy tasted so much like lemonade that I didn't mind my cheeks being funny as a squirrel's.

"Want to do a little dusting for me now?"

I nodded my head.

"The feather duster's right over yonder in the corner, hanging on a nail. See it?"

I nodded my head again.

"Start up there at the front window, hon. And while you do that, I'm gonna be back in the back straightening up the sacks of oats and cow feed."

I began brushing up and down on the window panes. A feather broke off the side of the duster and fluttered to the floor. I stooped to pick it up, but I didn't know what to do with it, so I just put it on the windowsill. Then, I looked out the window—down toward Mister Hansen's gin, on past Mister Goode's grist mill, and up the road toward home.

"Pa—" I had to grab both candy balls out of my mouth. "Papa, yonder comes somebody riding on a little bitty mule with a dog following him."

Papa came over and looked out between the window bars.

"That's Ned Roberts, Bandershanks. I don't reckon you know him. He lives over across the creek on Mister Ward Lawson's place. Or I should say the old Crawford home-place. Ward's just renting it. And that's not a little mule Ned's riding. That's a jack, a donkey. Some folks would call it a 'jackass.' But you don't say that, Bandershanks. It don't sound pretty."

"Ooh, Papa, look how fat that dog is!"

We watched Ned and his donkey and the bulged-out dog come on up the slope. It took them a long time. They stopped at the edge of the porch, where Ned tied the fuzzy, slow-walking donkey to one corner of Jake's hitching rail, but he was careful not to let the donkey stand close to Jake. A good thing, Papa said, for Jake could, and would, kick him.

"I see Ned aims to buy coal oil."

"How come he's got that old wrinkled Irish 'tater sticking on the spout of his can, Papa?"

"To keep his oil from sloshing out when he starts home."

The dog clambered up the steps behind Ned and followed him inside. As soon as she could spread herself out in the middle of the floor, she took a long, deep breath and closed her eyes.

"Evenin', Mister Jodie."

"Evening, Ned."

Papa looked back down at the tired, fat dog. "Pears to me like you're in the dog-raising business, Ned."

"Yes, suh. Sylvie, she gwine t' find puppies pretty soon."

"Is she any 'count?"

"Yes, suh, Mister Jodie. She sho' is. Sylvie 'bout the best coon hound I's raised yet. She sho' know how to tree 'possums, too. Folks done a' ready askin' for the puppies. But I saves one for you, Mister Jodie, iffen you wants hit."

"I wouldn't mind having two, Ned. 'Course I've got five or six young dogs, but a man can't hardly get too many good dogs. Well, what can I do for you this evening, Ned?"

"I needs me a nickel worth o' coal oil, Mister Jodie. And I wants to talk with you. I wants you to 'vise me, Mister Jodie." Ned let his talking go down low. "Hit's Mister Ward. He don't act right. I's uneasy."

"What's he done? Does he want you to move?"

"No, suh. I wish he did. I wish he'd run me off. He don't do that, 'cause ain't nobody else gwine t' move on his place."

"You could leave, couldn't you?"

"No, suh. Not 'zactly. You see, I owes Mister Ward a right smart money. And I ain't movin' off owin' a man. That ain't right. 'Tain't right, no more'n it's right for a white man to run off a colored man when the crops is half made. You knows that, Mister Jodie."

"Yeah, I know, Ned. Still, we see a good bit of both. It's like Doctor Elton says: 'Rascals come in all colors, 'specially black and white.'"

Ned didn't say anything.

"Mister Ward drinks considerable, don't he?"

"He sho' do, Mister Jodie. I tell you the big trouble. When Mister Ward's drinkin', he say one thing. Then when his head's clear, he do somethin' else."

"That's the way with a drinking man."

"Mister Jodie, you knows that white folks has got their ways, and us blacks has got our'n. We all works the ground together; then our roads just naturally parts at the field gate. That's awright. Everybody knows where he stands. A man likes to know where he stands."

"Yeah, Ned."

"When a white man wants to talk crops and such, he sends for you. He don't come to your house. Mister Ward, he funny. One time, he come and say his wife sick and want my Eulah to come do the wash. Eulah, she gets up there, Miss Ophelia not sick! She not to home. Miss Dink, she gone, too. And he come 'bout this and 'bout that all the time. Yestidy he done brung a hoe. Wants me to sharpen hit with a file. Mister Jodie, there just ain't no call for sharp hoes here this time o' summer. Crops is near 'bout laid by. Gardens, they's dried up. There ain't no hoein' to do!"

"Well, Ned, I—"

"I's uneasy, plum uneasy, Mister Jodie."

"Well, to tell you the truth, Ned, I don't hardly know how to advise you. I reckon about the best thing would be to sit tight one more year, try to pay out next fall, then find you another man. I know a Mister Taylor down on the State Line Road. He's looking for a good family with plenty of big boys, like yours. If we have another good year, and you don't owe Mister Ward too much, Mister Taylor might pay you out and move you down to his place."

Ned didn't answer. Instead, he eased over closer toward the counter so that he was standing right in front of Papa.

"I ain't telled you the worst, Mister Jodie."

"Yeah?"

"This mornin' Mister Ward show me how he gwine t' start makin' whiskey! Say I gotta help him! Say he gwine t' put in the biggest still you ever seen. I's plain a-feared, Mister Jodie! He say my chillens gwine to help chop and tote the wood!"

"He can't—"

"He say he shoot me 'tween the eyes iffen I tells hit, Mister Jodie! But Lawd, Mister Jodie, I's got to think 'bout my chillens. Little Stray, too. He that pitiful one what's not mine. I calls him my chicken coop stray boy."

"Chicken coop?"

"Yes, suh, Mister Jodie. Years back I finds that chile—one freezin' mornin'—all scrooched up in my chicken house. He near 'bout starved to death and shakin' like a leaf—he can't talk. Me and my wife, we warms him up and feeds him. And we

tries to take him back to his mammy. She don't want him. So we keeps him. That's 'fore I comes to Mister Ward's place, and—"

"Papa! Look! Yonder comes somebody to buy stuff!" I dropped my duster and ran to the door to get a better look at the man and horse up the road. "He ain't got no coal oil can, Papa. He's got a shotgun!"

"Oh, Lawd, Mister Jodie! That's him! That's Mister Ward! He follow me!"

"Yeah! Can't see his face from here, but it's him. He's the only red-headed man anywhere around."

I grabbed hold of Papa's pants so I could hide behind his legs.

"Is he gonna shoot me now, Papa?"

"Mister Jodie, don't tell him nothin'! Don't tell that man what I say!"

"Bandershanks, hon, you come back here to the back of the store real quick. I want you to do something—play a game for Papa. Come on!"

Papa thought I wasn't walking fast enough, so he scooped me up in his arms and ran with me to the back corner.

"What we gonna do, Papa?"

"We're gonna have a cat and mouse game. It's fun. You scrooch down right here behind this sack of oats and make like you're a little mouse!"

"A sure 'nuff mouse?"

"Yeah! You be a little bitty one, hiding from a cat! Be still, now. Don't make a noise. A mouse is real quiet when he thinks there's a cat coming. Just a minute, I'll bring you a whole handful of jawbreakers. A store mouse likes to nibble on candy."

"Mister Jodie, come look at the man! He gwine t' fall own his hoss. He drunk. That hoss, he know when Mister Ward's done been at the bottle. He walk easy with him. I's done seen him afore. What's I gwine t' do?"

"Just act natural, Ned. I won't let on to a thing. Anyhow, Mister Ward's probably already seen your donkey, and there lies your mammy dog. He'll know her."

"Yes, suh."

"I'll walk out on the porch. Then, when he staggers in. you just hold your tongue, 'less he asks you something."

Ned must have followed Papa out to the porch, for I could still hear talking. I slid farther down in my corner and put a purple jawbreaker in my mouth. Then, a green one. The others I stuffed into my pocket. I wondered why Papa had decided to let me have so much candy, and why he wanted me to play cat and mouse.

Ned sounded excited about something. Glad, too.

"Praise the Lawd! Look, Mister Jodie, he ain't gwine t' stop here! That horse ain't turning to come up the trail. Praise the Lawd!"

"Yeah, he's going on somewhere else."

"Mister Ward tryin' to tell you somethin', Mister Jodie. The man so drunk he can't talk."

"Evening, Ward. What's that you say?"

"I say, 'Don't waste time!'"

"I won't, Ward."

"Don't pay— Don't pay no mind to— to what Ned tells! It's wastin' time!"

"Ward, where're you headed, such a hot evening?"

"John Mason's. Gotta get John to fix this damn gun. Hammer's stickin'. If this Goddamn horse would just move on. Get up! You sway-back fool, get up! Mister Jodie, you got any shells?"

"Yeah."

"I'll be back directly and buy some. Soon's John gets this damn piece o' gun fixed."

"All right, Ward."

"I's glad he's gwine to Mister John's."

"I tell you, Ned, if he thinks John Mason's gonna sit right down and work on that shotgun this evening, he's badly mistaken. Mister Mason can mend anything, make anything. But he sure takes his time. He never hurries 'cept when he's building a coffin. He works like lightning on coffins."

"Yes, suh."

"Thank goodness, he's outta sight. Come on in, Ned. I'd better measure up your oil. Now, where'd I set that can?"

"Here 'tis, Mister Jodie."

I fell asleep, or something, for the next I heard was Papa yelling at some man and a big blamming racket that sounded like chairs falling over.

"You're a fool for thinking up such a notion! A plain fool! I ain't gonna let you have money to set up no whiskey still! I don't care who you threaten!"

I raised up to see who Papa was calling a fool.

It was Mister Ward!

"God damn! It wouldn't take no heap to get me my copper cooker! Folks'd never suspicion nothin' neither, you bein' a church-goin' man—Miss Nannie's husband, to boot. Ever'-body knows she's purt' nigh a walkin' saint!"

"Ward Lawson, don't call my wife's name when you're talking whiskey, cussing every breath!"

"You tryin' to tell me how to talk? You goody-goody church deacon!"

"You'd better go on home, Ward, and—"

"Fore Chris'mas I could pay you back! Whiskey sells quick! Good money in it! Why, I'd pay up what's done charged on your store books! Think o' that!"

"I told you no, Ward! I mean it!"

Mister Ward hauled off and hit Papa so quick it knocked him down! He straightened up and gave him back a big wallop!

"This ain't nothing to fight over, Ward!"

"I ain't gonna fight. I'm just gonna knock hell outta you!"

Next minute they were down in the middle of the floor, fighting like all get out, rolling over and over! Both of them jumped up! Down on the floor they sprawled again—but just for a second. Mister Ward leaped behind the heater, but Papa went at him and started banging him to pieces! Mister Ward grabbed Papa's arms and threw him against the wall. His head hit the side of the phone, and he slid to the floor, blood running out of his nose! Mister Ward jumped on Papa! More blood came streaking across his face from a gash by his ear!

I had to do something!

I thought of the time Mama dashed cold water on some fighting dogs to make them quit, so I ran for the water bucket. The thing was slam empty! Then I saw the coal oil drum. I snatched the measuring can off its hook and dipped up all the oil it would hold!

By the time I could get to Papa and Mister Ward, Papa was just lying on the floor doing nothing! And Mister Ward was astraddle of him, beating his head with both fists!

Mister Ward hadn't seen me, so I ran up close and splashed the oil on him! I didn't mean for it to go in his eyes and ears, but that's where it all landed. He screamed and grabbed at his face!

"God A'mighty! You little devil! Tryin' to blind me?"

He jumped up. Before I could run around the heater, he yanked up a chair and threw it at me. I ducked. The chair crashed against the stovepipe and it fell tumbling from the ceiling. Two joints hit right across Mister Ward's shoulders; the other rolled toward Papa. Soot flew everywhere. But not on me! I was already under the candy counter.

Papa was coming to. He caught hold of the piece goods counter and dragged himself to his feet. But quick as Mister Ward could kick the stovepipe out of his way, he rammed his head at Papa's stomach and tried to knock him down again.

Papa jumped to one side and whirled back around. He leaped at Mister Ward, giving him a shove that sent him skidding through the front door and out onto the porch!

"Get out, you drunken wretch!"

Mister Ward scrambled to his knees, then up to his feet, and staggered back toward us. To keep from falling he had to grab hold of the door facing.

"God damn you, Mister Jodie! You'll pay for this! I'll get both y'all! Ain't no little bowlegged witch gonna put my eyes out and get away with it!"

I was afraid he was coming right back inside, but he didn't. He sort of shook himself and stumbled out to his horse. He had a hard time climbing into the saddle, but, when he finally made it, he turned round and shouted at Papa: "You gonna rue the day your little witch was born!"

Chapter 3

When Protracted Meeting time came, it was like Preaching Sunday every day, morning and night. God willing, it would go on two full weeks, Brother Milligan said.

Getting to put on my frilly, thin dresses and my best bloomers and two starched underskirts and new white ribbed stockings was fun. But having to squeeze my feet into shoes and then sit still on a church bench two times a day was awful.

Everybody in Drake Eye Springs dressed up in Sunday clothes and came to the meeting; that is, everybody except the Baileys and the Lawsons. Mama said Mister Wes Bailey and Miss Lida Belle were sure making a mistake, not bringing Addie Mae and their three boys. Everybody had known beforehand that Ward Lawson wouldn't darken the church door or hitch up a wagon so Miss Ophelia, their young'uns, and Miss Dink could attend services.

During the second week of the meeting, we were late getting off to church one night because, while Mama and Papa were getting dressed, they whispered so long about Mister Ward. Papa was real bothered about something Mister Ward might do. And Mama kept saying, "Jodie, please don't you do anything drastic! You'd just make bad matters a heap worse."

Papa slipped on his good shirt and told her, "What gets my goat is that he's started telling all over the settlement that I didn't fight him fair and square. Says I yelled for the baby to pour that coal oil on him. That makes me so mad I could kill him! To hear him tell it, I started the fight. He's hell-bent on getting revenge!"

"Shh, Jodie, don't forget who's sitting right behind you, buttoning up her shoes."

That was me. And I was having a hard time with my shoes.

"Mama, can I go barefooted tonight? Just one time?"

"Not to Protracted Meeting!"

So I wore my squeezing shoes again.

Mama said I could get a lot out of the meeting if I'd only listen to what was going on. I tried listening, but I didn't get a thing. I found out, though, that at the night services, when Brother Milligan finally got through preaching and stepped down in front of the pulpit and said, "The doors of this church are now open," it didn't mean we could all walk out the door and go home! It meant the time had come for the bad sinners to go to the mourners' bench with their heads hanging down. Everybody else would stand up and sing the song about "Poor sinner, harden not your heart ... and close thine eyes against the Light." We'd sing it over and over for them—four or five times.

Some nights half a dozen would go up the aisle and shake the preacher's hand. He'd ask them if they believed in Jesus and wanted to be baptized and join the

church, and each one would nod his head. They would then sit down on the bench, and everybody except me would be glad and happy.

While we sang another song, the grownups who already belonged to the church would line up and shake hands with the sinners. That, the preacher said, was "giving the right hand of Christian fellowship."

Other nights nobody would even look toward the mourners' bench, no matter how loud the preacher called them to come or how long we sang. Those nights we got to go home early, and that made me glad and happy.

Every night I got sleepy. The last night of meeting, I tried to get Mama to let me go lie down on the quilts where all the babies were sleeping, but she said I was much too big to be sprawled out on the floor by the side of the pulpit.

Yet, the very next minute, when I told her I wanted to go sit on the mourners' bench so I could get baptized in the swimming hole down at Rocky Head Creek, she said I was too little for that.

I decided I'd never be the right size at the right time.

Summer dragged on and on. One morning in late August, a very good thing happened to me. Grandma Ming made a new flour-sack Dolly Dimple for me. She was pretty—the grandest doll ever stuffed with cotton, Grandpa Thad told me.

When I ran home to show her to Mama, I thought she would meet me out on the front porch and say, "Ah, Bandershanks, what's your new dolly's name?" Then, I was going to say, "Sookie Sue!"

But Mama wasn't on the porch. I hurried on into the front room. There she was, leaning against the wall, talking on the phone. She just reached down, patted my head, and kept on talking to Aunt Vic. She didn't even notice Sookie Sue.

I crawled up into a rocking chair to wait.

I wished I could talk on the phone—about cotton crops, or peaches, or just anything. It wouldn't do a speck of good though to ask Mama to let me try it. She'd only say I was too little. But I knew exactly how to turn the crank on the side of the phone and how to hold the ear piece.

And I could remember every ring on the line. Ours was two longs and a short. Aunt Vic's was two longs. Aunt Lovie's was a short and a long. And if I was going to call up Papa's store, I'd just give the phone's crank one long twist.

I didn't dare ask Mama if I could talk. She'd tell me all that business about telephones being for important matters and that when anybody called us, some grownup person should answer—not me, or Wiley, or even Mierd, who was already going on twelve years old. Then she'd say all over again that when I heard the phone ring two longs and a short, I was to get her or my big sister Bess or one of my big brothers—that is, when they were at home.

They weren't ever home any more—neither Bess nor my brothers. Bess was boarding in town so she could go to high school. And Clyde and Walker were still off in that army camp, wherever it was, and Dorris was down at the Caledonia Academy. I didn't know for sure where Caledonia was, but it wasn't far away, or terrible, like being in a camp for the World War.

Nobody was home any more, except me and Mierd and Wiley and Mama and Papa. Grandpa Thad and Grandma Ming were nearly there because their house was just the other side of the dying Chinaberry tree.

Finally, Mama hung up the phone, turned around, and stooped over so I could hug her neck and she could hug mine.

"You have a Dolly Dimple!"

"She's Sookie Sue!"

"Just let me look at her!"

"Grandma saved that flour-sack doll pattern just for me."

"She's fine as silk!" Mama held my homemade doll out at arm's length, looking first at her purple dress and the freckle dots on her face, and then at her long, soft legs. Sookie's legs were turned up at the ends and made black so she'd look like she had on Sunday shoes.

"Bandershanks, this is the kind of girl you want to be: one who wears her smile all day long!" She handed Sookie Sue back to me.

Mama stood up straight again and started toward the kitchen. I followed her.

"Me and you've got lots to do today, Bandershanks."

"What?"

"First thing is to finish working up the light-bread dough, else it won't have time to rise once, much less twice."

"Mama, can I shake the sifter?"

"Sure. Soon as I dip the flour outta the barrel. Hon, you better lay your doll on the bed, or you'll get her all mussed up."

I had hardly put Sookie to sleep and crawled up on the end of Mama's cook table when the phone started ringing—two longs and a short.

"Mama, it's our ring! Lemme answer it! Lemme, Mama! Please!"

"All right. Hurry. I'll be in there soon as I wash this sticky dough off my fingers. I can't imagine who—"

I couldn't wait for Mama to finish whatever she'd started to say. I dropped the sifter, jumped off the table, and streaked up the hall toward the front room. The phone kept ringing.

As soon as I could push a chair over to the wall I climbed on it and started jerking at the cord on the ear piece. That stopped the ringing. Then, by standing on tiptoe, I managed to yank the hearing thing all the way off its hook.

"Hello!" I hollered up into the mouth cup.

"Hello? Hello? Who's this?"

"It's me!"

"Who?"

"Me! I mean—"

"Call your ma to the phone, honey. This is Mister Hawk Lumpkin. I gotta tell her somethin'."

Grandpa had said lots of times that Mister Hawk couldn't hear it thunder.

"Here's my mama," I screeched.

I handed Mama the ear thing, but she didn't put it against her head. Mister Hawk was yelling so loud she didn't even have to hold it close.

"Hello! Mister Hawk? This is Nannie."

"Nannie? Say, Nannie, send one of your young'uns out to Thad's house and tell him if he wants to see a automobile to get down to the road. One just passed, headed that way! Tell Thad he'll have to make haste 'cause that fellow must be hittin' twenty or twenty-five miles a hour!"

"Yes, sir, Mister Hawk, I'll tell Pa."

He must have hung up, for Mama stopped talking.

"Run out to Grandpa's and tell him Mister Hawk called and said—"

"I heard him, Mama. I'm going."

"Don't you make a lotta racket and bother Grandma Ming. I'll go call Wiley."

I didn't want to use the front doorsteps; it was easier to run to the end of the porch and jump off. Besides, that put me right at the gate between our yard and Grandpa's yard. In a second I was on his porch and standing right by his rocking chair.

Grandpa was sitting in the hot sunshine, his hat tilted down over his eyes and his *Gazette* spread out across his knees. I could hear him snoring, loud.

I eased up closer to his rocker and tapped him on the hand. "Grandpa?"

He didn't hear me.

"Grandpa?"

"Huh? What? Oh, it's you, Bandershanks." He pushed back his hat brim and moved the newspaper. "How's my girl?"

"Grandpa, Mister Hawk said for you to get down to the road. And make haste. It's going fast!"

"What's going fast?"

"That auto'bile coming!"

"Automobile? Oh, my! Let's go! We gotta see that! There's not many traveling our road yet. Get me my stick there in the corner, sugar. I'm sure proud Hawk phoned."

I had a hard time trying to catch up with Grandpa. He wasn't waiting for me—or his walking cane. And he was almost out to the front yard gate before I could hand it to him.

Mama was unlatching the gate.

"Nannie, where's Wiley? And Mildredge? They don't want to miss seeing a automobile!"

Before Mama could tell Grandpa that Mildredge, as he always called Mierd, was over at Aunt Lovie's, we saw Wiley come bounding across the corner of our yard, heading toward the road.

Trixie was right with him, and he and that red mammy hound didn't even look at us, or the gate. Side by side, they skirted around Mama's cape jasmine bush and went over the fence in one big leap—like they'd been practicing together for days, Grandpa said.

"I declare to my soul!" Mama cried. "Wiley, you tore your pants!"

Mama always said "I declare to my soul" when something went wrong. If Papa had been there, he would have said "Great Jehoshaphat and gully dirt!" That's what he hollered when anything bad happened—torn pants or anything else.

Grandma Ming said the reason Papa wouldn't say nothing but "Great Jehoshaphat and gully dirt!" was because my mama was a preacher's daughter, and she wouldn't stand for "poor Jodie doing no cussing."

Grandpa thought Wiley's tearing the back end of his britches on the yard fence was all right.

"Never mind, Nannie," he was telling Mama. "It's not every day a boy gets to see a automobile. Wonder what make it is."

I skipped on ahead so I could sit down beside the edge of the road with Wiley and Trixie. Wiley was leaning back against a good-sized pine sapling, dangling his feet in the gully, and trying to hold Trixie around the neck. She twisted and turned and swished her tail. After a bit, though, she settled down between us and stopped panting long enough to reach over and lick Wiley square in the face.

"Quit it, Trixie! And get quiet, I'm listening for a automobile. Bandershanks, you hear anything?"

"No, I don't hear nothing. What's it gonna sound like?"

"Like a motor, you silly goose! Hot diggity! I hear it!" With that, Wiley jumped across the ditch and tore off down the middle of the road, running as fast as he could sling his fat legs and bare feet. Trixie was having a hard time keeping up with him.

"Wiley! Get outta that road, son!" Mama screamed. "You'll get run over!" Mama started running after them, but Grandpa called her back.

"Nannie, don't fret! They'll get outta the way soon as they see it coming!"

Wiley and Trixie, rounding the bend, disappeared behind the plum thicket.

"Boys and dogs has both got plenty of gumption," Grandpa told Mama, "more'n folks give 'em credit for."

Just then, we saw it!

"Look, Grandpa!"

"Yeah! There 'tis. It's a automobile all right. A one-seater. Foot dool! I wish it wasn't coming so all-fired fast. It ain't a Ford Model T. But hanged if I can tell what make it is." Grandpa was talking low and quick, as much to himself as to me and Mama. "Man, man, just look at her wheels roll! Lickety-split!"

Mama shielded her eyes against the morning sun and looked hard at the black automobile. I put my hand up on my forehead too, and stared. The thing sailed right by in a big whiff of dust and was gone before any of us had a chance to get a good look at it.

Wiley and Trixie ran up in the thick of the dust cloud. He was hollering and waving his arms; she was barking at every breath.

"Did y'all see it? Did y'all see it? What kind was it, Grandpa? Could you tell? Didn't it have a funny gasoline tank? Mama, lem'me go to the store! Will you? It's bound to stop, and I could see it up close. Can I go? Can I, Mama?"

Wiley was gasping for breath as he talked.

"Son, you couldn't run all the way from here to your papa's store. It's a mile, and you're out of wind already!"

"No'm, I got plenty of wind. And I ain't gonna run. I'll ride Dale. Please, Mama! Please?"

"I don't think—"

"Why don't you let him go, Nannie? If I was ten years younger, I'd go myself!"

"Well, all right."

"Hot diggity!" Wiley gave a whoop and lit out toward the barn.

"That's it, son! Light a shuck!" Grandpa called after him.

"Bandershanks, open the well-lot gate," Wiley hollered back, "and I'll dance at your wedding!"

Grandpa said, "Come on, sugar, I'll give you a hand with that dilapidated old gate; you couldn't budge it. Reckon I'm gonna have to come out here and brace that thing with some two-by-fours. Jodie don't never get time for fixing things."

With Mama's help, we got the sagging gate dragged open just in time for Old Dale to come jogging through, with Wiley astraddle of his back. Wiley hadn't even put on Dale's bridle, his blanket, a saddle, or anything! He was just holding on to Dale's mane with both hands and kicking his ribs with both feet.

"Why, son, I could've helped you get the saddle!"

"Don't need no saddle, Grandpa! Get up! Get up!"

Mama said Old Dale didn't appear the least bit interested in going to see any automobile. But, he did strike up a trot when Wiley got him to the foot of the hill

and on the main road. Trixie barked and wanted to follow them, but we called her back.

"I'll tell you, Nannie," Grandpa said as he fastened the sagging gate back in place, "I got so carried away with looking at the automobile I wasn't paying no mind to who was on it. You happen to notice who 'twas?"

"One of them was Ward Lawson, but the man holding the wheel was a total stranger to me."

"Ward? Wonder what he's up to? I heard talk he's aiming to buy the old Crawford place."

"He may be aiming to. But Jodie says Ward couldn't raise a dollar for a dead man's eye! Why Jodie ever gave him credit at the store all last year and this spring I just can't see. There's no telling how much that man owes Jodie! 'Course I sorta pity Ophelia and all their young'uns and Miss Dink."

"Yeah, Nannie, I know. Maybe Ward will settle up what he owes in a month or so—soon as he sells his cotton."

"He didn't last fall. Right after he hauled his first bale to town he let Jodie have seven dollars on account—seven dollars, mind you—and that's the last copper Jodie collected."

"Nannie, this evening soon as Jodie gets in from the store, send me word. I'm anxious to hear what he's gonna have to say 'bout that automobile."

"Sure, Pa. I'll send you word."

Just at dark Mama sent the word, all right. By me. Grandpa was busy trying to get the smut and smoke out of a lamp chimney. He couldn't go talk to Papa about anything right then, he said. He had a dishpan full of soapy water, and he kept sloshing the water through the chimney. Grandma, propped up in her bed like always, was eating her supper and watching Grandpa.

"Thad, you ought'a get a rag and wash that chimney right."

"Bandershanks, tell Jodie I'll come on as soon as I can put some oil in these dratted lamps!"

"Quit muttering and complaining, Thad. A-body can't expect lamps to give out a decent light if they don't keep the wicks trimmed and the chimneys polished—and put oil in them!"

Grandpa said for me to run on back home before I heard him say what he was thinking.

"Just tell Nannie not to wait supper on me, Bandershanks. I'll be out there directly, though."

We did wait. All of us sat down around the supper table to wait—that is, all except Wiley. Papa sent him back out to the hall washstand to rewash his gritty hands.

Mama and Papa kept talking back and forth over the top of my head, mainly about how little milk old Moolie was giving. Papa said it wasn't time for her to go dry, 'cause she wouldn't freshen till spring. Mama thought what Moolie really needed was a few more cotton seeds and lots of pea-vine hay.

I couldn't hear what Mierd and Irene were saying. Aunt Lovie had let Irene come to spend the night with Mierd, and they were over on the bench against the wall, whispering and giggling about something. I wished I knew what was so funny. But, there was no way to find out, for I was way across the table, up in my high chair. Well, it wasn't exactly mine, and it wasn't exactly high. It was a little oak chair some old, old grandpa man had whittled out for Papa when he was a boy. But, I always sat in it. The good thing about it was that over on the side next to Mama's chair, the arm was missing. So, when I got sleepy, all I had to do was lean right over into her lap. Besides that, it had a brand new cowhide bottom with fur that sort of tickled my legs.

Mama and Papa soon quit talking about Moolie and started talking about my big brothers.

"Nannie, quit fretting over the boys! Like as not, the war'll be over before the army gets either one of them trained. You mustn't let it drive you to distraction. Ah, here's Pa."

Grandpa jammed his hat on the peg next to Papa's and wiped the back of his hand across his beard. "Whew!"

"Evening, Pa."

"Mercy me, I thought I'd never get away from Ming tonight! Jodie, you know how your ma is some days. She lies there in that bed, thinking up a thousand things for a-body to do. Right at sundown she took a notion for me to fix all three lamps."

"Yes, sir, Pa. I know. Here, take your chair."

Grandpa eased himself down at the head of the table and hooked his walking stick on the back of his chair. Mama looked around the kitchen. She waited a minute for Wiley to slide back into his place and for Mierd and Irene to get quiet.

"Pa, will you return thanks?"

I wondered why Mama always asked Grandpa if he'd say grace. We all knew he would—three times a day. He never changed it a bit. I liked that 'cause I could remember every word.

We bowed our heads and squinted our eyes shut.

Merciful Father, smile on us;
Pardon our many sins;
Make us thankful for these
And all Thy favors,

We ask in the Redeemer's name.

Amen.

"Grandpa, guess what?" Wiley blurted out before we could even raise our heads.

"What?"

"I rode on it!"

"Naw!" Grandpa looked at Wiley as if he could hardly believe such a thing.

"Well! Now that's something to crow about!"

"Rode on what?" Irene asked.

"A automobile!"

"When did you ever ride a automobile?"

"Just this morning, up at Papa's store. All y'all just ought to 've seen me!"

"What was it like?"

"Irene, it was sorta like being in a buggy—only smoother and a whole lot faster! It was real, real fast!"

"Son, how'd you happen to get to ride?" Grandpa asked.

"Well, sir, that man said, 'Sonny Boy, you want to take a little spin?' I ain't 'Sonny Boy,' but I was dying to get on that thing, and Papa said I could. So, I did! He rode me all the way up to Doctor Elton's and Miss Maime's house and then wheeled around and brought me back to the store. We just went a-skimming along—like a bird!"

Wiley flung out his arms to show how a bird flies.

"Whoops!"

"Watch out, Wiley!" Mierd screeched. "Look what you've done! You've knocked over the syrup pitcher with one clumsy hand and Irene's buttermilk with the other!"

"Irene, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do it. Gee, it's running down all over your dress."

"That's all right."

Mama rubbed the spot on Irene's skirt with a damp cloth till it looked fine.

"What I'm waiting to hear is what make automobile that was," Grandpa said, turning to Papa. "It wasn't one of the Ford tin lizzies, was it, Jodie?"

"No, sir. It was a Chevrolet. It—"

"It was a 'Four Ninety'! That's what it was" Wiley hollered out. "It cost four hundred and ninety dollars!"

"Hold on now a minute, son. Don't interrupt when anybody's talking. 'Specially if it's somebody a good bit older than you are. We'll let you have your say in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir."

After that, Wiley seemed to really try to stay quiet. Papa went on talking.

"That automobile created quite a stir. Doctor Elton had walked down to the store, and I was out on the porch, talking to him. Old Black Idd was sitting there peddling his shoulder sack of parched peanuts. When that automobile pulled up nearly to the edge of the store porch, I thought Idd would fall outta his chair! I reckon it was the first automobile he'd ever seen so close.

"Well, the driver stepped down outta the thing and came up on the porch. Said his name was Hicks. I told him mine, and we shook hands. I made him acquainted with Doctor Elton. Then we passed the time of day. I figured he must be some of Ward's kinfolks, but he wasn't. You oughta've seen Ward. He was in his glory, all sweetness and light. He had this fellow Hicks thinking I was his best friend. Finally, Hicks got around to saying he was from off down in Louisiana somewhere— I forget the name of the place. He wanted to know if I had any gasoline for sale. 'Course I told him no, that I didn't have any calls for it. He said he figured he could make it to the next town with what gasoline was still in his tank. That was a real odd tank, Pa. Sorta oval shaped, and sitting up behind the seat. First one I've seen like that."

"Yeah, I noticed that tank myself."

"This Mister Hicks tried to explain a few things about his automobile to me and the doctor, but Ward kept running his big mouth. Then the crowd started gathering. After that, Hicks couldn't explain nothing."

"That's when I got there, wasn't it, Papa?"

"Yes, Wiley. And Old Man Hawk drove up about that time too. Mister Hansen was obliged to stop the gin, and Hal shut down the grist mill, 'cause every man and boy at both places had come rushing up the hill. They swarmed around that automobile like bees! Wes Bailey and his boys was the worst ones for questions. Then, soon as the man and Ward left, all three boys set in hounding Wes about getting a automobile himself!"

"What'd Wes say?" Grandpa asked.

"Wes just laughed. Finally he said, 'Well, boys, I got plenty of money and no poor kin! And I'm aiming to keep it that way.'"

Papa stopped talking long enough to pass the fried ham to Grandpa. Mama wanted me to eat some more, but I was too stuffed.

"Before everybody left the store I found out one thing I'd been suspecting all summer."

"What's that, Jodie?" Mama asked.

"Wes and Ward have had a big falling out and don't speak. They don't say 'Good morning,' 'Good evening,' 'Kiss my foot,' or nothing!"

"For goodness sakes!"

"'Course Wes claims it's the feud cropped up again."

"Feud? Jodie, folks don't have feuds nowadays."

"I know, Nannie. And it would take me the balance of the night here to explain what all Wes said, but years back they did have a bad feud through here between the Williamses and the Parkers. It's all over now, and most of them on both sides are long gone. But it turns out that Wes Bailey's ma was a Parker, and Ward's grandma was right smart kin to the Williamses. Or, that's how Wes claims him and Ward fell out. The real trouble between them may never be told."

Mierd and Irene began talking to each other about how stupid the three Bailey boys were at school and about all the silly, bad things Bud and the younger boy did.

I couldn't decide whether to listen to Irene telling what happened the day Jap Bailey slipped a dead frog into the schoolhouse spring, or whether to listen to Papa telling more about that automobile. But just then, Mierd said, "Come on, Irene. Let's go roll our hair," and they asked to be excused. She and Irene went flouncing out of the kitchen, both of them giggling again.

When I turned back around, Mama was talking to Wiley.

"If you're through eating, son, I want you to go draw a few buckets of water. We've got to put on some to heat for baths. Wish you'd bring in the foot tub so we can fill it and the kettle too."

"Mama, do I have to take a bath tonight? I ain't dirty."

"Wiley, it's Saturday night."

"But I bathed last Saturday."

"Son!"

Wiley went out the back door, fussing about how he hated Saturday nights. He let the screen door bang.

Papa and Grandpa didn't even hear the door slam; they were still talking about buying automobiles.

"Pa, you know what a loud mouth Ward is. He was telling everybody at the store this morning that he's sure gonna get him a automobile. 'Course didn't none of us believe him; that is, nobody except Old Mister Hawk. He got so mad I thought for a minute the old man would whack Ward over the head with his cane! I wouldn't have much cared if he had! I was thinking to myself: 'By hoakies, Ward Lawson, you red-headed coot, you'd better pay your debts before you start buying automobiles!'"

"I should say so."

"Doctor Elton must've been thinking about the same. He told me that during all those years the Lawsons lived over at Millers Crossing, Ward sent for him every time a young'un was born and never paid him a dime. 'Course the doctor just laughed it off. You know how he is."

"Yeah. Too easygoing. Got a heart in him big as a mule. Jodie, have you heard any more about Ward making you-know-what?"

"No, sir. Ned told me last week he still hadn't rigged up the still. And Doctor Elton says he didn't come across no signs last time he was over there to see Miss Dink. If Ward had had any mash fermenting, the doctor would've smelled it. But, I'm just waiting. I aim to call the Law, threats or no threats! Hal Goode laughed and told me if I had brains enough to carry me across the branch, I'd encourage Ward, help him make some money so he'd pay me what he owes!"

"You oughta've took a mortgage on Ward's mules last year, Jodie. That's what other storekeepers do when they're furnishing a man. Then in the fall, if the man won't pay up, they foreclose and get a little of their money back. You're too trusting."

"I know, Pa. Trouble is, if you take a man's mule, come the next spring he can't make a crop! And you never would collect."

"Well, have it your way. What happened this morning that made Hawk Lumpkin so mad at Ward?"

"It was what Ward said about the road. You see, Old Man Hawk had come riding up in that one-horse wagon of his pretty soon after the automobile stopped. He was mad and just a-ranting. I couldn't tell at first if he was talking to his mule or to himself."

"Probably both, if I know Hawk. He thinks more of that old gray mule than he does of his wife! Why, he's had that old bag of bones thirty years!"

Papa laughed.

"The mule, Jodie! Not the wife!" Grandpa laughed too. "What was Hawk raving about?"

"He was grumbling that a man and his mule ain't safe on the road no more. He said that all them dad-burned automobiles come tearing through—'course 'dad-burned' wasn't exactly the word he used—trying to run a-body in the ditch and scaring the living daylights outta you."

"That's Hawk for you, all right. He hates automobiles."

"A few minutes later, when this Hicks man said something to Hal Goode about the stretch of road between Union and Drake Eye Springs being narrow and rough as a washboard, I thought Old Man Hawk would explode!

"'Oh,' he said, 'you town fellers figger we ain't got a blessed thing to do but get out and drag the roads nice and smooth for you!'"

"That set Hicks back on his heels. Ward, though, piped up, 'Why, Mister Hawk, when I get me my automobile, I'm gonna be countin' on you to help lay down a plank road 'fore winter rains set in. Rocky Head Bottom gets powerful muddy!'

"Pa, that sent Old Man Hawk into such a rage he nearly swallowed his chewing tobacco!"

"I'm here to tell you, Jodie, Ward Lawson had better not tangle with Hawk! Get him riled, and there's no telling what he's liable to do. If Ward was to buy himself a car, Hawk would as soon burn it up as to look at it!"

Chapter 4

In September Drake Eye Springs School started again, this time with a new teacher named Mister Shepherd.

Mierd and Wiley both got new book sacks. I begged the grownups to get me a book sack and let me go. I could say my ABC's and count all the way to a hundred! But Mama said I wasn't old enough to start to school, Papa said my legs weren't long enough, and Grandpa Thad said I still had to eat a lot more baked sweet 'taters.

Shoogie couldn't come any day to play with me because she had to go to Sweet Beulah School. Her legs were already real long. So I played by myself. Sometimes Mama and I kept the store while Papa went to town. That was fun to me, but Mama didn't like it.

"I wasn't cut out to be a storekeeper, Bandershanks, and I'll sure be glad when Papa gets his shelves stocked."

"How come Papa goes and goes to town, Mama?"

"He's got to buy his winter goods before bad weather sets in. Once the rains start, the roads get so muddy wagons bog down. But Papa will soon be through. He's got one more haul to make—next Monday."

When Monday came, Papa and Mama got up while it was still night. They didn't wake Mierd or Wiley or me. But when I smelled the ham Mama was frying for Papa's breakfast, I woke anyway.

I slid out of bed and tiptoed into the kitchen.

"Bandershanks! What're you doing up? It's not even three o'clock yet."

"I'm hungry, Papa."

"Here, get one of these biscuits and go back to bed."

"Mama, can I take Trixie a biscuit?"

"Child, dogs don't want biscuits this time of night."

"Trixie's done woke up. I heard her out on the front porch, moaning just like Mierd does when she's dreaming bad dreams."

"Well, take her this'n. Then you crawl back in bed and dream yourself some sweet dreams, little gal!"

Just as I squatted down by Trixie to give her the biscuit, I heard somebody shooting firecrackers—or guns—way off up the road. Trixie jumped up. She growled and lay back down. She sniffed the biscuit but wouldn't eat it. I heard some more loud bangs. Trixie heard them too and started barking. Then I noticed the sky was glowing—like the sun was coming up. It couldn't be the sun; I knew that.

I ran back to the kitchen.

"Papa, come see! It's a big, big light!"

Papa set down his coffee cup.

"Where's any light?"

"Up in the sky. And somebody's shooting firecrackers! There they go again! Hear them?"

"Yeah!"

Papa and Mama ran with me out to the far end of the porch.

"Lord, Nannie, that's a big fire! Up about the store!"

"Looks like it's far enough away to be Doctor Elton's house, don't you think?"

"Maybe. Whatever it is, it's burning down! I'm gonna go see!"

"I'll go with you, Jodie."

"Me too, Papa!"

"Y'all hurry, Nannie. Wake Mierd and Wiley while I hitch up the wagon. Just let them come on in their night clothes!"

The light from the fire kept getting brighter and brighter. By the time we had splashed across the branch and reached the next rise we could see the huge blaze, already up higher than the trees.

Papa kept jerking on the reins, trying to make Belle and Puddin' Foot trot faster.

"Nannie, you think it might be Hal's grist mill?"

"Yeah. Or, it could be the cotton gin. Mister Hansen's got lots of cotton stored there."

"Cotton don't burn as fast as that fire's going. It's blazing like an old house made out of heart pine."

Papa gave the mules another slap with the lines.

"Jodie, what if it's the church? Who was supposed to tend the heater last night after services?"

"Wallace Goode and Wiley. Son, did y'all douse it good with water like we've always told you to do?"

"Yes, sir. Me and Wallace drowned it slap out! Say, maybe it's the schoolhouse, and we won't have to go to school no more!"

"Son! You oughtn't to say such a thing!"

"I didn't mean it, Papa."

We wheeled around the last big curve in the road and began climbing the high hill between us and the fire. Just as soon as the mules could pull our wagon to the top, we'd see what was burning up.

For a minute I wondered why nobody had said it might be Papa's store. Then I knew. It was his store, and they all knew it.

"Papa?"

"Yeah, Bandershanks?"

"I wish it ain't your store, Papa."

"Yeah, sugar, I know. Great Jehoshaphat and gully dirt! Look at that! Nannie, look!"

We all saw it. Not the store—it was done swallowed up. The huge blaze shooting up was as high as stores and stores stacked on top of each other and getting higher all the time! Wild flames, roaring and leaping, were trying to climb to the clouds and set them on fire!

"Oh, Nannie, our lifetime of work, going up in smoke!"

The wind was blowing smoke toward us, and already we could feel the heat. As we got closer, more and more sparks and cinders came flying in the air.

"Jodie, yonder's a whole bunch of men!"

"Where?"

"Backed up there between the fire and the schoolhouse branch."

"Yeah, I see them now. They've been trying to put it out for us! Nannie, it won't be safe for y'all to go any closer. I'll stop the wagon here at the gin. Now, you young'uns stay with your mama."

"Jodie, it's too late to do a thing! Don't you go up close! All them cartons of shotgun shells could go off."

"They've done exploded. That's what Bandershanks heard. Nannie, I've gotta go close enough to see if I can tell how and where that low-down fool set the fire."

"What'd you say, Papa?"

"Nothing of any consequence, son. You hitch the mules for me. Here, hold the reins."

Papa leaped from the wagon and ran up the slope, straight toward the fire.

"Take care, Jodie!"

"Mama, soon's I hitch the mules, lem'me go find out what it looks like on the other side! I ain't never seen such a fire in my whole life! I'll run way around. I won't get no closer'n we are right now."

"Lemme go too, Mama."

"If Mierd goes, can I go, Mama?"

"Now, now, children, Papa said for y'all to stay with me. I tell you what we'll do. I'll walk with you, and we'll make our way up toward the schoolhouse spring. But now y'all have got to keep close to me and close to the branch."

"Hot diggity! Come on!"

"Mama?"

"What, Mierd?"

"How come the fire just keeps on and on burning so terrible?"

"For one thing, the timbers in the store are pine, heart pine, full of fat—even the shingles on the roof. Besides, the shelves were stocked full of Christmas goods—things that burn easy. And, there's all that coal oil, and cloth—just everything."

"Mama, all our candy's burning up!"

"Yeah, Bandershanks. I guess it is. Don't cry, hon!"

"Hot diggity! Yonder's Wallace Goode! Mama, see Wallace standing up there with all the men? Lemme go where he's at!"

"Just for a minute, son. Then you come straight back."

Mierd and I wanted to go see Wallace too, but Mama wouldn't let us. Wiley came streaking back, Wallace with him.

"Mama, Wallace was one of the first ones here, and him and Mister Goode and all of 'em poured on lots of water, but it was too far gone!"

"Yes'm, Miss Nannie. Doctor Elton, he was the first one who seen it, and me and Papa was next. Doctor Elton woke up smelling smoke. Soon's he run out in his yard and looked down this way, he seen 'zactly what it was. He got on the phone and started calling. But the phone, it went dead 'fore he could get y'all 'cause the line going past the store melted in two!"

"Mama, you know what Mister Goode thinks?" Wiley asked. "He says somebody set Papa's store afire. Poured on coal oil!"

"Well, son, we—"

"Doctor Elton says so too, Miss Nannie! He figures somebody built a blaze under the porch first 'cause that porch was slam gone when we all got here."

"Yeah, Mama, and the back west corner was already blazing sky high too!"

"On top of that, Miss Nannie, we found rags and a soda pop bottle that smelled just like coal oil. Papa's done give 'em to Mister Jodie! And he's gonna take 'em straight to town and show both of 'em to the Law!"

"Come on, Wallace, let's run back up yonder where the men are at! Mama, can I go?"

"I reckon so."

We walked up a little closer to the fire, too. The flames weren't so high any more, but the whole hill was terribly hot. Mama said the fire would die down and that by daylight there wouldn't be a thing left but red-hot ashes.

"Ouch! Ouch! Oh, my foot!"

I had stepped on something.

"Mama?"

"What on earth, Bandershanks?"

"It's sticking in my heel. Oh!"

"I declare to my soul! Lemme see."

"Don't pull it out Mama! It'll hurt worsen! Please! Please!"

"Mercy sakes, you've stepped on a horseshoe with two nails still in it!"

"What'll we do, Mama?"

"Pull it out and get you home so we can soak your foot in coal oil, that's what."

"No'm! Please don't!"

"Bandershanks, when you step on a rusty nail, you've got to get it out and soak your foot in coal oil right away. Otherwise, you're liable to take the lockjaw. Mierd, run see if you can find Papa. Tell him Bandershanks hurt her foot and that I'll have to take her home. On second thought, you stay with her, and I'll go tell him."

Mama gave the horseshoe a quick jerk.

I screeched. But not loud.

Later, while Mama had me sitting on our kitchen doorstep soaking my foot, I got to thinking what strange stuff coal oil is. You put it in lamps. You can stop a mean man from fighting with it. You can burn down stores with it. You have to use it to doctor sore feet. It's funny stuff.

In the days that came next, nobody paid me and my sore foot much attention. Papa didn't have time. He said he had to go to town and do lots of things.

He didn't even have time to explain to me what he meant about "a plain case of arson," and "just circumstantial evidence that wouldn't stand up in court," and about the Law giving him some kind of run-around. He explained it all to Mama, though. He told her that Ward laughed in his face, and that Doctor Elton said later that a man who drank himself into a stupor all the time was plain sick.

One night I overheard Papa telling Mama, "This is one time I almost wish I wasn't a deacon and that I didn't believe what the Bible says about not paying back evil for evil."

"I know, Jodie. It's hard, but the only way to live is by the Bible. And it teaches, 'Recompense to no man evil for evil.'"

"Nannie, I'm holding my breath for fear of what the benighted fool will do next."

"I declare, Jodie, you're gonna wear out the soles of your boots pacing the floor! Please sit down. He can't harm the child, or any of us—not with us and everybody else in the settlement watching."

In a few more weeks, after Papa got the carpenters started on building the new store, he quit pacing the floor every night.

And when the store was finished, Papa helped me draw two pictures of it to send off in the mail to my big brothers, who just kept on staying in the army.

Clyde wrote back that he was keeping his picture in a knapsack. Walker wrote that he was going to take his with him all the way to France. He didn't say when he was going or how long he might stay, and Mama almost cried.

The very next day—right in the middle of a tea party I was having with my doll and Mierd's old cat Nero—I heard Mama laughing and crying, all at the same time! I hid the tea cakes from Nero and ran to see about Mama. She was talking on the phone to Papa and whispered to me what it was about.

I ran quick to tell Grandma Ming.

"Grandma! Grandma! Kaiser Bill ain't gonna cut off my hands! Yours neither!" I was fairly yelling as I dashed into Grandma Ming's house and up to the side of her bed.

"Bandershanks, baby, what in this round world are you talking about?"

"The phone ringed, and Mama was just a-laughing and a-crying and couldn't hardly talk! I asked her, 'What's the matter?' And she said, 'The war's over!' I said, 'Is the old Kaiser coming?' And Mama said, 'O Lord, no!'" I stopped a minute to catch my breath. "So, Grandma, Kaiser Bill ain't coming! He ain't gonna cross the ocean to cut off little kids' and old women's arms and legs!"

Grandma didn't say a word.

"Ain't you glad, Grandma?"

She just sat up in bed a little bit straighter and went on knitting and knitting, and her needles went on clicking and clicking. She looked at me over the gold rims of her eyeglasses. Then, all of a sudden, Grandma threw down her knitting and started calling Grandpa Thad as loud as she could holler!

"Thad! Thad! Oh, Thad!"

He didn't answer.

"Baby, run fast and find your grandpa! Tell him to make haste and com'ere!"

I darted through the kitchen, out the back door, and was at the yard gate when I almost ran smack into both Grandpa Thad and Mama. They were walking so fast and talking so fast they didn't notice me.

"Ming! It's over! The war's over! They signed the Armistice!"

"Glory be!" Grandma cried, raising her arms up high and letting her hands fall back down on the bed covers and counterpane. "Glory be! Our boys will come home! Thank God! They'll come back! Thank God!"

Tears were running out of Grandma's eyes, and she kept waving her arms and crying, "Glory be! Glory be!" She was shouting at first; then the "glories" got softer and softer, till she was just whispering them.

Grandpa was trying to tell Grandma something else, but I couldn't understand him because Mama was talking too.

"Jodie told me the Armistice means the war's ended for good! The shooting has all been stopped! I reckon somebody must've called out to the store from town. I just didn't think to ask how he found out. All I could think about was our boys. I asked when they'd be coming back, and he said, 'Soon, Nannie. Real soon, I hope!' He told me to run tell y'all. And he was gonna phone everybody on the line. Said folks all over the country are already celebrating and having parades and blowing horns and ringing bells!"

"God knows it's a day to ring the bells! Eh, Ming?" Grandpa looked over toward Grandma and me.

By this time she was lying back, half buried in the pile of cushions and feather pillows and the long bolster she kept on her bed in the daytime. I had crawled up on the foot of her bed and was turning her ball of knitting yarn over and over, unrolling the thick gray thread and then rolling it back up again. I wanted to hold the needles, but I was afraid I'd let them slip and drop a stitch. Grandma always fussed when I dropped her stitches.

"I should say so, Thad! It's a day to ring all bells! When the baby, here, came running in saying something about that wicked German Kaiser, I didn't know for a minute what to make of it. I'd clean forgot the wild tales Dink told. My! My! I'm so glad I could shout!"

Mama sat down then in one of the high-back padded rockers and rocked a long time, easy and slow, while she and Grandma and Grandpa told one another all they knew about the World War and that Armistice thing somebody had signed at exactly eleven o'clock.

Mama said the Armistice was an answer to prayer. Grandma Ming said she was powerful proud the Germans could tell the jig was up. Grandpa said, "Foot dool! Them German generals saw the handwriting on the wall the day our soldiers set foot in France!"

Soon Mama got up. "Come on, Bandershanks, let's go home. We've got to start getting ready! Walker and Clyde may be coming home before we can get a thing done!" Mama picked me up and squeezed me. "They won't even know you, gal! You've got so big! Pa, I'll let you and Ma know if I hear any more from Jodie."

Mama didn't put me down till we got out to our front porch. Then she let me slide to the top doorstep, and she sank down on the plank beside me.

"Mama, what're we gonna do?"

"Well, tomorrow I'll send for Doanie and Bett to come sweep the yard from front to back. They'll have to have new dogwood brush brooms. And just before your big brothers get in, I'll have Huldie up here helping me bake plenty of cakes and pies."

"Mama?"

"Yes?"

"When we get to Heaven, can we have cake and pie every day?"

"Why, I don't know! Maybe! It's gonna be sorta like Heaven right here when Clyde and Walker come home. But, my, I've got work ahead. I'll have to catch a dozen or so young pullets and roosters and coop them up to fatten. We'll need piles of fried chicken. I hope your papa will have Black Idd get a good-sized shoat ready to butcher so I'll have fresh hams to boil. Or, if it would just turn cold enough, we could have hog killing."

Mama sounded like she was talking to herself, not me, but I didn't stop her.

"I've got a quilt in the frame that's simply got to be finished and put away. I always did hate to see a half-finished quilt hanging up against the ceiling. That makes me think; I'd better set up another bed in the far side room. That floor's got to be scrubbed first, though. This porch and all these old floors need a good going over with sand and lye."

"Mama, what's for me to do?"

"I'll think of something." Mama looked out across the yard toward the grove of black walnut trees in front of our house and at the ones growing by the barns and wagon shelter. The trees were nearly naked. They still had a handful of brown and yellow leaves flipping in the wind, but all their walnuts were lying on the ground, their thick green hulls already shriveling up and turning from green to black.

"I know the very thing, Bandershanks. You can pick up walnuts. We'll make some chocolate candy with—"

"Mama, look coming! Yonder's Mierd and Wiley! What're they running for?"

"My sakes! Mister Shepherd must've turned school out early!"

"Mama! Guess what! School's out! We're getting a holiday!" Wiley yelled, long before he and Mierd got to the gate. "Teacher said we ought'a celebrate stopping the war! November 'leven's gonna be a big day to remember! Always!"

"Yeah, Mama!" Mierd hollered. "Mister Shepherd said they'll put it in the history book! But he assigned us so much arithmetic it ain't gonna be no holiday a-tall! Me and Wiley'll be up till midnight!"

"Maybe not."

"Mama, I gotta run tell Grandpa the war's over! He won't have to save no more peach seeds!"

"Son, he knows it. Your papa phoned us the news just a few minutes ago."

"Peach seeds? What's Grandpa and peach seeds got to do with the Armistice?"

"Good grannies, Mierd, you heard Grandpa talking 'bout saving 'em not long ago. The Government wanted folks to all start saving up peach seeds and nut hulls for the soldiers."

"Are you crazy, Wiley?"

"No, silly. They was gonna use seeds to get carbon for them gas masks—that's what soldiers wear on the front line."

Mierd didn't seem very much bothered about things soldiers put over their heads. She dumped her school books and dinner bucket on the edge of the porch and went off to play in the yard.

Most nights, after supper, Papa sat by the fire and counted his store money. But that night, when I got into the fireplace room, I saw his striped money sack was still hanging over the back of his chair. Papa was sitting there in his rocker, frowning and looking into the fire. So I knew he was thinking about Mister Ward.

Mama had told Papa a hundred times to quit thinking of that man, but Papa said that was impossible.

Mierd and Wiley were at their study table in the corner, but they surely weren't studying. They didn't even have their books out. Wiley was trying to make a new slingshot out of a forked stick and an old leather shoe tongue; all Mierd was doing was holding her cat in her lap. Nero liked that. He was purring and purring as Mierd stroked his slick, yellow fur. Wiley flipped his slingshot over toward Nero's tail.

"Don't you hurt Nero!"

"Mierd, your old cat sounds like a pea thrasher!"

"Nero does not sound like a pea thrasher! Do you, kitty?"

"He sounds worse!"

"Now, now," Papa told both of them. "Y'all get to your school books. Bandershanks, you come here."

"Papa, we gonna count money?"

"No need to tonight, hon. I didn't take in much today. Folks was so carried away over the Armistice news they didn't buy."

"Not nothing?"

"Well, your Aunt Vic did send Jim-Bo to get a sack of flour, and Old Mister Hawk was in as usual for his plug of tobacco. Otherwise, I sold very little today. Here, let's get your heels warmed up so you can crawl in the bed. My goodness, this is a mighty long nightgown you've got on tonight."

"It's a new one."

I was just crawling up on Papa's knees when Mama came in from the kitchen.

"Bandershanks! Shoo, shoo, to bed! It's time all chickens were on the roost!"

"I ain't no chicken, Mama!"

"Yes. You're a chicken. Mine and Papa's littlest chicken, not even feathered out yet!"

She led me back to one of the double beds in the far end of the fireplace room.

"I ain't sleepy, Mama."

"You don't have to go to sleep. Just lie down and rest. I aim to work on my quilt for a few minutes while Mierd and Wiley finish their lessons. Then we'll all get off to sleep."

"Mama, lem'me get in yours and Papa's bed."

"Not tonight." Mama turned down the covers.

"Just for a little while?"

"No, no. You're supposed to sleep with Mierd."

I climbed in while Mama was fluffing up my pillow. "Remember your prayer."

"I will, Mama."

Papa and Mama watched the fire and talked for a long time—about a letter from my married sister Gertie, and about Clyde and Walker finally coming home from the war.

Papa said, "You know, Nannie, I'm in hopes Walker will stay on here at home and plant a crop, come spring."

"Me too. It'd be a sad mistake for him and his wife to settle in town and him take up public work."

"Yeah. Working for the other fellow's no good. Besides, town ain't a fit place to live—folks all crowded together! A man needs room for his own shade tree if he's to stand the heat of the day."

"Trouble is, you can't tell young folks nothing. They've got to find out things for themselves."

Papa was quiet for a while. Then he said, "Nannie, I wasn't aiming to tell you, but I reckon I'd better."

"What, Jodie?"

"Our friend is in business now!"

"Where you reckon he got the money?"

"Beats me. You know, he's made a batch and hauled it off in the middle of the night."

By that, I knew Papa was telling Mama that Mister Goode or somebody had cooked a batch of ribbon cane syrup in the nighttime instead of the daytime. I never cared a thing about syrup, except when it was poured on a hot biscuit or batter-cakes, so I turned my face toward the wall and snuggled farther down under the covers.

"Ned told me, Nannie," Papa said. "That poor Negro is scared to death of Ward! He was sitting there on my store porch, shaking, when I got there this morning."

"What'd Ned say?"

"You remember this fellow Hicks that drove his automobile through here a while back?"

"Yeah. That was the only automobile we saw the whole summer."

"Ned told me he came riding up on that automobile and got the whiskey around midnight last night, and Ward went off with him."

"Did Ned actually see them?"

"They had him and his boys loading the kegs and jugs into the automobile. This man Hicks didn't say a word to Ned, but Ward threatened him again."

"You've been waiting for proof on the still. Now you've got it. But, Jodie, please don't turn him in! I'm scared for you to go to the Law!"

"I won't report him—not just yet. Doctor Elton talked me into waiting. He figures if we called the Law and they came out and busted up the still, all the commotion of Ward getting arrested might make Ophelia lose her baby."

"It probably would. Her time's about up, and she looks so bad-all hollow-eyed and blotchy-faced."

"Yeah. The doctor says he's worried about her this time. Me and him both figure Ward's just a big enough fool to get in a drunken rage and kill Ned. So, we're gonna wait till the baby's born and Ned moves. He's decided to start looking for another place."

"You're not thinking of taking Ned, are you, Jodie?"

"No. He's a good worker, but I'd have to build him a house, and I'm just not in shape for that this year. I did promise him I'd speak to Roy Taylor, down on State Line Road."

"Jodie, who all knows about Ward's still?"

"Nobody except us, Doctor Elton, and the Goodes. And we told the new schoolteacher. He's a fine man, Nannie."

"Seems to be."

"Evidently Wes Bailey hasn't got wind of it yet. Old Man Hawk don't know it either, or he would've done had Ward in jail."

Chapter 5

Late Sunday afternoon a bunch of men—Wallace Goode's papa, Doctor Elton, Mr. Shepherd, the new schoolteacher, and Uncle Dan, and others besides—came to talk to Papa about something bad, something none of them liked. But exactly what, I couldn't find out. Mister Goode said it would rile a rattlesnake. Whatever it was had happened Saturday night over at Mister Goode's house—long after he had gone to bed and while Mrs. Goode was sitting by the window brushing her hair.

All the men had solemn looks on their faces. And when the doctor said, "Maybe we ought'a get him out of the settlement before somebody kills him," the deep lines on Papa's forehead got deeper, and he took all the men into our front room and closed the door.

Before Wiley or Mierd or I could ask Mama why half the men in Drake Eye Springs had come and what they were going to do, Mama told Wiley to go chop wood. "And Mierd, you take Bandershanks over to Grandpa's house and stay there till I call you."

Mama started shooin' Mierd and me out through the hall toward the front porch, while Wiley ran on ahead. Even though the door to the front room was shut tight, we could hear all the men talking, Mister Goode louder than the rest. "If he tries to come in on my wife again, I'll shoot to kill!" Grabbing my hand and Mierd's, Mama started pulling us along.

"Girls, hurry!"

At the porch steps we met Wiley running back.

"Mama, Ned's out yonder at the gate. That little humped-over Stray, too. See them?"

Both Ned and Stray were astraddle of the donkey.

"Find out what they want, son."

"Ned's come to get Doctor Elton! I don't know who's bad off sick. He just said Miss Dink sent him. Said Mister Ward ain't to home, and something about Miss Ophelia's time coming."

"What time, Mama?"

"Never mind, Bandershanks. You girls scoot on out to Grandpa's, like I told you! I'll go tell the doctor. Wiley, get on to the woodpile. I declare to my soul!" Mama hurried back up the hall, muttering something that sounded like "Demented fool, climbing in windows—worse—his poor wife home in labor."

Mierd wasn't listening. She had stooped over to tie her shoelace. "Come on, Bandershanks. Let's skip to Grandpa's doorsteps! Betcha I can beat you there!"

"Mierd, what's labor?"

"Just another word for work. Come on! Good grannies, you don't know how to skip worth a hoot!"

"I do, too! Watch me!"

Instead of going on into Grandpa Thad's house, we sat down on the doorsteps to watch Ned and Little Stray and their droopy-eared donkey. Stray was still up on the donkey's back. Ned was standing by him, holding the bridle. Mierd thought Ned must be waiting to get to talk to the doctor.

Just then we saw Doctor Elton come out, walking as fast as he could move his stiff, stubby legs. His pants cuffs flapped against his shoe tops, and Mierd said he reminded her of a pepper shaker bobbling along. He jammed his hat on his head, said something to Ned, then got in his buggy and drove off.

Ned climbed on the donkey—in front of Stray—and let the animal amble back down the hill, following in the ruts made by Doctor Elton's buggy. Ned's feet almost dragged on the ground, but Little Stray's crooked legs didn't dangle down much farther than the donkey's tail.

Soon the doctor's black mares and buggy were out of sight, but not Ned and Stray and their donkey. We could see them for a long time.

On Monday afternoon, Mama and I went to the church to Missionary Society. While Mama was hitching Dale to our oak tree, I ran on inside.

The church was damp and dark, the benches all empty. "Mama, ain't nobody in here!"

"We're early, hon. Missionary Society is not supposed to start till three o'clock. Let's kindle a fire while we wait for all the ladies."

"Is Aunt Vic gonna bring Ginger?"

"I imagine so. She takes that little feist dog with her everywhere she goes."

"Does Ginger like church?"

"He should by this time." Mama put her satchel and her Bible and the other book down on the front bench and took off her gloves. I walked on over to the heater.

"I'm shivering, Mama."

"You'll get warm in a little while. Aw, I bet there's not a piece of kindling in this wood box!"

There wasn't, but Mama found some old wadded-up newspapers and a few splinters down in one corner. She piled them into the heater and then started stripping crusty hunks of pine bark from the logs in the box.

"Mama, look! A black grasshopper!"

"Where?"

"There he goes! He just jumped off that bark. Here he is! On the floor! See?" I grabbed at him, but he jumped again.

"Bandershanks, that's not a grasshopper. That's just a cricket!"

"Can I have him?"

"Sure, if you can catch him."

I got down on hands and knees and started crawling toward the cricket; but just as I reached out to get him, he leaped toward the side of the pump organ. I eased up a little closer and grabbed again! That just made him jump again, and this time he landed right at the pedals of the organ.

"Mama, come get him!"

My yelling out must have scared the cricket. Before Mama could even answer, he disappeared under the organ. I stretched out flat on my stomach and tried to see where he was hiding. I even felt along the carpet as far as I could reach up under the foot pedals. I couldn't feel a thing but sand and grit.

I lay real still, thinking maybe the cricket would come back out. But I finally decided he was just sitting real still, thinking maybe I would go away.

"I brought both letters with me, Nannie."

I wheeled over and jumped up! I hadn't heard Aunt Vic and Aunt Lovie come in. But there they sat by the heater with Mama. It was Aunt Vic who was talking about letters. Ginger had come with her, all right. He was already curled up on the end of the front bench.

"Vic, what did Cuddin Lucy write?" Mama asked.

"Not too much—just about Uncle Lige dying. I'll read y'all her letter and Pa's too, if you think we've got time."

"It's turning off so cold, y'all reckon anybody else will come?" Aunt Lovie asked. "We may have plenty of time."

"I know Miss Maime won't be here," Mama told my aunts. "She went with Doctor Elton back over to see about Ophelia this morning."

"Ophelia. Has her baby—"

"It was born late yesterday evening. I thought you'd heard about it, Vic."

"No."

"It's another boy. That makes six boys and three girls for Ophelia and Ward."

"Has this one got kinky red hair?"

"Yes. He's Ward made over, the doctor told Jodie."

"Is Ophelia getting on all right?"

"Miss Maime said she thought she'd be all right. The baby's a fine big thing. Weighed nine pounds! And not a blemish on him."

"Nannie, tell Vic what that loon Ward did Saturday night."

"Maybe you've already heard, Vic. I know you have if you've seen Verdie Goode."

"No. What now?"

"I won't go into any details on account of little pitchers with big ears. Just keep your windows bolted down at night. Verdie got the scare of her life. Hal was home, of course, and he got his gun and shot up in the air. That scared him away."

"For pity sakes!"

"Men in the settlement met at our house yesterday evening, but Doctor Elton had to leave before they decided just what to do."

Mama and my aunts were forever talking so I couldn't understand. Almost every time they got together one of them would mention "a little pitcher with big ears." They'd never tell me where the pitcher was. Finally, I quit asking.

"Is Verdie coming this evening?"

"She can't," Aunt Lovie said. "They've got company from town, so she sent word to get me to take the minutes. 'Course Lida Belle Bailey won't be here either. She never does meet with us any more. Do y'all realize that woman hasn't put her foot in this church in over three months? I think the whole Bailey family ought to be brought before the congregation, myself. If they're not gonna attend services, we ought to 'whop 'em out,' as the saying is."

"Well, Lovie," Mama told my older aunt, "I found out why Lida Belle won't come to Missionary Society. She's afraid we'll call on her to read."

"Read?"

"She don't know how!"

"For goodness sakes! I knew Wes never went to school a day in his life. That's what worried me and Dan both when he got elected Justice of the Peace. But I figured surely Lida Belle had had some schooling. Y'all reckon that's how come all their boys are so backward in their books?"

"Yes," Aunt Vic said, "Mister Shepherd told me yesterday, when we started getting up the Christmas program, that the boys don't get any help at home. Mister Shepherd thought it was a wonder the three of them ever learned their letters."

Aunt Lovie got up and moved closer to the heater. "Nannie, did you know that Lida Belle and Wes have let Addie Mae quit school and go off down in Louisiana?" Aunt Lovie always knew everything about everybody, especially if it was sort of bad.

"Yes, Lovie. Wes was telling Jodie that his aunt begged them to let her come and spend a while."

"That's what Lida Belle and Wes are saying, but I bet, there's more to it than that! Y'all just wait and see!"

"Well, goodness," Mama said, "let's don't sit here all evening talking about the Baileys and their problems. And Ward Lawson! Pa always said church is the place to talk up the good—not the bad." Mama poked 'nother piece of wood into the heater. "Vic, read us the letters!"

Aunt Vic opened her satchel and took out a thick envelope and her eyeglasses. "Speaking of the bad, I didn't know till I read this letter from Pa that he ever knew that sorry Ward's daddy. But he did. He preached the old man's funeral!"

"Mama, when're you—"

"Bandershanks, hon, you sit still and be quiet. Aunt Vic's gonna read us a letter from our Alabama cousin and one your Grandpa Dave wrote years ago—before you were even born. Vic, when was Pa's letter dated?"

"He wrote it May 7, 1903, just seven weeks to the day before he died. Let's see—Cuddin Lucy headed her letter: 'New Springs, Alabama, November 6, 1918.'" Aunt Vic flattened the pages and began to read.

My dear Cousins Victoria, Lovonia, and Nantelle,

It is my sad duty to inform you that my beloved father—your Uncle Elijah—passed to his reward some ten days ago. We children have naturally been grief-stricken, but we thank God that He saw fit to take Pa away without pain or a lingering illness.

He breathed his last, peacefully. And on last Sunday, we laid him to rest beside Mama in the graveyard at New Springs Church, where he had been a member over sixty-one years.

This week when we went through Pa's personal effects, we found a lengthy letter, the last one he had received from your own dear father. It must have been written just shortly before Uncle Dave's death. So I am sending it back to you all, knowing you will treasure it. Parts of the letter are so unusual that I made a copy for my own children to have in years to come.

I have always regretted that I never knew your father. I still have hopes that someday I will have the pleasure of meeting all of you kind kinspeople in Arkansas. Would that the distance between us were not so great.

Aunt Vic took off her eyeglasses and rubbed her eyes. "And then Cuddin Lucy just goes on to describe Uncle Lige's funeral, and she mentions a lot of our relatives back there—most of them folks I've never heard of. Here, Nannie, you read Pa's letter."

Mama took the yellowed, brittle pages. They rattled as she unfolded them. She said, "It's in Pa's hand, all right." Then Mama began to read very slowly.

My dear brother Elijah,

How good it was to hear from you once more. Through the years your letters have meant more to me than you can ever know, Lige. This time, please overlook my delay in answering. When I relate how matters now stand, you can understand why I did not reply by return post.

A great thing has happened to me: *God has offered me death. And I have accepted!*

Please do not grieve, Lige. This, the end of it all for me, is all right. True, it is a solemn thing to lie for days on one's deathbed, waiting, waiting, not

knowing the day nor the hour of the last breath. But that too has come to seem only evidence of mercy, part of my cup from the Lord's right hand.

When the time does come, it will suffice if a kind eulogist will say for me, as one said for Grant, "Let his faults ... be writ in water."

Lige, my condition came about slowly. I felt poorly all last fall and winter. For something like six months I had been drained of all my vigor and former energy. I just seemed like a jaded horse.

I thought surely, though, I'd soon get my second wind. So I went on about my pastoring. Each Saturday and Sunday, and often on Mondays, I rode miles in my two-horse buggy as I went to preach at my four churches over the county. This taxed my strength, so much so that I was always tired. And during these months it seemed I was called on to hold twice as many burials and weddings as common.

Then one Sunday in early February, as I was conducting an evening service at Shiloh, a strange and beautiful thing occurred. It was about three o'clock.

I turned the pages of the pulpit Bible to the thirty-ninth chapter of the Book of Psalms. I was planning to take my text from the sixth verse, which says, "Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them."

It was my intent to preach on the theme that one is foolish to lay up worldly goods. I decided, though, to read the entire Psalm to the congregation before I started my discourse.

I started reading, distinctly and in measured tones, so that all in the house could hear every word. And all were listening attentively as I gave it, verse by verse, with stress on the phrases which I planned to expound upon.

Then, I reached these lines:

Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am.

My voice faltered, failed.

There came a rustle and swish, as of a strong breeze sweeping through the church. It swirled around me and the pulpit like a benign whirlwind, slowing itself almost to a halt. I lifted my eyes from the Bible, and there before me was God's angel of death, hovering near—so near that his soft outspread wings brushed my shoulders. He came closer. Gently he folded me within ethereal wings and gathered me to his bosom. He bore me high and far away, into the presence of Almighty God, making for me a moment of ecstasy and inexplicable joy!

Quickly, the angel was gone, God was gone, and I was again standing in the pulpit, shaken and amazed. A tremor passed through my whole being, and I had to grasp the top of the stand until I could recover my normal sight and senses.

God had shown me my time would come soon. He had held out death to me and made me see it could mean being in eternal bliss. How wonderful! But this feeling of exhilaration and joyous peace vanished as swiftly as had the celestial being. Terrorizing fear engulfed me!

I managed to continue reading. However, the lines were no longer a song of David, the Israelite King. They turned into my own piteous lament. I kept on saying the phrases, but by the time I reached the final verse, I was not reading. I was crying out to my God, *"O spare me, that I may recover strength, before I go hence, and be no more!"*

How I got through the remainder of the service, I will never know. Later I could not recall a single word I had spoken. After the benediction, one of the elderly brethren came up to me and shook my hand.

"Brother Dave," he said, "that was the finest sermon you ever preached!"

He didn't know it was my last.

I spent the night at that kind old gentleman's house. Next morning as I drove my buggy toward home, I let my team find the way by habit rather than by my direction. They went up and down the little hills and through the sand beds at slow pace. Eventually I tied their lines to the dashboard so that I could give full attention to searching the Scriptures. I needed solace for my very soul.

As I thumbed through the pages of my Bible there welled up in my memory all the passages I usually read to the bereaved at a graveside. These brought small comfort. None, in fact. I wondered that I had ever thought such Scriptures could, in themselves, console.

I searched for other promises but could find not one to blot out my bitter regret and remorse.

Faces of the dear people in my churches came before me. I thought of the Sundays I had stood in the pulpit at Millers Crossing and at Shiloh, here at Drake Eye Springs, and at all my other churches and of how I had spoken softly and shouted loudly, of how I had cajoled and pled. Once more, in my mind's eye, I read them the Holy Scriptures and prayed with them all.

It was summer again, and I stood waist-deep in the pleasant waters of Cornie Creek, baptizing candidates by the score. One by one I lowered each into a symbolic watery grave and then raised them up—to walk a new spiritual life. And members stood at the water's edge and sang the sacred hymns.

I thought on all these things of bygone years. But I asked myself, did I actually show the great and mighty and merciful God to the people? Did a single one get even a glimpse of the truth?

Lige, as I rode on toward home that cold, lonely February day, I was utterly dejected. I felt all was lost. Finally I stopped looking through the Bible. I quit thinking of sermons I had or had not preached. Instead, I began to call out to God. I must have actually cried aloud, for my mares, Martha and Mary, gave a sudden leap and almost took me into a ditch!

How long I prayed, I couldn't say. But slowly, great comfort spread over me like a warm cloak, and with it came a peace, a serenity of heart I could scarcely comprehend.

As I picked up the stiff, frozen buggy lines, the mares, glad to feel my hands on the reins, quickened their step. Soon we were crossing Rocky Head Creek and climbing the hills toward home. The coldness of the wind or the frost yet in the air brought on one of the coughing spells to which I had been subject all winter. This time I spat blood! Then I knew. *The dread Consumption had its grip on me!*

I thought again of that line: "Lord make me to know mine end." And I was glad He, not another, had told me.

I knew it was useless to do so, but I drove by to talk with Elton, my wife's brother, who, as you recall, is the doctor here in Drake Eye Springs. I had no hope that he could help me, for I already knew there is no known cure for this scourge. Not only is it fatal, but also it is considered an affliction of shame or weakness. Why it should be thought something of a disgrace to succumb to galloping Consumption and not to another disease, I still cannot fathom.

Elton said he could not be sure of what ailed me, but he feared I was right in my own diagnosis. Isolation, and fresh air, and complete rest were all he could recommend. He told me of having read an article in his medical journal that advocated placing pine boughs about the room to diminish the frequency of the consumptive cough. But he discounted that.

Within a week my sons and grandsons built me a small screened-in room out in one corner of our side yard under the shade of our largest white oak. Here I spent most of my time. I grew weaker and weaker until finally I was forced to keep to the bed.

Of course I was obliged to tender my resignation to each of my churches. Oh, how this hurt me. I loved being pastor to these dear, frank, open-hearted people. They are hard workers. Of course, now and then, you will see a man who has let himself be dragged down by drink. But this is the exception, not the rule.

The very last funeral I conducted was, unfortunately, for such a man. His name was Lawson. I hadn't ever known him, but his family lived near Millers Crossing, and they asked me to preach the funeral. I have often wondered what will become of the man's sons, especially the older one, Ward. He appeared to be in his early twenties. His pa, from what I could gather, set a very poor example. And he hadn't sent Ward or any of his other children to school much. He never carried his family to church. And in this day and time, school and church make a big difference in molding character. So chances are young Ward Lawson will never amount to anything.

Perhaps I judge too harshly. Sometimes, parents cannot realize what they should be doing for their children. Even now I sometimes ponder whether I was wise to leave Sand Mountain and to bring my own three precious little motherless girls to this part of Arkansas, which was so sparsely settled then. But, my daughters by Rachael grew into lovely women and each married well. And the second wife I took bore me five fine children, as you know. So, I must not bewail my lot. God scatters his children over the land as a man sprinkles salt on meat, to make life more savory wherever they settle.

My glorious morning is now at hand. I know complete peace. Old friends and church people still come for miles to pay their respects. Elderly colored folk stop by. I hear them all pray for my recovery, yet they know the matter is final. They go away sorrowful, despite all I can say to reassure them.

Last week my family moved me from the outdoor room, placing my bed on the south end of the porch so that I can feel any slight breeze that stirs. Nannie, Vic, and Lovie take turns sitting by my side, day and night, to waft the air with their palmetto fans, and this does aid my breathing.

Soon, Lige, very soon I believe, the Lord will send again the angel who came to me at Shiloh. All my years are passed away, and He will bring my days to an end as a sigh.

With deep affection and with prayer on my lips for you, I remain

Your devoted brother,
David

Mama folded up the letter. She handed it to Aunt Vic. Aunt Vic passed it on to Aunt Lovie. They cried like little girls like me.

Chapter 6

Mama had said I could go home with Aunt Vic—to spend a whole week—because I hadn't been to her house in a long time, and because Aunt Vic wished she had a little daughter with braided hair and blue-green eyes. All she had was her three grown-up sons, Casey, Hi-Pockets, and Jim-Bo, and Ginger, and Speedy, her horse.

Both Aunt Vic and Aunt Lovie told Mama they knew I would be perfectly safe, but neither one said safe from what. Oh, well, it didn't matter. Grownups never get around to telling all they know.

I was glad Aunt Vic liked my long braids. While she was lifting Ginger, and then me, up into the buggy seat, I looked at her hair. It had started turning gray on top, same as Mama's and Aunt Lovie's. But mostly it was still brown, and her eyes were more brown. Aunt Vic was real pretty. She smiled nearly all the time, too.

"Bandershanks, let's fold the buggy robe around you and Ginger," Aunt Vic said as we were leaving the church grounds and waving good-bye to Mama and Aunt Lovie. "In late fall like this the wind comes swooping down out of the north and blows right nippy."

Aunt Vic's lap robe was a lot prettier than ours. Hers had a long purple fringe. But Ginger didn't like the robe or the fringe. He squirmed and twisted and stood up on the seat, turning himself round and round. Aunt Vic had to sweet-talk him and rub his ears and sweet-talk him some more before he would ever curl himself up and put his head in her lap to go to sleep.

We rode past Papa's new store, the cotton gin, Mister Goode's grist mill, and on toward Ash Branch. Speedy trotted along right pertly where the road was level, but at the foot of the first steep hill he slowed down.

At the top of the hill was the falling-down church by the graveyard. As we came alongside the churchyard fence I was wishing Aunt Vic would stop so I could go see the little lamb on one of the tombstones. I liked that little gray lamb.

Sometimes when Mama drove our buggy by the old church she let me get out and run inside the gate to pat the lamb for one quick minute. And every May, when we all gathered at the graveyard and stayed all day to chop down the weeds and nettles and to scrape away the briar vines and grass, Mama let me look at the little sheep as long as I pleased. He had about the best spot in the whole graveyard—just inside the fence, under the highest pine. There he could always rest in the shade.

I glanced up at Aunt Vic and knew she wasn't going to stop. She didn't have any flowers with her, and she never walked among the tombstones unless she had a bouquet for Uncle Hugh's grave. Uncle Hugh didn't have a lamb on his headstone. Lambs are for children. His stone, and the one at the head of Grandpa Dave's grave, had both been made to look like trees turned to rocks and then chopped up

and stacked up, one short log on top of another. Mama had said that showed both Uncle Hugh and Grandpa Dave were Woodmen of the World.

I decided not to ever, ever be a woodman. I wanted a lamb, not logs, on my tombstone.

The road became narrow and more and more crooked as we passed into the thick woods below the graveyard. The long shadows of so many tall pines made it seem like twilight, Aunt Vic said. Then, in a few minutes, we came out into a big clearing, and Aunt Vic turned the buggy onto a straight stretch of lane where there were cornfields on either side. She said they were Old Man Hawk's fields.

The corn had been stripped of blades and ears so that there was nothing left but row after row of shriveled stalks leaning against each other, waiting to fall to the ground. The goldenrod in the fence corners, so lovely in September, was dried up, dead. But the persimmon bushes and the young sassafras trees looked quite lively as their half-green, half-red leaves shimmered in the late afternoon sun.

"Their leaves will stay just that bright till killing frost comes," Aunt Vic told me. "And I think they're just beautiful!"

I looked at the leaves again. They were pretty.

"You know, Bandershanks, you can enjoy different things if you keep your eyes open. But if you don't open up your eyes, you miss half of everything along the way."

"How do you miss them?"

"You just won't see what's right in front of you, if you don't look! What you look at has a lot to do with the way you feel and think. And what you think about is very important, Bandershanks. You see this tall grass and broom sedge all along here between the road and Old Man Hawk's rail fence?"

"Yes'm. It's higher than my head!"

"Notice how it sweeps low with every breath of wind. Now, hon, you can look at that grass and say to yourself, 'My goodness, the wind sure is blowing.' Or, you can look at it and think, 'Ah, that waving grass has something to say.'"

"Ma'am?"

"High grass, in its way, is saying 'All creation knows its Maker. Even wild weeds in the wind bow down, pay homage.'"

I listened. Not a sound. I looked up at the broom sedge again and listened harder. Then I looked up at Aunt Vic's ears to see if they were shaped the same as mine. They were. Still, I couldn't hear the grass and weeds saying a word!

Aunt Vic reached into her satchel and took out a white, puffy handkerchief that had tatting lace all the way around it and wiped her nose.

I wished I could be a big lady and have a hand purse and carry handkerchiefs with frilly lace.

We came to the house where Old Man Hawk and his wife lived. We didn't see them, but Mister Hawk's mule Nellie was standing in the barn lot and his coon dogs were on the front porch. The minute the two dogs saw our buggy, they jumped off the porch and ran out to the road, barking and barking.

"You scared of them big dogs, Aunt Vic?"

"Why, no. They won't bother us. Ginger knows that!" She lifted the lap robe and peeped at Ginger. He hadn't opened his eyes.

Mister Hawk's hounds soon quit barking. After they'd watched us a little longer they let the hair ridged up on their necks fall back in place and trotted back to the porch to lie down.

As soon as we crossed Ash Branch I knew we were nearly to Aunt Vic's house. Her house wasn't like ours. Sure, it was sort of oldish gray, same as ours. All the houses in Drake Eye Springs were gray, because that's the color houses turn unless you put paint on them. But Aunt Vic's house didn't have a long porch across the front. It had just a half porch. And she didn't have fireplace chimneys at both ends of her house. She kept her front room warm with a nice Ben Franklin stove.

Whoever made Aunt Vic's house forgot to put a wide hall down through the middle so her dogs could trot through whenever they pleased. I knew Ginger didn't like that. The main thing I liked about Aunt Vic's house, though, was that her kitchen was another little house sitting out in the back all by itself.

Aunt Vic helped me out of the buggy. But Ginger jumped out.

"Let's go straight on in the kitchen, Bandershanks. I want to kindle a fire in the cook stove before we go to the cow pen to milk."

After supper, I watched Jim-Bo oil his squirrel rifle. Aunt Vic called him Baby Jones because he was her youngest boy, but he was still lots older than me. Both of my older cousins, Casey and Hi, had pulled off their boots and had edged their chairs close to the heater so they could prop their feet against the top of the wood box while they read.

Jim-Bo had started calling me his Cuddin Sally Sue. I told him and told him that wasn't my name!

"Well, all right, you're Cuddin Sookie Sue."

"That's my doll's name!"

Jim-Bo put his gun back on the rack. "Ail right, Bandershanks," he said, "do you want to hear some fiddlin' music! How 'bout it, will y'all play some for Bandershanks?"

"Sure. We need practice, anyhow. Eh, Hi?"

"Huh? What'd you say, Casey?"

"Let's practice a little for Saturday night and play a tune or so for Bandershanks. She don't never hear dancing music."

"Suits me." Hi-Pockets turned down a page in his magazine and slid it under his chair. "Jim-Bo, go get us the guitar and fiddle outta the side room."

"You've got legs!"

"I've done pulled off my boots."

"And I reckon your little bittie tootsies might get cold walking from here to the side room and back!"

"Boys!"

"I'll get them."

When Jim-Bo got back, he handed his fiddle to Casey, the guitar to Hi-Pockets. Then he sat down in the chair next to mine.

"Jim-Bo, what you gonna play?"

"Me? Why, nothing, Bandershanks. I'm the hat man. I just pass the hat!"

"Pass what hat?"

"When Casey and Hi are down at Calico Neck playing for a Saturday night dance, I go along to pass around the hat for them. You know, take up the money?"

"Church money?"

"No, gal! The money for the musicians. Want me to tell you 'bout dances?"

"Yeah, you tell me!"

"All right, little Cuddin Sally Sue! While—"

"I ain't Sally Sue! I done told you!"

"Well, Lady Bandershanks, then! While Casey—"

"I ain't a lady. I'm—"

"Shh, now. While Casey and Hi tune up, I'm gonna explain to you all about dances down at Calico Neck, from start to finish. Lemme light my pipe first, though. Folks down there don't generally give but five or six dances the whole winter—none in crop time."

"How come?"

"I reckon they think when us fellows walk behind a mule all day our legs get so wore out we couldn't dance none!"

Jim-Bo sucked hard on his pipe stem, and as soon as the tobacco started glowing he let me blow out the match. He shifted his pipe to the corner of his mouth and motioned for me to move over and sit on his knees.

"When somebody does decide to have a shindig, they get the word around to all the young folks down that way. Then they send for Casey and Hi and me to come do the fiddlin'. 'Course they call on Uncle Hiram, too."

"Who's Uncle Hiram, Jim-Bo?"

"He's just an old man with a fiddle. I don't know whose uncle he is, but he told me one night he's Miss Dink's brother."

"Has he got a peg leg?" Aunt Vic asked.

"Yes'm."

"I've seen that old man," Aunt Vic said. "He's only a half brother to Miss Dink. Lives way over yonder the other side of Millers Crossing--down below the state line."

"I tell you he can sure scald-the-dog! Don't know when to slow down, much less stop."

"He's a mean man! Pouring hot water on a poor dog!" I shouted.

"Bandershanks, that's just a saying! Means he's plain talented when it comes to a fiddle."

"Oh. Jim-Bo, hurry and get to the dancing part!"

"Yeah, I'm coming to that right now—soon's I clear the floor and sprinkle down the sand."

"What?"

"You see, on the Saturday of the dance, folks have to move out the beds and dresser and table—or whatever stuff they've got in their front room—to sorta clear the floor so there'll be plenty of space for dancing. All they leave is three or four straight chairs over in the corner for the fiddlers. And sometimes the lady of the house spreads a thick layer of white sand on the floor, just before everybody gets there. That way, she can get her floors tramped clean while the dancing is going on! Soon as the musicians come, they tune up. Then they strike up the music and six or seven couples start dancing.

"Casey and Hi and Uncle Hiram play and play. Then they rest. And while they're resting, somebody takes up the collection of money to pay them. That's me! I get my hat and walk around through the crowd. The boys drop in a dime or two bits, or whatever they want to. After a while the music starts again.

"All the young sprouts who ain't too bashful—and the ones who ain't made many trips out behind the house to find a bottle—ask the pretty girls to dance again. And away they go! This lasts half an hour or so."

"Then what?"

"Then the fiddlers have to rest again, and I pass the hat again. If the dancers don't want to pay much, why the musicians don't feel like playing much. Sometimes I have to call out: 'The more money in the hat, boys, the sweeter goes the songs!' Or, I say: 'Pay your fiddlers, boys, and y'all can call the tunes!'"

"Say, Casey, ain't you got that thing tuned yet?"

"Yep! I'm all set now, Jim-Bo." Casey stuck his fiddle under his chin and edged his chair over closer to the lamp. "What do y'all wanta hear first? Bandershanks, what do you say?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't y'all start off with 'Turkey in the Straw,' Aunt Vic said, "and then do 'Arkansas Traveler.'"

So, they played some lively tunes. All of them sounded pretty, but I couldn't tell which was which.

Then Casey said, "Jim-Bo, sing her the one about being an old maid!"

"Yeah, Casey, that's a good one. Bandershanks, you're gonna like this song. It's called 'The Old Maid's Lament.' Hi, gim'me a few chords to help me along."

Hi started plucking the guitar strings and patting his foot. And Jim-Bo sang:

My papa tells me I'm pretty,
But I'm sadly much afraid,
If Pa don't put down that shotgun,
I'll go to my grave an old maid.
The boys never come a-courtin';
They dare not darken our door.
O please go find me a—

"You can't be no old maid!" I hollered at Jim-Bo before he could sing any further.

"Why, Bandershanks! You don't mean it!"

"Just girls turn to old maids!"

"You wanta turn into one?"

"No, I don't! It's a disgrace to be a old maid! And you better not get a baby 'fore you get married, neither!"

"Well, well, you don't say. In that case, it looks to me like a girl's got little choice. 'Bout all she can do is avoid the extremes and keep her eye on the altar!"

"What does that mean?"

"Means we'd better have another tune. Or, maybe you'll dance some for us. How 'bout that?"

"I can't dance."

"How come?"

"I don't know how. 'Sides, it's a bad sin!"

"Who told you that, Bandershanks?"

"I just been knowing it."

"Why, Jim-Bo," Hi said, "it ain't been six months since Brother Milligan preached a whole sermon on dancing!"

"Oh, yeah. I remember that sermon, now."

"I bet you remember it! You probably weren't listening to one word he said!"

"I was, too! I can tell you his very words!"

Jim-Bo let me slide from his knee so he could stand up. He began talking, and he tilted his head to one side and reared back, waving his arms and shaking his fists—just like Brother Milligan when he was up on the pulpit stand.

"My good people of Drake Eye Springs," he shouted out, his voice cracking and trembling, "I warn you, dancing is a sin! Some would seek to justify it on the grounds that it is a graceful movement of the body. But I say to you: graceful movements can lead you down the road to damnation! My good people, both brethren and sistern, as surely as I stand here in this pulpit today, and as surely as my name is Josiah B. Milligan, dancing is a sin of the first water! It is nothing in God's world but artificial arm and leg crossing, invented by Old Split-Foot himself!"

"Boys, boys! Y'all oughtn't say things to confuse your little cousin. Hon, don't you worry. Sins change. Maybe when you get big enough to really dance, it will be a fine thing to do. Back when I was a young girl, it was a sin to read a novel. I don't know, though, whether I ought to mention that, 'specially since your mama and I read one once!"

"What about some more music?" Jim-Bo asked.

"No, it's late. Bandershanks, we've got to get you off to bed. Thank the musicians and this self-appointed 'hat man' for a wonderful concert!"

"Y'all, much obliged for the concert."

Jim-Bo just grinned at me. Then he put one hand behind his back and bowed low. "The pleasure was all ours, Lady Bandershanks!"

Saturday when I got home, Shoogie was waiting for me. So was Mama. The first thing Mama said was, "My, my, we've been missing you!"

The first thing Shoogie said was, "Bandershanks, let's go pick us some goobers!"

"Yeah! Mama, can we?"

"I suppose so. I'd rather for y'all to be eating peanuts in the hayloft than playing outdoors in this wind. It turned cold this evening."

We ate some peanuts and stuffed more in our pockets. Shoogie said they'd taste a sight better if we made a fire and roasted them in the ashes.

"Come on, Bandershanks. I's got plenty o' matches."

"Where we gonna cook them?"

"Down yonder side o' the road."

"Mama won't lem'me play at the road no more."

"We ain't gonna be on the road. We'll be in that gully where there's sand. See, iffen we get a pile o' sand hot, our goobers'll cook quick. Come on, Bandershanks!"

Shoogie gathered up leaves and sticks and struck match after match, but she couldn't get a fire going.

"We needs us some pine straw, that's what. Come on, Bandershanks, there's plenty right down yonder round the bend. See them big trees?"

We hurried down the hill toward the pine thicket, following the road and the winding gully. After we had rounded the bend, we slid down into the gully and walked along the bottom till we got to the first of the pine trees. Straw was lying matted on the ground, thick and deep. Easy to rake together in big wads, Shoogie said.

She showed me how to hold my skirt out with both hands so she could pile on a big armful of the dried straw. Then she heaped up a bundle in her skirt, and we started back to our sticks and peanuts.

Shoogie was walking in front, and I was being careful to step in her tracks.

"Bandershanks, what's that roarin' racket I hears?"

"I don't hear no roaring. Yeah, I do too! I hear it! That's a automobile motor coming, Shoogie!"

We dropped our straw and ran to the edge of the road.

"If you don't know what a motor sounds like, you're a silly goose! Wiley said so!"

"Bandershanks, you knows I ain't no goose!"

"Ain't you seen one of them automobiles yet?"

"No."

"I have! My brother rode one! Shoogie, here it comes!" Shoogie didn't say anything.

"That's the same one Wiley rode!"

"Who's that man makin' hit go?" Shoogie whispered.

"It's— It's— It's Mister Ward! We'd better run!"

"Not yet! He's lettin' hit go slow so's we can see hit." Mister Ward made the automobile come to a stop right in front of us, but he didn't make it be quiet or quit rattling and shaking.

He was grinning as he got out. His red, bushy hair was hanging down nearly to his eyes.

"How'd you little gals like to ride in Mister Hicks's automobile?"

"No, suh!" Shoogie told him. She started backing away.

"Gal, you a-feared o' automobiles?"

"Shoogie ain't scared! She just ain't seen none!"

"Well, Bandershanks, I know you ain't a-feared to ride, are you?"

Before I could say "Yes, sir" or "No, sir," he grabbed me by both arms and jumped back into the automobile with me!

"Turn me loose!"

"Shut up! Quit screamin' and kickin'!"

He clamped his hand over my mouth and plunked me down on the seat. With his feet he did something that made the automobile start rolling.

"Sit still, young'un! What's that little nigger's name?" Then he hollered back at Shoogie, "Black gal, you go tell Mister Jodie to get me that money!"

I twisted around quick to see what Shoogie would do. Shoogie was gone! All I saw was a streak of dust.

"Now, little wildcat, you'd just as well stop scratchin' and fightin'! We've got a long ways to go! Ah, this is the chance I been waitin' for! Your pa's gonna pay plenty to get you back, and I can buy me my own automobile! Man, that'll be the day! God damn, young'un, you bite me one more time and I'll let you have it! Quit tryin' to jump out, you little devil! Don't you know if you jump, fast as we're goin', you'll break your fool neck?"

All at once Mister Ward quit talking mean to me. He didn't let go of my arm, but he told me he thought I was a sweet little gal—pretty, too—and that we were going where there was lots of candy. "More candy than anybody's ever seen, Bandershanks!"

"I don't want no candy! I wanta go home!"

"Just as soon as we get all that candy, we'll go home."

"Where's the candy at?"

"It's not too far," he said. "Pretty soon after we cross Rocky Head Bridge we'll come to the road goin' to that candy store."

He reached down under the edge of the seat and got a bottle of something that didn't smell good and gulped down half of it.

"What's that?"

"Whiskey. Good God, ain't you never seen a bottle o' whiskey before?"

"No, sir."

"I wish to hell my young'uns could say that." He laughed and muttered something else.

Then Mister Ward began singing, or half singing and half talking to himself. He sounded real happy, like he knew something nobody else had ever thought about. He had quit paying much attention to the road. Instead, he was just letting the automobile weave from side to side. I was wishing we'd hurry and come to that candy road. But we didn't. We just kept going and going.

"When we gonna get there?"

"Just a little bit farther, gal."

The few houses we were passing I'd never seen before. "I wanta go back home!"

"Naw, naw, don't start that tune again. We're gonna soon be comin' to a big steel bridge. You ain't never seen such a high bridge! Be watchin' out and tell me when you see it up ahead."

Mister Ward reached under the seat and got his bottle again.

"It's getting too dark to see bridges! I want my mama!"

"Dammit, it shore is gettin' dark. I hadn't figured on that. Hicks, cuss him, didn't show me how to make the damn lights work!"

Mister Ward stopped the automobile and got out. He staggered toward the front wheels. I slid off the seat, put both feet on the running board, and jumped! I fell when I hit the ground, but I scrambled up and ran—back toward home!

"You little devil! Come back!"

I didn't even look back.

"You hear me? Come back!"

I could tell Mister Ward was right behind me and getting closer! I darted off the road, down into a ditch full of tall grass, not half seeing where I was going. As soon as I could, I climbed out of the ditch and ran between a lot of bushes and big trees. But Mister Ward kept coming. I could hear him wheezing and panting.

"Young'un, if you go down in this damn river bottom, you'll get lost!"

I scooted under a low-hanging limb and headed for a canebrake right ahead. While Mister Ward was going around the limb, I squeezed myself into the tall cane. It was so thick, the only way to get through was to go down on hands and knees and crawl between the stalks.

I managed to get out of sight of Mister Ward, but I could hear him stomping and floundering his way through the cane.

"Hell! She must've circled back toward the river. Bandershanks! Where're you at, young'un? Bandershanks? That candy's just across the river!"

I wouldn't answer. I kept on crawling--into mud! But I didn't care. I sloshed on through till I was back on dry dirt and could get up and run again.

Suddenly I found myself right at the edge of the biggest creek I'd ever seen! It wasn't Rocky Head; I knew that. It was too deep and the banks were too steep to be Rocky Head. And the water was muddy red, even to the scum and bubbles swirling around at the edges.

I saw a foot log a few feet down the bank. Maybe I could try to cross over on it. No. I couldn't! I didn't like foot logs—especially not that one. It was sagging down in the middle, and it wasn't very wide. The log was plain rotten-looking in places where the bark was peeling off.

Before I could decide what to do, I heard Mister Ward again. When I turned around, there he was, right behind me, grabbing at my cloak!

I jumped for the foot log and started crawling across, clinging on with hands and feet. At first it was all right. Then the log began to sway and swing. It was wet, slick. Halfway across, I got to a bowed-up place where I had to get down astraddle of the log and slide myself along. I almost slipped off!

I didn't dare look down at the gushing water and rocks or behind me to see how close Mister Ward was. I knew he was already on the log, for I could feel it give

with every step he took. I glanced back. He was inching his way along, walking sideways.

"You little idiot, stop! You're gonna fall and drown, shore as hell!"

I couldn't stop! Not with him about to grab me! He was on his knees now, crawling, not three feet behind me!

"Young'un! For God's sake, come back! This damn river's way over your head! Mine too!"

I was getting closer and closer to the other bank, almost close enough to jump. I felt the log beginning to sag! Crack!

"God 'a mercy! Help!"

The log was breaking, and Mister Ward was falling!

I leaped!

"Help! Somebody, help!" There was a loud splash! "O God!"

I crawled back to the edge of the bank to look. Mister Ward was down in the red, swirling water, kicking and flailing his arms!

Both ends of the foot log had crashed into the river. The shorter piece rolled over once, passed by Mister Ward, and went churning on downstream. The other end, caught against rocks, bobbed up and down.

I didn't wait to see how Mister Ward would crawl out. I had to run! But which way? I couldn't see any way to go. I stumbled into a mass of vines and briars. In trying to get out of the tangle, I lost one of my shoes, but I couldn't stop to hunt for it. I kept running!

By staying close to the river bank I could go fast. At the water's edge the trees and low bushes were not so thick, and there a little sunlight was still coming through.

I got into a watery place where there were cypress trees. Trying to wade through all their knees and buckled-up, crooked roots was dreadful! I saw a snake! But I didn't let him see me! I turned and ran the other way and left the river. After that, I had to slow down to a trot. It was getting darker and darker.

How long I'd been going, or how far, I couldn't tell. My legs were hurting, but I was afraid to stop. Mister Ward would catch up with me! So I went stumbling on—falling, getting up, falling again. I was beginning to shiver, and I noticed for the first time that my cloak was wet all over and that my hair had come unbraided and was stringing down. It kept getting caught on limbs and vines, and I kept bumping into saplings. Every time I fell I wished I could just stay down and go to sleep, but I never did fall in a place fit for sleeping. Then I saw what looked like a wide strip of white sand. I could lie down on the sand and sleep.

But it wasn't sand. It was a road!

Once out of the thick woods, I could see a little better. In the dim, shadowy part of the evening, when the sun has gone down and the stars haven't yet come out, it's

hard to see anything. I started trying to run again, this time up the middle of the winding road that stretched in front of me like a wide, silver ribbon lost out of some lady's sewing basket.

Way ahead, I could make out what I thought was a house, but when I finally got to it, it turned out to be an old piece of a shack—either a cotton house or corn crib, ready to fall down. No matter. It was a good enough place to hide. Mister Ward would never think about looking for me in a crib.

Inside it was dark. I bumped into what smelled and felt like a stack of dry corn, still in the shuck. Yeah! It was corn, the same kind we had in our crib at home. I could hide in that. Sleep, too. So I scrooched down in the mound and covered myself with shucks and stalks, leaving only my face out. Now, Mister Ward couldn't find me! Not ever, ever!

Chapter 7

Crowing roosters waked me. I rolled over and opened my eyes. What had happened to the top of our house? There wasn't any top! Just sky! Papa was right. He had been telling us for a long time that our roof was going to fall in if he didn't get good crops and build Mama a new house. Papa was 'shamed for Mama to have to live in an old dogtrot house built before the Civil War. The Civil War was Grandpa's war and it happened a long time ago, but we still talked about it. Now, for sure, Papa would build us a new house with a good top on it. Then I remembered! I didn't know where our house was! Nor Papa! Nor Mama! Grandpa, neither! I didn't even know where I was!

I scrambled up from the pile of corn and ran outside.

Right across the road stood a real house! With hound dogs on the porch. And a man. Chickens scratching in the yard. Smoke puffing out of the chimney. Everything a house is supposed to have!

The dogs started barking at me.

"Hey there! Com'ere!" The man had seen me too.

As I ran toward him he made the dogs hush and yelled back at somebody inside: "Set another plate, Mattie! We've got a sorta ragged little visitor! With one shoe on!"

He squatted down to look at me. "Bless your little heart! Com'ere, sugar! My, my! Mud and leaves and tatters! No tears, now! Wearin' one shoe's all right! Hon, I wear just one—all the time."

The breakfast tasted good, and the man and lady talked to me a lot and said for me to just keep on eating—as long as I could swallow a bite. But I couldn't get down but two biscuits and jelly and some salt meat and a cup of milk.

When I'd finished, the man said, "Now, little girl, try to tell us where you came from."

"Outta the corn crib! And the woods!"

The lady smiled at me. "We can see you've been down in the river bottom. Your little cloak is just tore all to pieces, and your hair's got leaves and sticks all through it."

"Where was you at before you got to the woods?"

"In the automobile."

"Mattie, she must be from town. Sugar, do you live in Union City?"

"No, sir."

"I declare, I wish I knew who you are. Your folks must be wild by this time—you bein' lost all night. Try one more time to tell me who your pa is, sugar."

"He's Papa!"

"Yeah, I know. There must be some way to find out who you are."

"I know who you are."

"Who am I, sugar?"

"Uncle Hiram!"

"Lord, yeah! How'd you know?"

"One of your legs is just a wood peg. And I see your fiddle! Right yonder on the wall!"

"I'll be hanged!"

"Jim-Bo says you can sure scald-a-dog!"

"Jim-Bo? Jim-Bo Jones over at Drake Eye Springs? You know him?"

"Yes, sir. He's Aunt Vic's baby."

"Mattie, this child belongs to somebody way over in Drake Eye Springs! 'Cross the Arkansas line! I'll go hitch up. Get on your good dress, and we'll take her home. I'll bet her pa's got the Law out combing the woods with bloodhounds! And every man in them parts helpin'! We'll go by to see sister Dink while we're over that way. Make haste, Mattie, 'cause you know if it was one o' our'n lost, we'd be outta our minds."

Uncle Hiram hobbled out the back door before I could get a chance to tell him that Mister Ward fell in the deep river. Miss Mattie started washing my face, and then they bundled me up into the wagon, and away we went.

The first house we got to, we stopped while Uncle Hiram went inside to see about using the phone. But when he came back, he was shaking his head.

"It wasn't no use, Mattie. Couldn't get nobody on the Drake Eye Springs line. I reckon they're all out searchin'."

"Let's just go on, Hiram. It won't take more'n three hours."

We rode and rode, up hills, down hills, around curves, across shallow streams—much longer than three hours, it seemed to me. About midmorning we came to low, red hills and pine trees and pin oaks that I'd passed before. Then we could see a fork in the road, where another road branched off. The new road looked a good bit like the way to go if you want to cross Rocky Head Bridge, but I couldn't be sure.

"Baby, you know this stretch through here?"

"No, sir. I just know the trees."

"That's good!"

There was a lot of mist everywhere. Fog, Uncle Hiram said. Miss Mattie took off her shawl and tied it around my head.

"No use a-lettin' you take your death of cold, sugar!"

Before we got to the corner where the two roads came together we saw a bunch of men on horseback galloping toward us. But they didn't see us, and as they came to the split in the road, they turned their horses to go the other way. We were real close to them. Still, they didn't look toward our wagon!

"It's Papa! Uncle Hiram, yonder's Papa! He's that'n on Jake! In front! Papa, stop!"

"Thank the Lord!" Miss Mattie squeezed me.

Uncle Hiram stood up, yelling.

"Hey! Hey, there! Hey!"

The horses kept loping up the other road. Papa and the other men wouldn't look back.

Uncle Hiram sat down real quick and handed the reins to his wife.

"Mattie, make these mules move! When we get to the corner, cut over to that other road! They never seen us on account o' this thick fog risin' outta Rocky Head Bottom!"

Uncle Hiram grabbed out his pocket knife. I couldn't imagine what he was fixing to do. He slit his britches leg, clear up above his knee! Then he snatched off his wooden leg and tied his pocket handkerchief to it! Next, he caught hold of his wife's shoulder, jumped up on the wagon seat, and started waving his peg leg in the air!

"Hey! Hey, there! We've got her, y'all! She's all right! She's all right!"

When Papa finally got me home, he toted me straight to Mama. She grabbed me into her arms and held me tight, a long time. And, for the rest of the day, she let me sit in her lap.

And Mierd let me hold her best doll in my lap. And Wiley gave me his blue marble, for keeps.

Mama said it would take her a solid week to brush the leaves and matted tangles out of my hair. It didn't. By Friday morning, when my two brothers got home from that World War that had stopped, Mama had my braids looking fine again. Besides that, the briar scratches on my face were gone, and I had me some new shoes!

But Clyde and Walker came rushing in with so many suitcases and sacks and presents and there was so much kissing and neck-hugging that I didn't even think to show them my hair or my lace-up shoes.

While we were getting ready to have our big celebrating supper, Mama thought of nothing except fixing good stuff to eat. At least, that's the way she was talking.

"I declare to my soul," she complained to me and Mierd and Clyde, "this supper table just ain't long enough or wide enough tonight!"

"How come, Mama?" I climbed up into Clyde's lap so I could see the peach pickles and jelly Mama had put on the table.

"I reckon, hon, I simply cooked too much. There'll be fifteen of us to eat—besides your Grandma Ming—so I knew it would take lots of vittles. But I've cooked more'n our old table can hold. Mierd, hand me the scuppernong pies. I can set both of them back in the safe for the time being."

"Where're you gonna set the 'possum, Mama?"

"It'll have to stay on the back of the stove till we can—"

"Hot diggity! Look here, y'all!"

Wiley was yelling so loud we couldn't hear what Mama was saying about the 'possum Black Idd had caught for my brothers.

"Look at this knife Walker just gim'me! See, Mierd!"

I jumped out of Clyde's lap to run with Mierd to the other end of the kitchen. I got to Wiley first, but Mierd squeezed herself in front of me. I couldn't see the knife till I darted around Papa and Dorris and the cook stove. Even when I got to the other side of Wiley's elbow, I couldn't tell how the knife was made because of the way he was holding it.

"Lemme see!" Mierd shrieked.

"No, Mierd! It'll cut you! Bandershanks, get your hands off! Quit that! Girls don't know how to handle pocket knives. 'Specially one with four blades!"

"I know how just as much as you do!"

"Mierd, you do not! Hot diggity, look at the middle blade! Old Wallace Goode will have a fit when he sees this!"

"You'd better not take it to school."

"Yeah, Walker, I've gotta take it to school! Wallace and all the rest of 'em will wanta see it! Just think! I'll be the only boy there with a pearl-handled knife! Clyde, what'd you bring me?"

"Well, now, Wiley, I'll tell you. When I stopped in Little Rock the day before yesterday, I saw something that reminded me so much of you I just had to buy it."

"What?"

"Go in yonder and look in the top of my knapsack and get that yellow box, the one that's not wrapped up."

As soon as Wiley ran out the door, Clyde cupped his hand against the side of his lips and whispered, "Mierd, it's a monkey on a string!"

Wiley came racing back into the kitchen, holding a yellowish looking pasteboard box, which he was ripping apart. "What's in here, Clyde?"

"Open it up! As I said, it looks just like you."

Wiley gave a loud whoop when the tin monkey fell out on the floor, and everybody in the kitchen laughed.

"Aw, I ain't no monkey! Say, what's this string going up through his stomach for?"

"Careful! Don't yank so hard, Wiley—you'll get him all tangled up. If you'll just read the directions, you'll see how he climbs up the string."

"Yeah! Look at him! I don't need no directions!"

"Mierd. Com'ere. You're next on the presents. I bought this for you in New York City the day after the Armistice was signed."

Mierd grinned as our oldest brother handed her a small, slick, black box not more than half the size of a biscuit. I could hardly wait for her to open it!

She didn't know how.

"Mash the little brass catch on the side," Walker told her.

As soon as Mierd pushed in the little knob, the lid flew up. She started squealing and jumping!

"It's a ring! A gold finger ring! Gee, thanks, Walker! Oh, ain't it pretty!"

"Let's hope it fits."

Mierd slipped the ring on her middle finger and dashed back over to the supper table to hold her hand close to the lamp. She turned her finger from side to side, making the gold ring shine and sparkle. To get a close look at it, I had to jump up on the end of the bench and lean across the corner of the table.

"Lemme wear it a little bit, Mierd."

"No, Bandershanks! I'm not gonna ever, ever take it off."

"Stingy!"

"I'm not stingy. It's my ring! And it's pure gold! Anyhow, Bandershanks, they brought you lots of pretties, too. Look there spread out on the table: a beaded purse with real money in it, and a yellow soap doll, and pink beads to wear around your neck!"

"I want a ring."

"You ain't big enough yet to wear rings!"

I picked up my doll. Walker had said it was solid soap, through and through. Poor little thing. She smelled sweet, but she was as naked as a jaybird. I covered her with my napkin, and once I had it folded and patted down, it looked just as good as a sure-'nough doll blanket.

Where could I put my new doll to sleep when bedtime came? And where were all the rest of us going to sleep? Mama had said before all my big brothers and sisters came home that we didn't have but seven beds, counting the narrow cot in the side room.

"Where're we all gonna sleep?" I asked Mama as soon as she came over to bring the stack of corn bread.

Gertie heard me. "Oh, you don't have to worry, Bandershanks. We can slip you down in a tow sack and hang you in the corner!"

"No, y'all can't neither! I don't wanta sleep in no sack!"

"Well, good gracious! Don't get so mad. I was just teasing. We're gonna make a nice big quilt pallet down on the floor for you and Farris and little Cleburne."

"Where?"

"Right in front of the fireplace. You think that'll be all right?"

"Yeah, I reckon."

Mama told me there would be plenty of beds for everybody, and Gertie didn't say anything else about a sack. She started talking to Grandpa and her husband Henry about how dim the lamplight seemed.

"We oughta've had this celebration supper before dark. I can't half see what I'm doing."

"Ah, Gertie," Grandpa told her, "your eyes are just spoiled to them electric lights."

"I guess so, Grandpa. Electric lights are wonderful."

"It's all in what you're used to. Our coal-oil lamps still seem bright to us poor country folks."

Mama was crowding more and more food on the supper table. Bess was fixing the tray to send out to Grandma, and Gertie had started dishing up some things in saucers for her young'uns.

"Bandershanks, you go with me into the fireplace room and eat with Farris and little Cleburne at Mierd's and Wiley's study table."

I couldn't do that! Gertie hadn't noticed that I was too big to eat with little kids!

"See, Gertie. I'm big! I don't wanta be with them babies! And I just ain't!"

She didn't answer me.

"Soon's I eat 'nough 'taters, I'm gonna get real, real big. And my legs will get long and fat! And y'all won't call me Bandershanks no more! And I can go to school!"

"Bandershanks, I don't know when Mama and Papa are gonna start you to school, but you're big, all right! You're just about too big for your britches, I think!"

I lifted up the bottom of my dress and looked at my bloomers. They weren't too tight!

During supper Walker and Clyde asked questions and questions. Clyde said he'd like to know everything that had happened in Drake Eye Springs while he was off in the army.

"There's not been much going on," Papa told him, "except my knock-down-drag-out fight with Ward and the store burning. Then the kidnapping! And we've already told you how bad all that was. 'Course the fight and losing the store was nothing compared with that ordeal last week. Me and Nannie aged ten years apiece Saturday night while the baby was gone."

"I can imagine."

"Yeah, what a time! Every soul in the settlement came, trying to help, all night long. The women, in the house with Nannie, crying and praying! The men, out in the woods with me, searching and cussing! Reckon I ought not say it that way. We

was praying, too. But we was all disgusted with ourselves for letting a snake like Ward live among us."

"Papa, what was Ward wanting so much money for?"

"To get him a automobile! The man was obsessed with the notion of buying one. That's what started the whole trouble. You see, first, he took it in his head he could make big money with moonshine whiskey. The fool, he came to me wanting money to buy a copper drum. That's when we had the fight! Then—out of pure spite—he burned down my store! Next thing you know, he had his whiskey still in operation. But I reckon money wasn't coming in fast enough to suit him, so he got this fellow Hicks's automobile and carried off Bandershanks!"

"He figured Jodie would pay a fortune to get her back alive. He would have, too!"

"Yes, Pa, I'd 've paid. A man will do most anything to save his young'un. I just thank the Good Lord things didn't turn out no worse than they did. Doctor Elton and the schoolteacher say that if Ward's not dead and if the Law ever finds him, he could be locked up for over twenty years, but I can't help that. Oh, well, let's try to forget the whole business for tonight. Pass me some more of that 'possum."

The talk around the table went on and on. I got so sleepy I couldn't listen to what Mama and Papa and Grandpa Thad and all my big brothers and sisters were saying. Not till Wiley started telling about school did I rub my eyes good, yawn, and try to pay attention again.

"School just ain't no fun, this year. The new teacher don't never whip a soul! Does he, Mierd?"

"No."

"Not even the Bailey boys?"

"No," Mierd told Walker, "they don't seem so bad no more."

"You mean those big rascals haven't set fire to the schoolhouse this year?"

"No. First day of school they hid a dead rat in the teacher's desk, but since then they ain't done nothing. And you know what?"

"What?"

"Mister Shepherd won't ever make Bud, the oldest one, read. He's been in the third reader ever since I can remember, but every morning when it's time for the little kids in the third reader to go up front to the recitation bench, the teacher will say, 'Bud, looks to me like the fire's half out. Would you mind tending to the heater?' So Bud goes out behind the schoolhouse to the woodpile and brings in a turn of wood and pokes up the fire."

"Yeah, but you know what I found out just yesterday?" Wiley asked. "Wallace Goode told me that every Saturday morning Mister Shepherd rides over to the Bailey house and goes hunting with them boys. And Wallace says he's learning all three of 'em how to read plum good, while he walks through the woods with 'em!"

"And I bet can't none of y'all guess how Mister Shepherd punishes you if you don't get up your piece to say for Friday! Now, Mierd, don't you tell!"

"You've got my curiosity aroused, Wiley. What does he do?"

"Bess, he makes you learn a whole chapter outta the Bible, by heart!"

"I'll have to remember about this next summer when I start teaching. I sort of dread the Friday programs, especially when the parents will be coming."

"Have you got you a school already, Bess?"

"She sure has," Papa told Walker. "Come June, Bess is gonna get her high school diploma in one hand and her teaching certificate in the other! And the folks over around Ellen School want her to teach their three-month summer term."

"Gee, that's good! How much are you gonna make?"

"I'll get fifty dollars a month, but of course that won't all be profit. I'll have to pay out at least ten a month for room and board."

"Oh, well, you'll still have plenty left. How 'bout making me a little loan?"

Mama started passing around the pies and cakes. All the laughing and talking died down for a few minutes as we raked the bones and scraps to one side of our plates to make room for the sweets.

Dorris was the first one to start talking again.

"Clyde, your girl up and got married!"

"Which one? You know I had me several when I left here!"

"I'm talking about Lucille."

"Oh, Lucille! Yeah, Mama wrote me about her and Ollie Goode jumping the broom. Too bad. You can tell I'm plain heartbroken, can't you?"

"Ah, I tell y'all, the Goodes had an infare to end all infares!"

"What was so special about it, Mama?"

"Folks told that Mrs. Goode baked five different layer cakes, and then she thought that wouldn't make a big enough show. So, at the last minute, just before Ollie brought his bride home, she dashed in and iced three stacks of corn bread to make them look like three more layer cakes sitting on the sideboard!"

"Sure enough, Mama?" Gertie asked.

"That's what they told on Mrs. Goode. She does like to put on the dog whenever there's any sort of a to-do."

"Now, Mama, you can't talk about infares," Walker said. "You fixed quite a dinner yourself the day y'all welcomed Anna into the family. Remember? You had enough grub cooked up for a log-rolling?"

"It was nice," Anna told Mama.

"Aw, I'm afraid it wasn't much!"

"Walker, is Lucille anybody I've met over here?"

"No, Anna, you don't know her. She's a girl Old Man Hawk and his wife raised. She's their niece. Mama, did Lucille and Ollie have their wedding at Mister Hawk's house?"

"Why, no. They were just like nearly all the other young couples around Drake Eye Springs. One preaching Sunday they come driving up to the church in Ollie's buggy. It was right after services. And they didn't even step down outta the buggy. Folks who hadn't already gone home lingered around 'cause they saw something was up. Both Lucille and Ollie were dressed fit to kill. As soon as the preacher came outta the meeting house, he took his stand by the side of the buggy and started the ceremony. It didn't last two minutes! He just had Lucille and Ollie join right hands and repeat the 'I will's.' He then pronounced them man and wife, and that was the end of it. As soon as Ollie could hand the license papers to the preacher, he gave his old horse a slap with the reins, and off they went!"

Dorris pulled his chair over closer to the corner where Clyde was sitting. "You just oughta've been here for their shivaree, Clyde! Man, we made enough racket to wake the dead!"

"Yeah?"

"We didn't shivaree 'em till they moved out to themselves. Old Ollie thought we'd forgot 'em."

"Who all was in on it?"

"Oh, me and Bess and Jim-Bo and Hi and Casey and the Hansen girls—the whole gang of us young folks. And we took along everything we could lay our hands on: cow bells, washtubs, five or six syrup buckets with rocks in 'em! Captain Jones even let us borrow that fife and bugle of his!"

"Don't forget that I was blowing Papa's hog-calling horn!"

"Yeah, Bess had that steer horn Papa's got. Man, we nearly scared the daylight outta Ollie and Lucille! They admitted the next day that they thought the world was coming to an end!"

"Y'all sure enough surprised 'em?"

"And how! See, we waited till about nine o'clock that Saturday night, when we knew they'd be sound asleep. Me and Jim-Bo and Hi climbed up on the roof with the washtubs and hammers while the rest of the boys and all of the girls were easing their way up through the hall. Then, when Jim-Bo let out the whoop, we all cut loose! Wow! What a din!

"We heard Lucille scream! Next minute, Ollie came running out in his nightshirt! Then they saw who it was. As soon as they could pull on some clothes, we all went in. We stayed and stayed. I reckon it was nearly midnight when we left, wasn't it, Bess?"

"Yes, Lucille cooked us so much ham and battercakes and stuff it took a long time to eat it all up."

"Did y'all ride Ollie on a rail?"

"No. We boys threatened him. Then we told him that since he'd married himself such a fine cook, we'd postpone his ride. But 'course he knew as well as the rest of us that the riding on the rail part of a shivaree is sorta passed over nowadays. Still, he made like he thought he'd had a close call.

He told Lucille that only her good cooking had saved him from a nightmarish ride through Rocky Head Bottom!"

"Foot dool!" Grandpa told Dorris. "When I was young, we rode 'em all on a rail! Many's the shivaree I helped pull off! But you know something, boys? We've been laughing a good bit here tonight about weddings and infare dinners and shivarees and all. I'm here to tell you—laying all jokes aside—that the day a-body marries is just about the most important day of his life. My advice to you, Clyde, and you too, Dorris, is to look around. If a man wants to enjoy his daily bread after he's prayed for it, he'd sure better be particular who he picks to stir the dough!"

Chapter 8

I was learning fast.

I learned why you have to have Christmas Eve Day before you can have Christmas. It's so you can sit on the kitchen floor and string popcorn to hang on the big tree at church. Mierd told me that. And she was in a good humor, even laughing, when she said it.

The next minute, though, Mierd was fussing, saying I was bad, tattling to Mama.

"Mama, just look at Bandershanks! You ought'a get a switch to her! She's eating up every grain of this popcorn! Won't be enough left to go from one limb to another, much less all round the Christmas tree!" Mierd jerked the pan of popcorn out of my hands and held it up toward Mama. "Look, Mama!"

"Mama, Mierd's telling you wrong! I just eat the ones that crack when I punch my needle in 'em!"

Mama didn't even look around. She spread another dampened pillowcase on the ironing board and pressed her hot iron back and forth, back and forth, along the crocheted trimming.

As soon as Mierd set the pan back on the floor between our feet, I reached for more corn.

"Bandershanks, you're clumsy with your needle on purpose! See how long my string is? And look at yours! I bet you ain't got fourteen grains on it. Quit grabbing all the biggest grains!"

"You're making me spill it, Mierd!"

"Girls! Girls! Christmas Eve's no time for sisters to be quarreling." Mama folded the pillowcase as fast as she could and gave it a final lick with the smoothing iron. She glanced down at Mierd and me and at the half-empty pan of corn. She couldn't see the sour face Mierd was making at me. "Now y'all make haste and finish stringing your popcorn. We've got to go on up to the church and help Aunt Vic. She's worked so hard getting up the program, the least the rest of us can do is have the church ready tonight."

"Are we gonna just stay till the program?"

"No, Mierd. The cows have got to be milked, and I'll need to fix supper for your grandma and grandpa. So we'll rush back home as soon as we get the cleaning and decorating done. Thank goodness I'm through with this eternal ironing one more time."

Mierd hopped up off the floor and asked Mama where Wiley was.

"I thought you knew he went with a bunch of boys to look for the tree—this morning."

"No'm."

"I wish I'd gone."

"No, no, Bandershanks. Girls don't go tramping through the woods to cut down Christmas trees. The place for girls is in the house. Mierd, see if Grandpa Thad has finished hitching up the wagon for us."

I grabbed myself a handful of corn and ran with Mierd.

Lots of folks were going in and out of Papa's store as we passed there. Mama said they had waited till the eleventh hour to buy presents to put on the tree.

We could see several people up at the church, too. Uncle Dan and Wallace Goode's papa were at the woodpile chopping kindling. Mrs. Goode and Mrs. Hansen were stooping down by the church doorsteps. At first I couldn't imagine what they were doing. Then, as we got closer, I saw that they had the wall lamps and tin reflectors lined up on the bottom steps and were cleaning globes, trimming wicks, and polishing the reflectors.

Mama told Mierd that the Missionary Society had bought extra oil.

"Y'all gonna light all sixteen lamps, Mama?"

"Every one! After all, it's Christmas Eve!"

As soon as Mama went inside, she and Aunt Lovie started talking about the sagging old benches. They looked at the one with the bad bottom.

"It ought'a be either fixed or thrown away," Mama said. She took hold of one slat and shook it. The whole pew almost fell apart.

"Every last one of them should be taken out and chopped up for firewood!" Aunt Lovie declared. "Then we'd have to get new benches. Pa used to say that when the old church was built the carpenters just nailed together some scrap lumber to use temporarily—till the congregation could buy regular pews. Then, when we put up this church, we foolishly brought the old things on over here."

"Yes, I know," Mama said. "That temporary business turned into a long time. Forty years or more!"

I left Mama and Aunt Lovie still talking about the pitiful condition of the church. Mierd and Sally were shrieking and fluttering around like two young setting hens, so I had to find out what they were looking at out the middle window.

It was just Wiley and Wallace Goode and the big boys with the Christmas tree. They were at the corner of the building trying to slide the tree out of Mister Goode's wagon. We couldn't hear what they were saying, but from the way Dorris and Jim-Bo were waving their arms, they were all trying to decide whether to pull the big holly toward the front of the wagon or toward the back.

The boys finally got the tree out of the wagon and a base nailed on it. They carried the tall tree to the front of the church, but they couldn't get it to stand straight. In spite of long, stiff wires fastened to its limbs, the tree kept leaning toward the pulpit. Aunt Vic said that would never do. She had Dorris and Jim-Bo turn the tree around this way and that. Still, it wouldn't stand straight.

Finally, Mister Shepherd sent Wallace Goode home to get a hand saw so he could trim off the bottom of the trunk. Then he showed Jim-Bo how to brace the tree by nailing on three short boards.

Mister Shepherd and Jim-Bo and Dorris raised the big holly again. This time it stood straight, but the top scraped against the ceiling, just a little bit.

"Miss Vic, will this be all right?" Mister Shepherd asked.

"Oh, sure. A bent twig or two won't matter. Our star will cover the tip top anyway. One of you tall boys—Dorris, you'll do—climb up the ladder and fasten on the star. And wire it tight! It fell last year, remember!"

I didn't remember, but the boys did. They laughed.

"Boys, y'all lend a hand," Aunt Vic said, "and let's get the decorations on. Somebody tell those ladies in the back to put down their dust cloths and come help fasten the candles. Let's see, we ought'a drape the strings of popcorn around first. Here, Wallace, you and Wiley tie the popcorn balls on the low limbs. Oh, goodness! These I brought are sorta sticky!" Aunt Vic stopped talking only long enough to lick off the candied syrup that had stuck to her finger.

I picked up a popcorn ball, thinking maybe some of the sweet goo would stick to my fingers. But the schoolteacher saw me, so I had to drop it back into Aunt Vic's box real quick. I licked my fingers, but not much sweet stuff was on them.

"Bandershanks," Aunt Vic said, "com'ere a minute." Aunt Vic sat down on the organ stool and swung herself around toward me.

"Now, Bandershanks." Aunt Vic put her arm around me and drew me up close. "Tonight you're gonna be the little walking Christmas tree and say a recitation too!"

"Me?"

"Sure. All the older children will be in the part Mister Shepherd's putting on. So we saved the walking tree bit just for you."

"What does a walking tree do?"

"I'll tell you that in a minute. Your mama is gonna get you here early tonight, and you bring one of your papa's old, worn-out felt hats with you. Before the program starts, we'll wrap your tree costume around you. Then, when the time comes—I'll tell you when—you'll step out front and recite your piece."

"My piece?"

"Right! A little recitation all your own! Now don't mention what you're gonna say to anybody. It'll be a big surprise!"

She leaned closer and whispered a short rhyme to me. "Can you remember that?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, sure you can. Whisper it back to me."

I said it for her.

"Good! Now, tonight after you say it, I want you to walk through the church with your papa's hat, and everybody will put in money. That will be for poor people. Then you come back to me, and I'll get some of the little presents off the tree and pin them on you. Then you'll walk up and down the aisle so that folks can take off their gifts. What do you think of that? Can you do it?"

"Oh, yes Ma'am! I can do it!"

On our way home I thought I'd absolutely pop wide open with excitement. But I never did. At supper I gulped down a whole big glass of buttermilk with corn bread crumbled in it, and not a drop leaked out of me! Even after we got our stockings hung up and our Sunday clothes on, I was still in good shape.

I kept whispering my Aunt Vic piece over and over to myself. But as we were going back toward the church, Mierd and Wiley talked so long about how many nuts and apples and oranges we might get in our stockings that I forgot every word Aunt Vic wanted me to recite!

"Don't cry, for goodness sakes!" Mama told me. "Aunt Vic will tell you again what to say."

It was dusk before we got within sight of the grist mill and cotton gin. Mierd and Wiley were quiet. Mama wasn't saying much either.

When we were about halfway between the gin and Papa's new store, three men on horseback streaked past our wagon, their horses running neck and neck!

"I wonder," Mama said, "who's in such an all-fired hurry to get to the Christmas entertainment."

"That's just them Bailey boys," Wiley said.

"How do you know it's them dumb clucks?" Mierd asked.

"I'd know their bays day or night. They're the prettiest horses in Drake Eye Springs, and them boys are the meanest."

"Y'all mustn't talk so about them wild, mischievous Bailey boys. 'Course it's true they sorta took after their ma's folks, and to my knowledge none of Lida Belle's kin—or Wes's—ever killed many snakes. But at the same time, I figure Addie Mae and the three boys do the best they can."

"But, Mama, they—"

"Anyhow, Wiley, I thought you told us the other night that the schoolteacher goes over to the Bailey place on Saturdays to hunt squirrels with the boys and learn them how to read."

"He does. But, Mama, they're still the worst boys in the whole school. Don't nobody like 'em."

As we rode by the store, we saw Papa standing at the back door. Mama pulled up on the reins to make Belle and Pud-din' Foot slow down and called to Papa, "You coming on now?"

"Yeah! I'll be up there in a few minutes! Soon's I can blow out the lights and lock up."

It took Papa more than a few minutes to get to the church. When the house was getting filled up with folks and the tree was sagging with presents and I was already in my Christmas tree costume and it was almost time for the Christmas Eve program to begin, he still hadn't come. I was afraid he wouldn't get to see me being a tree or hear me say my Aunt Vic piece.

"When's Papa gonna get here, Mama?"

"Pretty soon. He'll be in before we start singing. Let's me and you sit on the front bench. That way, you can see good."

The mourners' bench?"

"Sugar, it's not the mourner's bench, except during protracted Meeting time."

Mama and I sat down and waited—and waited.

All the school kids, ganged up in the corner behind the stage curtain, were getting noisy. It sounded like fun, but we heard Aunt Vic ask them to please be quiet.

Mama wanted me to be still. "Quit twisting around, Bandershanks!" she said. "You'll tear up your costume!"

I hadn't been doing any twisting, except when I slid down to the far end of the bench to watch the folks hang gifts on the tree, or when I looked back to find out who else was coming in the door, or when I turned so I could see everybody sitting behind us. Mama should have known that bit of twisting around wouldn't hurt my walking-tree dress.

Mama turned sideways herself to see what Ginger was gonna do, as he kept trotting up and down the aisle. She said he was trying to find Aunt Vic.

Instead of looking behind the curtain, Ginger kept going down to the bench where he sat by Aunt Vic on Sundays. Finally he gave up his looking and his trotting and lay down by the wood box.

I stretched both my arms out straight.

"Mama, how come y'all wound this green paper 'round my arms?"

"They're tree limbs. And your pointed hat is the tip top of the tree. See?" Mama reached over and set my paper hat farther back on my head. "It's got to sit straight up to look right."

I smoothed out the wrinkles at my elbows and fluffed the leaves across my shoulders. Aunt Vic had told me I looked pretty. I thought so too.

Papa didn't know what to think when he finally walked in and saw me sitting there in my shaggy dress. Mama told me to stand up and turn around so he could take a look at me.

"Good gracious, Bandershanks, you're all diked out here tonight!"

"I'm a Christmas tree, Papa!"

"I believe you are!"

Papa sat down on the front bench by us instead of going over to his Sunday place in the corner, where he always sat with Captain Jones and Uncle Dan and the other men.

I noticed Captain Jones wasn't in the men's corner either. He was standing near the organ talking with the schoolteacher and my big sister Bess. As they talked, Captain Jones kept waving his walking stick toward the stage and the curtain. Every time he spoke, his chin jiggled his beard up and down. His beard, I decided, was even longer and whiter than Grandpa Thad's.

The three stood talking only a minute longer. Then Bess sat down on the organ stool and started looking through her hymnbook. Captain Jones leaned on the teacher as they went slowly up the platform steps. Mister Shepherd had to help Captain Jones get seated in the high-backed chair Brother Milligan used on Preaching Sundays.

"My, Nannie, what a crowd!" Papa had turned to look over the church.

"Seems like everybody in the settlement is here, yet I see folks are still coming in."

"I'm afraid Doctor Elton won't make it. He said when he passed the store that there's a regular outbreak of influenza down below the State Line Road."

"I hope and pray it don't spread up here!" Mama pulled her cape closer around her shoulders. "Wind must be rising. Every time that front door opens, I feel it."

"Yeah," Papa told her, "the wind has come up. A pretty night, though. Stars out. The moon full. Perfect for Christmas Eve."

I twisted round to see who was letting more of that Christmas wind swoosh through the church door. It was stirring up the leaves of my dress, and they had to stay down smooth and nice!

It was Miss Ophelia, bringing in her string of little red-headed young'uns and Miss Dink. But Miss Ophelia didn't have her new little baby with her. It was just as well that she hadn't brought him. She was having to use one hand to lead her two little girls down the aisle and the other to guide Miss Dink along and keep her from bumping against the heater. Why'd Miss Dink come, anyway? She couldn't see our high, sparkling tree, or the toys and presents, or the red paper bells and streamers hanging in clusters from the ceiling. Miss Dink couldn't even see my tree dress!

There were so many of Miss Ophelia's kids I could tell it was going to take nearly two benches to hold them. Wallace Goode's mama and her sister got up and moved across the aisle to another bench so the Lawsons would have plenty of room. Miss Ophelia sort of bowed and told them, "Much obliged, much obliged," over and over.

Finally, she got all the young'uns in place and Miss Dink settled, and she sat down on the front slat of their bench. I thought she would lean back and start

smiling and talking to the folks around her, the same as everybody else. She didn't. She just stayed perched there on the edge of that one thin plank like a scared bird, afraid of having to fly away any minute.

"Bandershanks, turn around!" Mama whispered, "and quit staring at people. It's impolite."

Papa started talking and worrying about Grandpa Thad. "Nannie, I do wish Pa had come. He would've enjoyed it."

"I tried to persuade him, Jodie. But 'course he felt like he had to stay with your ma."

"I reckon so."

"Guess who did come in a few minutes ago?" Now Mama was talking louder, and like she was happy.

"Who?"

"Lida Belle and Wes Bailey. They're sitting back yonder on the last bench."

"I saw their rip-snorting boys ride past the store. Wes'd better watch out. Them boys will run his bays to death."

"They passed us just a-galloping. You know, Jodie. I don't reckon Lida Belle and Wes have been to a tree in this church in ten years—oh, longer than that. Wonder what's come over them."

"Funny thing. Wes Bailey came into the store day before yesterday and bought an expensive blue silk tie. Said it was for the tree."

"I helped Vic put on the toys for Ophelia's young'uns and looked at all the presents, but I didn't notice whose name was on that blue tie."

"And, Nannie, Lida Belle bought twenty-one yards of piece goods! First thing when she got in the store, she went 'round behind the counter and began fingering every bolt of cloth on the shelves. Why, it took her a good half hour to settle on what she wanted; and when she did, she got seven yards of purple calico, seven of yellow, and seven of the red."

"Well, Jodie, I wonder if the reason Wes and Lida Belle haven't been coming to church on Christmas Eve is 'cause all these years the schoolteachers have never once given Addie Mae or the three Bailey boys a part on the program. 'Course I doubt if any one of them could, or would, learn a recitation, even if a teacher assigned it to them."

"I don't know. I always thought the reason they hadn't been coming was because of the old feud."

"Lida Belle and Wes weren't mixed up in the feud, were they, Jodie?"

"No, they weren't old enough. But Old Lady Bailey lived with them so long and harped on the feud so much, I reckon maybe they got to thinking they could get tangled up in its aftermath. Sometimes, you know, old folks can hand down hate and spite easier than they can pass on a single idea worth a hoot! The old soul

probably raved most about the Christmas Eve her pa's cousin was murdered in Millers Chapel."

"In Millers Chapel? That's new to me, Jodie. I never heard of a killing in that old church!"

"Folks quit talking it, it was so bad. I don't know what year it was, but that final and worst killing was when I was still a boy. It was on just such a fine Christmas Eve night as this."

Papa took off his heavy jacket and kept talking.

"Folks from Drake Eye Springs and Tubal and Millers Crossing had come for miles. You couldn't find one empty bench in the whole meeting house that night; in fact, a good many had to stand. That was the only church in these parts then.

"The shooting was right after the program. There was the usual confusion as everyone began going up front to claim their gifts. Folks said afterwards that some of the Williams men and grown boys had been drinking pretty heavy. The one they called Jake was talking uncommonly loud. He was, by the way, a great uncle to Ward Lawson.

"So, when Jake Williams kept making such a nuisance of himself, Old Mister Gus Parker—he was sitting across the aisle from him—hollered out, 'Jake Williams, you get quiet! We can't hear 'em readin' out the names!'

"Jake hollered back, 'Here's you a Christmas present, you old Parker coot!' And he grabbed out his pistol and shot the old gentleman dead, right there in the church!"

"No!"

"Mrs. Parker started screaming, Jake run out the door, and somebody blowed out the lights! Then every man in the house took to the woods. Left women and young'uns to get out and get home the best way they could!"

"It must've been a frightful thing!"

"It was, Nannie. 'Course the next morning the Parkers went back to the church to get Old Man Gus's body. But the tree with all the Christmas stuff was left standing there for weeks. Folks didn't have the heart to go back in the building.

"The following spring when the trial came up, Jake was convicted, but he broke jail and got away. Old Judge Crawford had all the rest of the Williamses, by name, to clear outta the country. And what few Parker men were left took their families and moved off too. They figured the killing could flare up again among some of the Williamses' blood relations, and there wouldn't be a Parker man or boy left to carry on their name. Wes Bailey's ma was one of the few who stayed behind. 'Course she was already married. Anyway, all the Baileys, except Addle Mae, are here tonight, and I'm glad. It's not good for a family to live to themselves so much. Besides, it's Christmas, and we ought'a all share it together."

"Looks to me like Wes and Lida Belle would've had Addle Mae come home for Christmas. There's something mighty strange about them letting her stay down in Louisiana so long."

"I reckon that's their business, Nannie."

Chapter 9

We heard the organ squeak. I turned quickly to watch Bess as she started pumping on the foot pedals. I knew she would wait just a little before she began pressing down the black and white keys. She had to get a sackful of air into the organ before it could make music. She had explained that to me lots of times.

In a minute Bess began playing. Mama and Papa quit whispering to each other, and everybody else got quiet, too. The organ's pedals and bellows sounded louder than ever, but Bess kept pumping her feet up and down, faster and faster. She pulled out more and more stops till the music drowned out the organ's whining and wheezing.

"That pump organ's gotta be fixed, Jodie!" Mama whispered.

"Yeah, I know."

Aunt Vic stepped out from between the center curtains. Bess stopped playing.

"Let us all rise and repeat together the Lord's Prayer. And please remain standing for the hymn—selection one-eighteen."

We all stood up and said the Our-Father-Which-Art-In-Heaven prayer, and then everybody except me began singing a slow, sweet-sounding song I'd never heard before about the Holy Night.

As soon as we sat down, Bess left the organ and went behind the curtain. I didn't know what would be next. "Papa, will we get the presents now?"

"Not yet," he whispered. "I think the schoolteacher's going to speak to us."

Mister Shepherd went over to the pulpit stand. First, he said good evening to us all, and then he began making a speech.

He spoke about as loud as Brother Milligan, but I couldn't understand much of what he was saying. I could always understand Brother Milligan, for he said the same things every time—all about dying and going to Hell and somebody putting goats on one side and sheep on the other for Judgment Day. I knew all the part about hellfire and brimstone burning and about weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

But Mister Shepherd didn't even mention the fire and red-hot brimstones that Brother Milligan said were forever waiting for the damned. Mister Shepherd seemed to want everybody in the church to think about Christmas Eve instead of damnation. I was glad, because Hell is too far away to think about.

"This is a night," the schoolteacher was saying, "for the old, young, and all of us in between! How wonderful it is that you've come and brought your children and grandchildren to see the beautiful tree, to get their gifts, and to hear the story told once more.

"It's important that we keep our festive customs and traditions. They smooth the roughness of life. But it's even more important that we hold fast to our sacred beliefs and pass them down. They ease life's pain, give it purpose.

"It's a genuine pleasure being the teacher for your children this year. Every school day, from eight o'clock in the morning till four in the evening, my thirty-seven pupils and I are in our own separate world over across the branch at the schoolhouse. They're as fine a bunch as I've ever had, and I've been teaching now for seventeen years.

"Yet you can see for yourselves that if I teach these bright pupils only what is printed in the books, and if you provide only something for their dinner buckets, clothes to go on their backs, and a shelter for them at night, we all fail.

"During the short years that boys and girls are in our care, we must show them more than reading and writing and how to plant crops and how to get bread and meat on the table and how to marry and rear their own little ones. If this is all we do, we will have done no more than a 'possum that sacks its young around or any bird that tires its wings making trip after trip to the nest with worms and bugs for its fledglings. They too know how to get the necessities and to train their offspring to do the same.

"If we show children no more about life than this, that's likely all they'll ever know. The desire to search for life's full meaning, its sweetness, will never be theirs.

"I don't pretend to understand the purpose of human life. To me, the struggle to know is, in itself, almost the answer. A man strives all his days to get for himself that which is pleasant and lovely and good to think upon. Is not this a groping toward the Divine? Could it be that we were made to desire the perfect so that we would be drawn to the Almighty?

"Tonight, let's keep these questions deep in our hearts as the pupils give their pieces. Some of their recitations and skits are light, but most are serious. Through such a Christmas entertainment, we can put in the children's memories forever how God came down to man. In the years ahead this will help them, too, to struggle, to search, to hope, to hold fast."

Mister Shepherd moved back toward his chair and Captain Jones, and Aunt Vic took the lamp from the top of the organ over to the pulpit. She set it right beside the big Bible.

With the schoolteacher's help, Captain Jones managed to get to his feet, and both Mister Shepherd and Aunt Vic helped steady him as he walked toward the stand. Everybody stayed still and quiet, waiting.

Aunt Vic spread open the Bible to where the red ribbon was showing and then stepped to one side so she could hold up the lamp. "Is this all right, Captain Jones?"

"Yes, Miss Vic, I can see fine, thank you."

"At this time, Captain Jones will read for us, as he has these many years." Aunt Vic lifted the lamp a little higher.

When Captain Jones had straightened the nose piece of his glasses, he began reading:

"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed...."

That wasn't anything for me to listen to, I could tell, for I didn't even know Caesar Augustus. I wished Aunt Vic would hurry and say, "At this time, we will start taking presents off the tree." But I knew it would be hours before she got around to saying that.

Then, I made another wish: I wished that one of the popcorn balls would fall to the floor and that Mama would let me eat it up! But, none fell. They just stayed still, hanging there on the holly limbs, as if they too were waiting. Nothing on the tree was moving, except the flickering tips of the candle flames, and little wisps of smoke rising from each blaze. Nothing in the whole church was moving, except those candle lights and Captain Jones's lips and his quivering beard.

The stiff pasteboard in my paper hat was bothering my head so much I wanted to pull the hat clear off. I reached up to get it, but Mama made such a frown I knew to leave it alone.

Then we saw Aunt Vic raise one of her hands in a quick waving motion. Immediately somebody back on the stage gave the ropes a hard jerk and the curtains opened wide.

Of all things! An apple crate right in the middle of the stage with hay sticking out at the top and on all sides! I couldn't imagine why we needed hay at church.

Bess and Jim-Bo were sitting there beside the hay box, their hands folded as if for saying prayers. They weren't praying, though. They weren't moving their lips or keeping their eyes closed. They were just gazing down into the straw. "Mama," I whispered, "what's down in the box?"

"Sh-sh! Pay attention to Captain Jones so you can understand the pageant."

I started to listen to him. Then I happened to glance toward the far side of the stage. I was glad I did! There came all the school girls—Mierd and Irene and Sally and all the rest—every one dressed up like an angel with pretty shining wings. And right behind the girls were Wiley and Wallace Goode and the Hansen boys. But they didn't have on wings. They were just toting little pasteboard sheep, gray and droopy, and long crooked sticks. Slowly the angels and the sheep boys circled around behind Bess and Jim-Bo, and every last one of them leaned their heads over to look down in the hay.

"Mama, there's something down in that box!"

"Sh-sh, Bandershanks. If you can't see, why here, stand up on the bench a minute."

I stood on tiptoe and stretched my neck. "It's a baby, Mama!"

"I know."

"He's asleep!"

"Be quiet, Bandershanks, and sit back down."

"Mama, how come the baby's in the hay?"

"Hon, the baby is like the Little Lord Jesus."

I stood up again to look.

"He's got red hair! Mama, that's Miss Ophelia's baby! He—"

We heard a big commotion outside, and everybody turned toward the back door. Mister Goode opened the door. But instead of going outside, he beckoned for whoever was at the doorsteps to come into the church.

Three curious-looking men filed in, one close behind the other. They marched, clomp, clomp, straight up on the stage.

"Look, Nannie," Papa whispered, "now we know why Lida Belle bought that calico!"

"I declare to my soul, Jodie. I can't believe it!"

The men had on the most peculiar clothes I'd ever seen: long, flowing robes that dragged to the floor; high, bespangled headgear that reached halfway to the ceiling. They looked a good bit like the kings in my storybook. That's what they were! Real live kings! But where did they come from?

I jumped up to see what they would do with the pretty sparkling chests they were toting. These might be three more presents to put on the tree for somebody. No. The kings didn't even look at the Christmas tree.

They lined up in a straight row in front of the sleeping baby. Then the one who wore the purple robe nodded to the one in yellow. He, in turn, cut his eyes around toward the one wearing red. All together, the three bowed themselves down to the floor and lifted up the three golden chests.

I noticed that the big king men all had on regular high-top shoes just like Papa's. I looked up at their faces.

"Mama! They ain't no kings! That's them bad Bailey—"

"Hush!" Mama clamped her hand across my lips and pulled me down into her lap. "Tonight, hon, they're kings, the Orient Kings. You listen to Captain Jones."

I had forgotten all about him. He was standing up there in front of Aunt Vic and the lamp, still reading, his white beard quivering.

“...they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.”

Captain Jones stopped. He closed the Bible. Still, nobody moved or said a word.

Then Aunt Vic gave a quick motion with her hand. The curtains went together, and such noisy scrambling and talking broke out back on the stage that both Aunt Vic and Mister Shepherd had to hurry behind the curtains to quiet the school children.

"Now is it time for our presents, Mama?"

"Not yet. It's time for you to go get ready for your part."

"Now?"

"Yes, you run on back there and find Aunt Vic. And, hon, you do exactly like she says."

I found Aunt Vic, and I watched and listened as she and the schoolteacher sent the big kids out front by two's and three's to give their readings. Aunt Vic went through my piece with me again and had me whisper it to her three times. Then, right in the middle of Irene's verses about a hot Christmas pudding—and before I knew it was anywhere near my turn—Aunt Vic said I would be next.

"Sugar, repeat your recitation to me one more time now, real slow."

I rattled it off.

"Fine! You're just about the smartest girl I ever saw!"

Aunt Vic handed me Papa's rumped hat that I had brought from home and told me to follow her.

"Hold the hat out in front of you, sugar. With both hands."

When Aunt Vic and I got out to the middle of the stage, she took a big breath and made her voice go high and clear. "At this time, our little walking tree will recite the old-time Beggar's Rhyme, and this will conclude our program for the evening."

To me she whispered, "Now, hon, lift up your chin and say it."

I started to look up, but I saw the churchful of people. I looked down at my feet, trying to think what to do. If I were home, I could crawl under Grandma's bed. I tried to think some more. The churchful of folks were still looking. If I could just be a crawfish instead of a Christmas tree, I could scoot backwards and hide behind the curtain! But Aunt Vic had stepped back there. She motioned for me to take my finger out of my mouth and say my piece.

"Christmas is—" she whispered.

"*Christmas is a-coming,*" I started. "And, and, uh—" I looked back at Aunt Vic.

"The goose—" she whispered.

*"Christmas is a-coming.
The goose is a-getting fat!
Please put a penny in the old man's hat!
If you ain't got a penny,*

"If you ain't— If you ain't— If—" I had to look at Aunt Vic again. She whispered, "Half penny."

*"If you ain't got a penny,
A half a penny'll do.
If you ain't got no half penny,
God bless you!"*

A roar of laughter swept the whole church, and everybody started clapping hands, even the school kids behind the curtains! The clapping kept swelling louder and louder till it waked Ginger. He didn't like it. And I didn't either! He gave a shrill yip, jumped up, and came rushing up on the stage, barking at me like a big dog baying at a coon.

The more he barked, the louder everybody laughed and clapped their hands. Finally Aunt Vic called Ginger, and Papa came and got me.

Papa started smoothing out the leaves of my dress. I didn't care about the dress any more! I grabbed him around the knees, begged him to sit down and take me up in his lap.

"No, no, Bandershanks! You go on and finish what Aunt Vic wants you to do. Pass the hat and then let her pin on the little presents. You're a walking Christmas tree! Remember? And trees don't cry! Now, scoot!"

I scooted! From one side of the church to the other, I ran back and forth in front of each bench. And every person I passed dropped money into Papa's ragged old hat: pennies, or one or two nickels, or a dime, or two bits. By the time I came to the back pews, the bottom of the hat was sagging down. As Uncle Dan and the other men started tossing in four-bit pieces, it got heavier and heavier. The last people I came to were Mister Wes and Miss Lida Belle.

"You sure recited a nice little piece, hon," Miss Lida Belle told me as I squeezed my way between her thick knees and the bench behind me. She didn't drop any money in the hat, but as soon as she turned her head the other way, Mister Wes slipped in a whole silver dollar!

Leaning over close to me, he whispered, "Little lady, you see the pretty blue tie up yonder on the tree?"

"Yes, sir."

"I bet you, if you ask her, Miss Vic will fasten that fine tie on you and let you take it straight to the schoolteacher!"

Aunt Vic stopped calling out names long enough to pin the tie on my shoulder.

"Hurry right back, hon," she told me. "There are more presents for you to take."

"Where's Mister Shepherd at?"

"Right over yonder by the side door. Doctor Elton just got here, and he's talking to him and Captain Jones."

"I see him!"

By weaving my way in and out between people I got through to Mister Shepherd. I stopped and stood—straight as any tree—right in front of him. But he wouldn't quit listening to Doctor Elton and look down at me.

Doctor Elton wouldn't quit talking, either. He was so hoarse he could hardly speak. Every word was just a croak. Doctor Elton smelled of medicine worse than ever tonight. He kept on croaking and frowning and chewing the stuffing out of his cigar butt.

"Shepherd, the rascal has been hiding out down in Louisiana all this time! I wasn't surprised to hear it, 'cause I never did think he drowned. But I can't figure out how he bought a automobile! I'll ease up front and tell Jodie. But let's keep it quiet. No need to disrupt things and get the womenfolks and children in a panic."

While Doctor Elton was trying to get over to the center aisle, Old Man Hawk walked up and began asking him about the influenza ep-i-something-or-other down below State Line Road. The schoolteacher still hadn't seen me. He moved over and sat down beside Captain Jones.

I tapped on one of his legs. "Mister Shepherd! Mister Shepherd! Here's a present!"

"Why, hello, Little Tree!"

"It's for you!"

"My, how pretty! But it couldn't be for me. Let me see whose name's on the tag."

Just as Mister Shepherd leaned over to look at the slip of paper pinned to the tie, we heard a big rumbling and rattling -right outside the window. Then came a loud honking. I'd never heard such a horn before! Mister Shepherd jerked up his head, got to his feet, and turned around to Doctor Elton and Mister Hawk.

"Doc, you don't suppose that's—"

"It's him! Come to show off! A few of us men had better get out there. Shepherd, get word to the others. I'll go on." Doctor Elton bumped against me. "Green Tree Gal, step over a little so I can get through here!"

"Y'all lem'me get out too!" Mister Hawk was right behind the doctor. "I gotta go see 'bout my mule!"

When Mister Hawk saw there were so many people between him and the side door, he headed to the nearest window, raised it, and eased himself through.

Doctor Elton hurried on around me, but before he could get to the door, Papa came elbowing his way down the aisle, Uncle Dan right behind him.

"We'd better see who's out yonder, don't you think, Doctor Elton?" Papa was talking low, fast.

"I know who 'tis, Jodie! It's Ward!"

"Great Jehoshaphat and gully dirt! Let's get him! Come on, y'all! Let's get him down to my store and hold him there till we can send for the sheriff!"

Doctor Elton caught Papa's elbow. "Wait a minute, Jodie! Let's sorta stroll out slow—so we don't start a commotion. Let's make out like we're all dying to look at the automobile. Then, the minute he steps to the ground, grab him!"

"Yeah, we'll do it that way," Papa agreed.

Doctor Elton, moving along right behind Papa, began chewing his cigar faster than ever. "If we can ever plow our way through this jam of folks, we'll—God! Too late! Here he comes busting in the church! He's got a gun, Jodie!"

The front door had swung open, and there stood Mister Ward—waving a pistol above his head!

"Merr-rr-r Chris— Chris'mus! Merr-rr-r Chris'mus, ever'-body!"

Papa, the doctor, and Uncle Dan rushed on toward him, while everybody standing in the front of the church just sort of melted back against the walls—tramping one another's feet as they scrambled out of the way.

Doctor Elton croaked out, "Why, hello there, Ward," and slapped him on the back like he was glad to see him. Papa grabbed his arm, Uncle Dan, his coat!

Before I could see what would happen next, Mister Shepherd pulled me back from the aisle and had me scrooch down under a bench. Here, I couldn't see a thing but shoes and britches legs and Captain Jones's walking stick. I couldn't even hear what Papa and the other men were telling Mister Ward. But I could sure hear Mister Ward talking—loud, and like his mouth was full of baked 'taters.

"Y'all s'prised to see me, ain't you? What y'all grabbin' me for? I ain't done nothin'! Charged with kidnappin'? Hell, I just took the young'un for a automobile ride. Weren't my fault she jumped out. Anyhow, y'all found her. I come to get Ophelia and my young'uns. I ain't havin' my baby boy in no Chris'mus doin's with them damn Baileys. Naw, Doc, don't touch my gun! Where's Wes Bailey? I brung him a message from Addie Mae. Wes thinks I don't know where she's at! Doc, Wes is here, ain't he? Somebody tell Wes to come see my automobile! I bought the first automobile in Drake Eye Springs! What'd you say, Doc? Hell, yeah, you can ride on it! I left the motor runnin'."

I raised up, peeping, to see if I could see Mister Wes. I saw him, trying his best to get to Mister Ward. But he couldn't break away from Miss Lida Belle and Mister Goode, who had him hemmed up in the corner. He was twisting and turning, but they wouldn't let go!

Mister Ward's loud, blubbering talk got louder.

"Wes, I see you now! Cuss your hide, come out and look at my automobile! I'm aimin' for you to take one good, long look at it—'fore I shoot you! Soon's I tell you what Addie Mae says, I'll kill you! Naw, Doc! Lemme have my pistol back! I gotta use it! I'm startin' up the Williams-Parker feud again! I ain't Jake Williams's great nephew for nothin'! Great nephew! Sounds plum good! My Uncle Jake, he stopped the feudin' one Chris'mus Eve. I'm a-startin' it back tonight! You men are just dyin' to see my automobile? Shore, I got plenty time to show y'all! Come on! Hell, yeah, I'll let all y'all ride it!"

The church door slammed.

Everybody started milling around, talking all at once and making such a babble I couldn't tell who was saying what.

"Hush and sit still, Ophelia! Sit still!" That was Miss Dink.

"No, Wes! I don't care if you are the Justice of the Peace! He'll kill you! You heard him say it, didn't you?" That couldn't be anybody except Miss Lida Belle.

"I gotta go!"

Mister Goode hollered, "Wes, you'd better stay right here in this church! They can handle him! I'll go phone the sheriff myself!"

Mister Shepherd grabbed up Captain Jones's walking stick and started rapping the pew above my head with it. He almost hit me! "Let's be calm," he called out. He kept rapping till everybody got quiet. "Take your hymnals, please, and we'll sing another Christmas song. Then Miss Vic and the young folks can proceed with passing out the gifts. Miss Bess, please start playing the organ. I suggest we sing 'Angels We Have Heard On High.' It's a fine, fine old French hymn! You'll find it on page seventeen."

Bess started playing the organ. I didn't know whether to stand up to sing or not. Nobody could hear me if I kept sitting on the floor.

"Mister Shepherd, can I get—"

"Oh, sugar, I'd forgotten you! You can crawl out now. Everything's all right. They'll take Ward to be locked up. Let's sing loud!"

We sang loud, but everything seemed all wrong.

Right in the middle of our song—at the part saying "Come adore on bended knee"—Doctor Elton came back inside, his cigar gone, his mouth drooping down at the corners. He was coughing.

"We let the fool outsmart us!" he whispered to Mister Shepherd. "He'd left his motor going. He made out like he wanted to raise the hood and show it to us. 'Stead of that, he jerked loose, jumped on the seat, and tore off down the road!"

"I hate to hear that!"

"Jodie and them are trying to head him off, but—" Doctor Elton started coughing again. "They're trying to head him off before he gets to the bridge, but they'll never make it. Saddle horses just aren't a match for these automobiles! I'd've

tried to help, but me and my mares have—" The doctor took another coughing spell. "We've simply had it for today."

I pulled on the teacher's coat sleeve. "Mister Shepherd, is Mister Ward gonna come back and steal me again?"

"Of course not! Come on, let's keep singing! Loud, Little Tree! Sing loud!"

In dreams that night I grew to be a great tree, tall and shining, with ten arms instead of two, each a strong branch bent down by gifts of gold and precious things. I stood on the banks of Rocky Head Creek, not far from the bridge.

One low-hanging limb, heavy with blue silk ties, had been propped up with walking sticks, while at my roots lay Papa's good Sunday-go-to-meeting hat. It, too, was big, as big as a barrel. In the middle of it a fat, fat goose had made her nest. And there she sat, hatching out popcorn balls and pennies by the hatful.

Mister Ward came whizzing across the bridge, his new automobile loaded with guns and axes. He stopped to chop me down! But Ginger came frisking along just then and barked so loud it scared him and his automobile away.

Old Mister Hawk came walking along the far bank of the creek, leading his mule to get water. She saw me and blinked her eyes and gave her tail a swish. Before I could say anything, though, Mister Hawk took her away without even looking up. All he said was, "Let's go, Nellie."

Then, three kings on bay horses came galloping by, their calico robes rippling in the wind, their laughter ringing through the woods.

"Pick some presents!" I called.

All whirled around and came back, and they gathered fine gifts from my boughs-enough to fill their saddlebags.

"Where are you going in such a rush?"

"To see the Holy Babe!" they cried.

"Why not take me?" I asked.

"Yeah! Let's take the whole tree!"

So, with merry shouts, they pulled me up and carried me away to the Holy Babe in the hay box.

Chapter 10

Every Preaching Sunday morning, right after services were finished and we were ready to leave the church grounds, Papa said two things, one to the mules, the other to Mama.

He'd get Belle and Puddin' Foot unhitched and backed away from our oak tree and headed toward the main road; then he'd give the mules a light slap with the reins and say, "Belle! Puddin' Foot! Quit moving like molasses! There's such a thing as getting home 'fore dark!" Then he'd look around at Mama and say, "Nannie, looks like on preaching days you invite everybody and his dog to go home with us for dinner!"

And every single time, Mama would smile up at Papa and say, "Well, ain't you glad the dogs don't come!"

Then they would laugh, and we'd ride on home. Mama would start putting all the Sunday good things on the dinner table, and Papa would leave the wide gate open so the company folks could drive their wagons and buggies into the well lot, where a long time ago Grandpa Thad had wedged hitching rings deep into the trunks of the black walnut trees. And before the company men could unharness their teams, Papa would have his feed trough filled with fodder and corn.

But the first Sunday after Christmas, I knew Papa wouldn't tell Mama a thing about inviting dogs to come eat dinner. Our wagon was the last one leaving the church grounds, and nobody was going home with us, not even Mierd and Wiley. Jenny Goode had begged Mama to let Mierd go to her house to eat dinner and spend the evening, and Mama had said she could. Wiley had gone home with the Hansen boys, and Wallace Goode went there too.

Papa climbed into the wagon, gave Belle and Puddin' Foot a light slap with the reins, and told them about how slow cold molasses moves in wintertime. As usual, they paid no attention.

"You didn't ask anybody to take dinner with us today, Nannie?"

"I asked several, Jodie. But Miss Maime had already invited Vic and the schoolteacher to go with her and Doctor Elton. And January is always their turn to take the preacher, you remember."

"Yeah, I bet Doctor Elton's looking forward to that! It'll half kill the man to sit all evening and talk to Brother Milligan!"

When we got home, I climbed down from the wagon and skipped on toward the front porch. Mierd's old Nero came around the corner of the house and met me at the yard gate. When I stopped to pet him, he purred and rubbed his back up against my legs.

Mama called to me from the kitchen and told me to run and tell Grandpa and Grandma that we were home from church. "Tell them I'll have Grandma's tray ready in just a little bit—soon as I can warm up the chicken and dumplings."

In a few minutes I was back, and I found Mama in the kitchen already setting things on Grandma's dinner tray.

"Mama, you know what Grandma Ming said?"

"No, there's no telling 'bout your grandma. What'd she tell you this time?"

"She said if I stand 'hind the door and eat a chicken foot, it'll make me pretty!"

"Goodness me! I'd forgotten that old saying."

"Can I do it, Mama?"

"You can try it, if you want to. That is, if the old rooster's feet haven't boiled all to pieces."

I followed Mama over to the cook stove and watched her lift the cover off the stew pot. White steam whoofed up, but she jerked her head back before it could get on her face. With a big spoon, she started stirring through the hot simmering dumplings.

"Here's one foot. Well, here's the other one. You may as well have both of them. But now, Bandershanks, don't be expecting too much."

Mama put the chicken feet on a saucer and handed it to me.

"Careful now. They're hot."

"Which door, Mama?"

"It won't matter. Try that one."

She pointed to the door between the kitchen and the fireplace room. I slid myself in behind it and squatted down to wait for all the steam to float away from the saucer. Then I happened to remember that Grandma Ming had said if I wanted to get pretty to *stand* behind the door and eat a chicken foot, so I stood back up again.

As I got up, one piece of my chicken slid off the saucer and fell to the floor. That was all right. I just wiped it off good with the tail of my underskirt.

When I had finished chewing up every last piece of skin and soft gristle sticking to the bones, I set my saucer on the floor and darted over to the bureau by Mama's bed. But its looking glass had wavy streaks, so I ran across the hall to the big dresser in the front room. After a few minutes I decided I'd have to go back in the kitchen to Mama.

"Mama, them chicken bones ain't no good! I got to the looking glass, and it was— It was— It—"

"It was what, hon?"

"My same face!"

"Well, don't cry! You look fine. Sometimes it takes a long time for a girl to get extra pretty. Some need lots of chicken feet."

"I wish every chicken had a hundred feet!"

Papa called me to come over to the kitchen bench where he was sitting.

"Come on, sugar." He took out his pocket handkerchief to wipe my sticky fingers. Then he lifted me up in his arms. "You look real beautiful to me."

While we were eating Sunday dinner, Mama said, "Jodie, I know it'll make you mad when I tell you what I've got to do this evening. But I can't help it."

"What're you talking about? We've been married nearly twenty-seven years, and I ain't got real mad at you yet, have I?"

"Well, it's this— Our Missionary Society voted to take turns carrying foodstuff over to Ophelia and her young'uns. Today's my turn!"

"You're aiming to take groceries to Ward Lawson's house? Good Lord, Nannie!"

"It's our Christian duty!"

"Christian duty?" Papa had to grab his glass of water and take a gulp to keep from choking on the biscuit he was eating.

"We can't let old Miss Dink and Ophelia and them nine young'uns suffer! Vic took vittles to them Wednesday, and she said they're on starvation—not a crumb in the kitchen! No bread, no meat, just nothing."

Papa put down his knife and fork. "Nannie, it ain't my Christian duty to feed the family of a sorry, no-'count sot who nearly beat me to death, then burned down my store and kidnapped my baby! And he ain't through yet! He'll poison our livestock or—"

"But, Jodie! The poor little young'uns! They can't help it! They—"

"All right! All right! I'll hitch up the buggy and take you—this one time. I declare, womenfolks don't look at things like men do. You see Christian duty where all I see is plain, hard facts!"

It was rather late when we got to Miss Ophelia's place. We didn't see anybody on the porch, in the hall, or anywhere. But there was a little streak of smoke rising from one chimney. Papa hitched Dale close to the yard gate, and we sat in the buggy to wait while Mama went inside with her box of eggs and butter and stuff. We'd been there a few minutes when Papa noticed two people coming up the trail from Ned's house.

"Looks like two women, Bandershanks."

"It's Shoogie! And Doanie! Papa, lem'me run to meet them!"

"All right."

Shoogie was glad to see me. Doanie, too. When we got back to the buggy, Doanie asked Papa if Shoogie could ride back home with us.

"Yeah, I reckon so, Doanie. What's going on?"

"Trouble, Mister Jodie. Trouble's pilin' up! Shoogie, she is plum puny. And now, Huldie and me just got word to go quick and help with a birthin'. Huldie see'd

you pass Ned's house. She said ask, maybe y'all carry Shoogie back. She just in the way. Huldie said tell Black Idd he better put her in the bed. She look puny, plum puny!"

"In that case, we'll take her."

Shoogie didn't look puny to me. She was grinning and eating hickory nuts. She let me have a bite and whispered that she knew where we could find lots, lots more.

"They's just lyin' on the ground—right down yonder at the field. Wanta go get some, Bandershanks?"

"Yeah, let's do! Papa, I'm going with Shoogie. We're gonna pick me up some hickor'nuts!"

"No, no, I don't want you out of my sight."

"It's just right yonder, Papa."

"Where's the tree at, Shoogie?"

"This side o' that rail fence."

"Well, don't y'all be gone long, Bandershanks. Surely your mama will soon quit talking and come on so we can go home. I declare, this is nearly 'bout too much!"

There weren't as many nuts lying under the hickory tree as Shoogie had thought. We found a few. Then we climbed over the fence to look under two more trees closer to the edge of the cornfield. None there.

"Bandershanks, let's go to them big trees 'cross the field yonder on that hill. See them? I just knows there's plenty under all o' them hickor'nut trees. I bet that's where Little Stray and Ned's chillen picks up their'n."

"Papa won't like it!"

"We'll run and get back quick. Your mama still ain't back to the buggy. And your papa won't never know we's went. Look at him. He's just walkin' back and forth. Come on, Bandershanks! We's gotta run fast!"

We did run fast, but it was farther across the cornfield than we had thought. When we finally got to the clump of hickory trees, all we could find were a few hulls lying around on the ground, and they were buried in dried-up leaves.

"I don't see none to pick up, Shoogie!"

"Squirrels has et them all."

"Shoogie, let's go back."

Shoogie caught my sleeve. "Be quiet a minute," she whispered. "I thought sho' I heerd somebody out in the woods. Yeah! Look! Some man with his shotgun! Run back in the field! He may be mean!"

"A man? Where?"

"'Tween them 'simmon trees! We's gotta hide, Bandershanks! Quick! Get behind these bushes!" Shoogie pulled me into some high weeds. "Squat down behind this big old stump!"

"Shoogie, silly! That ain't a mean man. That's— Ouch, Shoogie! You're hurting my arm!"

Shoogie grabbed my other arm! "Look, Bandershanks! Yonder, comin' this way! More mens! Naw, it's Ned and Little Stray! Sylvie, too—just a-streakin' 'cross the field. Sylvie must be chasin' a rabbit. Lawd, no! There's a white man chasin' Ned! Who's that white man, Bandershanks?"

"I can't see nobody! Where?"

Then I saw!

"Don't let him get me, Shoogie! Don't let him steal me!"

"Stop, Bandershanks! Come back here! Don't run! Mister Ward'll see us! Be still, still. Scrooch way low!"

We huddled closer together. Closer to the stump.

"Don't breathe, nor nothin'!"

We could hear the dry cornstalks popping like little firecrackers as Ned and Stray and Mister Ward got closer and closer. Shoogie poked her head up to look. I took a quick peep.

"He gonna shoot 'em! Mister Ward gonna shoot!" Two loud blasts! Another! Little Stray darted by. Another blast! Mister Ward kept coming! Shoogie shoved me to the ground! I couldn't see Ned any more.

"Get on your belly and crawl! We's gotta get outta here! To the woods! No, this way! Through the corn!"

The next shot whizzed right over our heads!

Mister Ward yelled, "O, God!" He was right at us!

Shoogie jumped up, jerked me up, and darted back toward the woods. Then she whirled to go the other way.

"No, Shoogie! Not this way!"

We ran smack into Mister Ward! It knocked him down! We fell too, but he didn't reach out and catch at me or Shoogie! He just grabbed at his own neck, pulled himself up against our hiding stump, and cried "O, God" again. Shoogie rolled me over so fast my mouth got full of dirt! Before I could spit it out she had us both down in a gully, up again, and headed across the field. She was dragging me every step. Cornstalks hit me in the face. They were hitting her too, but she wouldn't slow up.

"Shoogie, wait and see what they're gonna do!"

"No! We don't care what they gonna do! We gotta get outta here!"

"I can't run so fast, Shoogie!"

"We's gotta get back to that rail fence and that hickor'nut tree! Bandershanks, pick your feets up high! That's the way to run fast!"

It seemed we were running and stumbling through all the cornstalks in the whole world, but Shoogie didn't care. She went streaking on.

When Shoogie finally did slack down and turn my hand loose, she began whispering to me as if she were starting a secret she didn't want even the high weeds to hear.

"Don't you dare tell Mister Jodie, Bandershanks! Don't tell your Papa Mister Ward done come back. Don't never let that mean white man's name roll 'cross your tongue. Not never!"

"Shoogie, my papa—"

"Gran'ma Huldie, she says don't breathe his name! Hit'll get you in trouble. She says she'll beat my hide iffen I gets in more trouble. And your papa might beat your hide!"

I didn't want that!

"Iffen Gran'ma Huldie finds out we seen Mister Ward, she'll get me for takin' you 'cross that field. She still claims hit was me what let Mister Ward steal you and run off with you. Says I ought not to 'a had you playin' by the road! Bandershanks, she 'clares iffen I gets you in bad one more time, she's gonna beat the daylight's outta me! And iffen you tells Mister Jodie, he'll tell Gran'ma Huldie!"

It was taking us forever to cross the field.

When we finally got back to the buggy, Papa didn't say a thing about beating me or my hide. He hardly noticed us. Mama was there by the buggy, and they were looking at a big, double-barreled shotgun Miss Dink wanted Papa to fix.

Papa walked back to hook the chain on Miss Ophelia's rickety gate, and he and Mama talked on—about Miss Dink being sick in the bed again, and about Miss Ophelia claiming she hadn't seen Ward since Christmas Eve night, and about some gunshots way across the field. Papa was more worried about the shots than about Miss Dink.

"Nannie, it sounded like it was between here and Wes Bailey's house!"

"Quit worrying, Jodie. It was probably them three boys out shooting at tin cans. Boys like to practice."

"Maybe so, but let's get on home. These days I stay uneasy, 'specially every time I hear a gun go off."

Papa glanced down at me and Shoogie. "You girls hurry and climb up in the back of the buggy there so we can go. My, y'all both look like you've been running pigs in a briar patch!"

"No, suh, Mister Jodie. Me'n Bandershanks ain't see'd no pigs. No pigs a-tall!"

Mama was surprised to see Shoogie. And she was afraid we had both just about played our dresses to pieces.

Papa helped Mama up into the buggy, and she held Miss Dink's gun and the reins till he could climb in.

"Nannie, I doubt if this old thing can be fixed. Just look, both hammers are rusty as all get-out. What's Miss Dink's idea, anyway?"

"Well, she's sick and worried, of course. The gun belonged to her husband, and she thinks it'd be some protection—now that her and Ophelia and the young'uns are by themselves all the time."

"I'll oil it up and see what I can do. But it's not any 'count." I tried to get Papa to let me look at Miss Dink's shotgun, but he wouldn't. He said guns were not for girls. He laid it across his knees and took the reins from Mama.

Papa gave Dale a light slap with the reins, and we drove on toward home. We didn't even stop to talk to Mister Wes Bailey, even though he was standing out on his front porch as we passed by. He and Papa just raised their hands to each other, the way men always do.

Papa had already gone to the store the next morning when I woke. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and looked over at Mierd's and Wiley's study table. Their books were gone, so I knew they had left for school. It was that way almost every morning, no matter how hard I tried to wake early. The whole family could eat breakfast, and Mama could even get the milking done and the cows turned out to pasture before my eyes would open.

I could hear talking. Sounded like Doanie. Yeah, that was Doanie, in the kitchen with Mama.

Mama was saying, "What colored woman was having a baby yesterday evening? Mister Jodie told me you and Huldie had to go help with one."

"Law, me and Huldie was up the blessed night! I ain't shet my eyes yet! Hit wasn't no colored! Hit was Miss Addle Mae!"

"Addie Mae Bailey! Why, didn't nobody know she— I declare to my soul! She's been visiting off down in Louisiana for the longest!"

"Miss Addle Mae, she come home the day after Christmas, and Mister Wes and Miss Lida Belle, they makes her hide in the smokehouse so's nobody'd see her. Then yesterday, when the time come, they won't fetch the doctor. They sends for Huldie and me."

"That poor girl!"

"Law, Miss, when we gets there, Miss Addie Mae, she's in a bad way. Huldie tells Mister Wes he ought'a send for the doctor! Miss Lida Belle, she beg and beg him to go get Doctor Elton. He say he don't want nobody, not nobody, knowin' 'bout Miss Addle Mae."

"What did—"

"Huldie, she do what she can, and I helps her. Finally, 'bout midnight, we gets the baby—the biggest baby I ever see'd! But, he was stillborn. Poor Miss Addie Mae was in terrible shape. Then Huldie see'd de blood keep a-comin'! She yells, 'Lawd God, Mister Wes! Fetch the doctor! Fetch the doctor! This girl's dyin'!"

"At that, he tear out for the doctor! Doctor Elton, he rush over and make her swallow somethin' he call 'Ergot.' Then he tell me to hold tight 'gainst Miss Addie Mae's bottom stomach with both my fists. That help. Miss Addie Mae dozed off to sleep. We stays there with her all night. Just 'fore daylight, the doctor say she gwine t' live."

"Did Doctor Elton see the baby?"

"Yes'm. Huldie, she done cover the baby with her cook apron. The doctor, he uncovers hit hisself. He say, 'God damn! Ward Lawson's!' He puts the apron back and walks out the front door!"

"I declare to my soul!"

Doanie and Mama stopped talking. At first I thought it was because they didn't have anything else to say, but it wasn't that. They came hurrying into the room where I was to look out the front window 'cause both of them had heard a horse galloping up our road.

"That's Mister Jodie comin' yonder!"

"Goodness, I wonder what's the matter! He hasn't been gone an hour!"

Mama ran to open the door.

It was Papa, all right.

"Nannie! Nannie!" He started calling her before he even got off his horse.

"What's wrong, Jodie?"

"He's dead! They just found him!"

"Who?"

"Ward! Ward Lawson's dead!"

"Oh, the Lawd have mercy!" Doanie screamed. She threw up her hands and ran for the back door.

"Doanie! Papa called her back.

Doanie let the door slam and came running back inside.

"Is Sun Boy at home?"

"Yes, suh. He home."

"Tell him to come up here quick."

"Yes, suh."

"I've got to go over to the Lawson place. Miss Nannie will have to go too. You tell Sun Boy to hitch up the buggy for Miss Nannie, and y'all help her load up some vittles and stuff to take."

"Yes, suh." Doanie started to leave.

"And, Doanie, send one of your boys to tell Bett to come. She can cook today for Pa and Ma. Me and Miss Nannie may not get back before night, so tell Bett for her and Hollis to milk and feed the livestock."

"Yes, suh. I tell her."

Mama was rushing around, gathering up my clothes. She seemed in the biggest kind of hurry, but she whispered that I ought to look out the side window to see the icicles.

I was still watching the icicles when Doanie flew out the yard gate, running as fast as she could go. One corner of her white head rag came untied before she got as far as the well, but she didn't stop to fasten it back in place. To keep it from flapping in her eyes, she jerked it off her head as she disappeared around the side of the garden.

"Jodie, what happened?"

"I don't know yet. Wes phoned me. He'd just heard it. Said Ward was shot—stayed out in all the freezing drizzle last night. His shotgun was lying on the ground by the barn fence, and Ned told Wes it looked like maybe Ward was trying to crawl under the barbed wire when his gun went off."

I wanted to tell Papa that Mister Ward wasn't even close to a barn or a fence when me and Shoogie saw the blood leaking out of his neck. But Shoogie had made me promise not to let Mister Ward's name roll out of my mouth! So, I just looked back at the icicles.

Mama sat down on the edge of my bed and started pulling my nightgown up over my head. But I could tell she wanted to talk to Papa, not me.

"Who found Ward?"

"Wes didn't say. 'Course Wes didn't know anything for sure. I tried to phone you, but never could get you."

"I reckon I was still down at the cowpen."

"He asked me to call into town to get the county coroner right away. I don't know why he didn't do it himself—he's the new Justice of the Peace. But I didn't argue with him. I phoned in and explained to the coroner everything Wes had told me."

"I can tell you how come Wes wanted you to put in the call! He's too tight to spend a dime on toll charges, that's why! Bandershanks, you be unbraiding your hair, and I'll help you with your stockings. What time you reckon the coroner will come, Jodie?"

"He's not coming. First he said that he'd get right on down here; then he asked me how far the old Crawford place is from town. When I told him it's around twenty-three or twenty-four miles, he said in that case Wes could just hold the inquest himself."

"Wes?"

"Yeah, he said that, according to the state law, if a coroner lives more'n twenty miles from the place where a dead body is found, the nearest Justice of the Peace can make the inquisition, as they call it."

"Will Wes know what to do?"

"That's what I wondered myself, but 'course I didn't say so to the coroner. No need to tell him we've got ourselves a J.P. who can't read or write. I just said Wes had never held an inquest and asked if there was any special instructions I ought'a pass on. He said to tell Wes to get himself at least twelve men and swear them in as jurors—have them take the oath.

"Then, he insisted that I hold the line while he got down his law book and read the oath to me. He had me copy it down, word for word, in case Wes needed it.

"But, Nannie, right after the old fellow had rambled through another five or ten pages of his state books, he said that if it was plain that Ward's gun went off accidentally while he was trying to climb a fence, why, we won't have to hold no inquest."

"I thought you always had to have an inquest."

"No, apparently not. He said that a county coroner is not obliged to call a inquest if there's no suspicion of foul play."

"What do you figure y'all will do?"

"I just don't know. But I gotta get on over there and tell Wes what the coroner said. We may have to ride around and get twelve men together. Hal Goode will be there. I phoned Doctor Elton, and he'll be on as soon as he can. He'd just come in off an all-night case. Dan's going. With me, that'll make four. And Old Man Hawk will come."

"Oh, you can soon get twelve men together."

"You know, Nannie, nothing ever shakes the doctor; but when I called and told him they'd found Ward dead, he sure sputtered. Took me by surprise."

"What'd he say?"

"He said, 'That son of a—' Ah, Nannie, it won't do to repeat. But, I declare, I never heard old Doctor Elton cuss so before."

"Who's keeping the store for you?"

"Vic's boys. Oh, I almost forgot. Vic sent you word that she'll go on over to Ophelia's as soon as she can dress a chicken. And she's gonna get Lovie to help her phone the other women."

Mama reached behind the door and took down Papa's heavy cloak.

"You'd better wear this over your jacket, Jodie."

"Yeah. It's plenty cold out. Nannie, I've had the strangest feeling—sorta guilty—like I'd killed Ward myself!"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"It's curious. When I first heard he was dead, I'm ashamed to say it, but I was actually glad! 'Course there's been two or three times when I wanted to kill that man! It was all I could do to keep from it. Now that he's dead, why, I've got an odd feeling—"

"You've got no reason to feel guilty. You didn't do a thing to the man. Jodie, have you got time to step out to your pa's and tell them?"

"Yeah, I'll go tell them. I've got a plug of Brown's Mule to take Pa, anyway. He may not chew it, but I'm clean outta his brand."

Mama followed Papa to the door.

"Jodie?"

He turned around, and she whispered something to him.

"Nannie! That red-headed devil!"

"Doanie told me, Jodie. And I thought you ought'a know!"

"That explains it!"

"What?"

"Where Ward got money to finish setting up his still and then buy that high-priced automobile! Wes Bailey forked it over!"

"As hush money?"

"Yeah."

Papa left in a big hurry.

Chapter 11

"Mama, am I gonna stay at Grandma Ming's?"

"No, Bandershanks, you'd better go to Miss Ophelia's house with me. It'll probably be late before we come home. When there's a death, you never can tell what's to be done. Here, stick this other shoe on and let's go to the kitchen and get you some breakfast."

"I want lots, and lots, and lots of breakfast!"

Doanie was back before the butter in my biscuits had melted and before I'd tasted my strips of fried salt meat. She pushed the kitchen door shut and came straight to the cook stove, wringing her hands together and saying, "Chile, this is the coldest day the Lawd done made!" Doanie blew her breath on her fingers and kept rubbing her hands. She held them up over the steam coming from the teakettle.

As soon as Doanie's hands got warm and limbered up, Mama told her to help me wash my face. Doanie poured lots of water in the wash pan, and I thought for a second or two she was going to scrub my ears off. Finally, she gave my face one last swipe and emptied the pan of soapy water out the back door.

"Now. That does hit. Dry yourself off good. You looks clean as a kitten with a fresh-licked face!"

The minute Doanie got my mittens and wraps on me, I ran out to climb in the buggy. Sun Boy had already loaded on the stovewood and had stacked it all the way up to the back of the seat. So when Doanie came out bringing the collard greens and meat and coffee and buttermilk—and all the sheets and quilts and stuff Mama had gathered up—she had to pack the whole works in front. The sack of eggs she set up on the seat by me.

Mama told me to prop my feet up on the pile of quilts. The thickest one she slid out and unfolded to wrap around our legs. Even that heavy cotton quilt didn't keep us from shivering and shaking as we drove down the road.

After we crossed Rocky Head Creek, we turned right on a little side road. Mama said it was a short cut, a different road from the one we took Sunday when Papa went with us to Miss Ophelia's.

We heard a gunshot way off up the creek.

"Who's that shooting, Mama?"

"Just somebody hunting squirrels, or maybe partridges. I sure wish your papa had time to kill us some. We haven't had a partridge on the table since Thanksgiving Day! And not many squirrels."

As soon as we got out of the creek bottom, we crossed over a steep ridge, and then I could see fields and two houses—one was Ned's house, and the other one,

with two chimneys, was Miss Ophelia's. It took only a few more minutes to get there.

"I declare, look at the wagons and buggies, Bandershanks! We'll have to go on around to the side yard."

Papa was standing on the porch, talking to some men. More men were down at the wagon shelter, where they were looking at Mister Ward's automobile. One man was up in it, trying out the hand wheel and the pedals.

As soon as Papa noticed us, he came around the house to help us get out.

"Nannie, drive Dale up in the yard, and I'll hitch him to this corner post. It's a good thing you brought this dry stovewood, 'cause when I got here, there wasn't a stick cut. I finally got Ned to chop kindling for both fireplaces."

"Jodie, what have you found out?"

"Not much, yet. You remember Miss Dink's half-brother, Mister Hiram?"

"Of course. He was the man who brought Bandershanks home."

"Well, Uncle Hiram, as they call him, found Ward early this morning, lying down yonder below the barn, about halfway between the barn and the woods."

Papa kept talking as he lifted Mama down to the ground. "Uncle Hiram couldn't tell if Ward was dead or not, he said. So he hobbled across the field quick as he could to Ned's. He got Ned and some of his boys to help tote Ward to the house. He sent Ned's oldest boy to Ralph Ware's to phone for the doctor, and he got Ned to run and tell Wes and Lida Belle. 'Course it was pretty soon after that when Wes phoned me, like I told you."

"Yeah. Then what?"

"Ralph said he never could get the doctor."

Papa helped me down. When my feet touched the ground, they felt so stiff I had to grab Mama's skirt to keep from falling.

"Is Doctor Elton here yet?"

"He got over here right after I did, but Ward was already dead. He didn't even examine him—just took one look at him and said he'd been dead all night."

Mama picked up the bucket of buttermilk and the eggs. She let me carry the sack of coffee. Papa gathered up some of the other sacks and boxes, and we walked up to Miss Ophelia's house.

"How is Ophelia taking it?"

"Oh, she's in hysterics. I reckon anybody would be. But, Nannie, old Miss Dink is the one in bad shape."

"Worse off than she was yesterday evening?"

"Yeah. Lots worse. Lida Belle says the old soul's talking out of her head."

"Lida Belle's here?"

"Her and Wes both. I figure they don't want anybody suspecting that anything's wrong at their house."

"Has anybody notified Ward's folks yet?"

"Uncle Hiram's gone back home to get his wife and to get word to the kin over around Millers Crossing."

"What about Ophelia's young'uns?"

"Most of them are at the schoolhouse. Uncle Hiram came the day before yesterday to take Miss Dink back to his house, but she was too bad off. So, he took the older young'uns home with him. I guess he figured it would help Ophelia. This morning he brought them back, straight to the schoolhouse. Then he came on over here."

"How'd he know where to look for Ward?"

"He didn't. He said when he first got here Ophelia told him Ward sneaked home Sunday but didn't stay long."

"But, Jodie, she vowed she hadn't seen him!"

"Well, anyhow, Uncle Hiram went down to the barn to feed the mules and to milk the cow. But the cow got out of the pen and was already way down the lane. He went to drive her back up, and that's when he saw Ward slumped down by the fence."

Papa pushed open the back door. There was nobody in the kitchen, and we didn't hear any sounds coming from the other part of the house.

"Nannie, some of the men seem to think Ward might've shot himself on purpose. And I wouldn't put it past him. He was a crazy, curious man. But, I oughtn't to criticize the dead."

"I'm wondering about Ward's automobile. When do you guess he—"

"Ned told me this Hicks fellow and another man brought it a few minutes before I got over here. 'Course they left, right away."

As soon as Mama hung her cloak and mine behind the kitchen door, she led me into the fireplace room, where Miss Ophelia and Miss Lida Belle and a big wide lady Mama called Mrs. Lee were sitting.

Miss Ophelia was holding her little baby boy on her lap and was rocking him back and forth. We could tell he was about to fall asleep, for every time he tried to open up his eyelids, they drooped back down again. He was two times as fat as he was that night when he was sleeping in the Christmas hay at church.

Mama spoke to all the women, and they spoke, but nobody did any more talking. They all kept sitting there, quiet. There wasn't a little chair for me, so Mama crossed her knees and let me squeeze in on the edge of her rocker.

The old ladies had drawn their chairs close to the hearth, and there they sat, their hands folded, just looking into the fire. After I had watched them for a while, I noticed they didn't even have their snuff-dipping brushes in their mouths. The front door squeaked.

I looked around. Papa and Doctor Elton and Mister Wes were coming in from the hall. Papa and the doctor took off their hats, and after Mister Wes sat down in the chair next to Miss Ophelia, he pulled his off, too. He held it in his hands, twisting it round and round, folding and refolding the middle crease.

"Miss Ophelia," he said, "I hate to trouble you at a time like this, but I reckon I'll have to ask you a little bit about Ward."

"It's all right, Mister Wes."

"The county coroner sent word by Mister Jodie that we don't have to have no reg'lar inquest 'less we figger somebody shot Ward. 'Course we don't figger nothin' like that, but when somebody dies under odd circumstances, we sorta have to look into it."

"Yes, sir."

The baby fretted and whimpered, and I just knew if Mister Wes didn't quit talking so loud, he was going to wake up and cry. Miss Ophelia kept rocking her chair real easy, and he drifted back to sleep. Miss Lida Belle leaned over to Mrs. Lee and said something about seeing to the cooking.

They both got up then and went into the kitchen.

Mister Wes kept on twisting his hat and talking to Miss Ophelia. He asked a lot of strange questions. She said, "Yes, sir" to some, "No, sir" to others. I couldn't tell if she knew just what he was talking about or not. I surely didn't.

"Miss Ophelia, if you wouldn't mind, just tell us what happened Sunday."

"There ain't much to tell, Mister Wes. Ward, he s'prised me! He slipped home Sunday morning—first time I'd seen him since Christmas. He was just ranting and fussing, like he always does. And, I don't like to say it here in front of Miss Nannie, but he was drinking—like he always does."

"Did he say anything outta the ordinary?"

"Well, he did talk a right smart. Seemed like Ward hated ever'body and ever'thing yesterday, even himself. He blessed me out twice for letting the young'uns go home with my uncle. Oh, God 'a mercy! The young'uns! Their own pa, lying yonder in the front room, cold dead, and they don't even know it! Ohhh-hh-h! I forgot my poor young'uns. They're all I've got left in this world."

Mama put me down so she could go over to Miss Ophelia. Miss Ophelia's hollering and crying got louder. Mama told her over and over not to worry about the children. Finally she got quiet; then Mama took the sleeping baby from her arms and eased him down on the bed nearest to the fireplace.

"Miss Ophelia, did Ward say anything a-tall about goin' huntin'?"

"Yes, sir, Mister Wes. 'Bout middle of the evening, just 'fore Miss Nannie come in bringing us them vittles, I was in the kitchen, and he come in. He was riled 'bout something, and in a rush. I asked him to chop a little wood, and he said he didn't have time. Said he was going a-hunting."

"I told him, 'Ward, this is Sunday. You oughtn't to hunt on Sunday.' He said, 'To Hell with the day o' the week. I'm goin' ahuntin'. And, I just might kill myself a coon!' Then he grabbed down his shotgun and went storming out the back door."

"Did you hear any shootin'?"

"Yes, sir. Later on, while Miss Nannie and Mister Jodie was here, I heard lots of shooting."

"Which way did Ward go?"

"Mister Wes, I don't have no clear notion. I heard Aunt Dink groaning, and I went running in the side room to see 'bout her. Oh, God 'a mercy! Poor Aunt Dink! She ain't had a mouthful to eat this morning! I'd better go see 'bout her."

"Now, now," Mama told her. "We'll look after Miss Dink. Doctor Elton's right here, so don't you worry."

What Mama told Miss Ophelia didn't do a bit of good. She just started wailing and crying all over again. I couldn't stand to hear her, so when Papa and Doctor Elton and Mister Wes put on their hats and left the room, I followed them.

Papa didn't notice I was walking along behind him, for he was listening to the doctor and Mister Wes, who were talking low, both at the same time. Doctor Elton tried to tell Mister Wes when rigor-something-or-other set in, but Mister Wes kept asking questions. Then he wouldn't wait for the doctor's answer before he started talking again himself.

A hard gust of wind swept through the house as we were crossing the open hall. Both Papa and the doctor had to grab at their hats to keep them from being blown away.

"This dratted wind cuts like a razor," Mister Wes muttered. He turned his cloak collar up to his ears and opened the door of the front room.

There lay Mister Ward on the bed! Somebody had spread a white sheet over him, so all I could see was his muddy boots sticking out at the bottom, his red hair at the top.

Two or three men sitting in front of the fireplace got up, and some more men I had seen in the hall walked in right behind me. Then Old Man Hawk came in.

Nobody in the room was saying anything. They all seemed to be waiting for the doctor, or Papa, or somebody, to pull back the white sheet.

The doctor bent over the bed and pushed the sheet to one side. He unbuttoned Mister Ward's hunting coat and ran his hand down inside the big pocket.

"Here're some soggy matches," he said, "and two shells—and his bottle. It's empty. Here, Jodie, set it up there on the mantel. Well, I'll be damned! A squirrel!"

Doctor Elton pulled a chunky red squirrel out of Mister Ward's coat pocket and held it up so we could all see it. Nobody said a word. The doctor looked at the squirrel again and felt of it.

"Umm-mm-m. A young fox squirrel. A pretty thing."

"Can I hold him some?" I asked the doctor.

"Bandershanks!" Papa seemed surprised to see me, but he didn't scold. He only watched as Doctor Elton handed me the fat, curled-up little squirrel. I ran my fingers along over its back and smoothed down its soft, thick, reddish-brown fur. Its tail was bushy and fluffy as could be.

"Better give him back to me, honey," the doctor told me a few minutes later.

He took the squirrel, and as soon as Mister Wes pulled the sheet over Mister Ward's face, we all walked out to the front porch. I held to Papa's hand.

"I reckon we may as well let Ward's dogs have this squirrel for their breakfast," Doctor Elton said. "What do you think, Wes?"

"Yeah, just throw it to the dogs, Doc. Ward must've shot it right 'fore he started back to the house. I see he didn't gut it."

Doctor Elton turned the squirrel over again to look at its stomach. "No, he didn't."

Papa gave a shrill whistle. Two hounds asleep at the gate pricked up their ears. He whistled again, and they came trotting toward the porch. Doctor Elton tossed the squirrel to them. Both dogs pounced on it and began pulling it to pieces.

Mister Wes started his loud talking again. "I don't figger there's no need o' havin' a inquest. Do you, Jodie?"

"It's for you to say, Wes. You're the new J.P. But it looks to me like Ward just went squirrel hunting yesterday evening and had an accident right before he got back to the house."

Mister Wes walked across the porch toward Doctor Elton. "What you think, Doc?"

Old Mister Hawk and the man he was talking with both quit chewing their tobacco and moved closer to the doctor, too. Old Mister Hawk cupped a hand behind one ear, like he thought the doctor was going to say something special. All the other men got quiet. And I stayed still, because I didn't know what Doctor Elton was fixing to tell Mister Wes.

"Y'all, this is a bad business. Death always is. A man in his prime is gone. And a sickly young widow has eight young'uns at her knees and another on her lap. Their prospects are mighty bleak. Her kinfolks will have to take them in, I reckon. But it appears that Ward's was a case where a man brought death on himself, one way or another. And I honestly doubt if an inquest would do him or anybody else any good."

"We just won't hold none then. I'm gonna go down the lane and look 'round one more time so's I can figger just where Ward was tryin' to climb over the fence when his gun went off. It's a pity the rain washed out his tracks. All a-body can see is where we've been trompin' this mornin' and all them holes Uncle Hiram punched in the ground with his peg leg."

Every one of the men, except Papa and Doctor Elton, followed Mister Wes down toward the horse lot. Some of them stopped at the wagon shelter to look at Mister Ward's automobile again. The others went on down the lane.

"I've got to get on back," the doctor was saying. "There's plenty of sickness this time of year, and folks will be calling for me. In winter I'm a popular man, you know. An old, tired, popular man! Ah, Jodie, I got called out at midnight last night, and I haven't seen my pillow since."

They stopped at the yard gate. As the doctor unhooked the latch he turned and looked straight at Papa.

"Jodie, I just hope the Good Lord will forgive me for times when I meddle in His affairs."

"You don't meddle."

"Sometimes, it's not what you do, Jodie. It's the way you say a thing, or don't, that changes matters. I'm telling you, this whole business worries me."

"It's enough to turn anybody's hair."

"Me and you might have made a mistake—mainly me. Maybe we should've reported Ward's whiskey still before we did. Maybe he wouldn't be dead today, if we had. Maybe it's a blessing he is dead. I don't know. When I think of that stillborn baby, I— Damn my tongue! Jodie, forget I mentioned a baby! My tongue slipped! I gave my word not to—"

"I already knew about the baby—Nannie and me. And we're not aiming to talk it. 'Twouldn't help Wes's daughter, nor nobody."

"That's the truth! Jodie, I don't know how you look at it, but as I see it, it's best now to let Ward's folks bury him and not stir up a ruckus over the technicalities of just how he died. Far as I'm concerned, it don't make a continental how the gun went off. It's not the how of death that's of any consequence. It's death. If there was ever anything any 'count in Ward Lawson—and there must've been at some time; nobody's worthless all their livelong life—it died a good while back. When, I don't know. But it wasn't Sunday at sundown when that lead ripped through his jugular vein!"

Papa and the doctor walked on through the gate into the grove of trees in front of Miss Ophelia's house, where the dozen or more buggies and wagons and saddle horses were waiting. But Doctor Elton wasn't bobbing and bouncing along the way he usually walked. He was dragging his feet, and when he got to the side of his big black buggy, he had to catch one hand on the dashboard and the other on the armrest so he could pull himself up to the seat.

Papa tugged at the bridle bit of one mare just enough to make her start backing the buggy a few feet. The doctor gave both mares a light touch with the whip, and they struck up a smooth trot. Turning halfway round, Doctor Elton lifted his hand to Papa.

When I saw Papa was going toward the barn instead of coming back to the porch, I scooted down the bare, windy hall to the kitchen.

More and more folks, most of them strangers, kept coming to the Lawson house. And it seemed that everything was going wrong and nobody knew what to do. I didn't know what to do either. Mama said for me just to be sweet and stay out of the way.

Uncle Dan brought Miss Ophelia's children home. But the girls didn't want to play with me. They just stood around, looking at the houseful of people. The middle girl, Sissie, never would take her thumb out of her mouth—not even long enough to tell me her real name. Effie, the biggest one, couldn't play because she had to tend to her baby sister.

The boy named Philip wouldn't play with me either. He had a bad earache. He had been crying with it when they all came home from the schoolhouse, and he kept on crying, even after Mama heated up a skillet of salt and fixed a poultice sack for him to hold against his ear. Finally, when Aunt Vic warmed some milk for him to drink, he began to feel better.

While Aunt Vic was making biscuits, Mama and Miss Lida Belle were trying to decide what would be the best thing to do for Miss Dink.

"It's dreadful cold in that far side room," Miss Lida Belle told Mama. "Let's move her 'cross the hall to the fireplace room."

Mama sent me out to the woodpile to get Papa. He came, and together they rolled Miss Dink up in a blanket, and Papa toted her across the hall. When Papa laid Miss Dink on the freshly made bed, she sank down into the feather mattress so far I could hardly see her wrinkled face. Something had made her cheeks turn a strange yellowish color. And she wasn't laughing like she had been that day she told me and Mama how a long time ago she smeared hog lard on Miss Ophelia's seven-year itch.

"Nannie," Papa whispered as he started out, "soon's you get time, ask what clothes Ophelia wants us to use."

As soon as Mama went over to Miss Ophelia's chair and began talking to her, she started crying again.

"Them things in the big trunk is all. They're all he's got, Miss Nannie."

I didn't know what trunk or what things she was talking about till a few minutes later when I followed Mama and Miss Lida Belle into the far side room. There we found two trunks over against the back wall, one flat on top, the other humpbacked—both dusty. Mama lifted the lid of the humpbacked one.

"It smells terrible, Mama! Just like Grandma Ming's big old trunk! That one with all them little white balls in it."

"Course, hon. All trunks have to have camphor balls in them, else the moths will get in."

There wasn't a thing in the tray of the trunk except a handful of dry, shriveled-up roses. Down in the bottom, though, we saw a long white dress with lots of lace on it and a man's dark Sunday suit.

Miss Lida Belle caught her breath. "Nannie! It's their wedding clothes! Is there a white shirt?"

"I'm afraid not."

"This other trunk is slam empty, Nannie."

Mama pulled out a wrinkled black coat and a pair of pants and handed them to Miss Lida Belle. Then she laid the wedding dress and the dead roses back in place.

"Move your fingers, Bandershanks. This heavy lid could cut them off."

"Well, Wes's got two white shirts. I'll just go get one o' them. He'll never miss it, but don't say nothin', Nannie."

"You want Jodie to take you home in the buggy?"

"Naw, naw. I'll cut through the woods. It's not more'n a quarter of a mile."

While Miss Lida Belle was gone, Mama set Miss Ophelia's ironing board up on the backs of two straight chairs and put two flatirons on the kitchen stove to heat. But she couldn't find Miss Ophelia's cake of beeswax.

Aunt Vic knew what to do. She just stepped out in the back yard and broke off a few little sprigs from a cedar tree.

"Cedar's just as good as wax when it comes to making your iron smooth," she told me as she was stacking the prickly green needles on the end of the ironing board.

Mama had the wrinkles pressed out of the suit by the time Miss Lida Belle got back with Mister Wes's white shirt and a celluloid collar that went with it.

"Lemme run the iron over these cuffs, Nannie. Looks like the last time I ironed this shirt, I must've just give it a lick and a promise. Here, I thought I'd better bring this too."

Miss Lida Belle handed Mama a narrow string of a black tie. Mama handed it to me.

"You can tote the tie, Bandershanks."

We took the tie and the suit and the shirt and stiff collar up to the door of the front room and handed them to Papa. Mama didn't say so, but I knew Papa and Uncle Dan were going to dress up Mister Ward.

I knew why: you have to get dressed up in Sunday-go-to-meeting things when you die and go to Heaven. God's up there, and it wouldn't be very nice to go to see God with just weekday clothes on.

Up in the middle of the day, Mama and the other women put dinner on the kitchen table. Some of the folks who had been there all morning ate; some didn't.

Mama couldn't get Miss Ophelia to eat anything. Not till Mama said, "Now, Ophelia, you'll just have to eat a little something to keep your strength up," would she even sip any black coffee. She nibbled at a piece of pound cake.

Aunt Lovie had brought the cake, and it was good. Aunt Vic let me have two slices of it to keep up my strength.

Another wagonload of people came right after dinner. Papa went out to the well lot to meet them, and so did I. They were wrapped in heavy cloaks and had warm bricks and blankets at their feet, but their faces were red, and they looked cold.

The man holding the reins said, "Whew, Mister Jodie, we finally made it, but I don't know if I'll ever thaw out or not!"

"It's the worst cold spell we've had, all right. Y'all just go on in. I'll hitch your team, and all."

As soon as the people got in the house, they went straight into the front room. The women all looked at Mister Ward and cried. The men bit their lips together tight and didn't make a sound.

I wanted to go home.

I went back outside, looking for Papa. When I couldn't find him, I ran into the kitchen, where Mama and Aunt Vic were getting food warmed up for the kinfolks who had just come. Aunt Vic said that they lived far away and were bound to be tired and hungry.

"Mama, I wanta go home."

"We'll be going now in just a little while."

The sun was down to the pickets of Miss Ophelia's garden fence when we finally did put on our cloaks to leave. Papa got some boy with Mister Goode to ride Jake home so he could go with Mama and me in the buggy. Aunt Vic followed us to the door.

"Vic, me and Jodie will be back over here around midnight to sit up till day. Then you and Lovie and Dan and some of the others can get some rest."

"I won't mind staying up all night, Nannie. Somebody's got to keep coffee boiled."

"I know, but there's no need for so many to sit up. And the way things have turned out, we may be here helping most of the day tomorrow. Jodie said the carpenter Ward's folks got to make the coffin can't send it till way up in the morning."

On the way home Papa and Mama talked of all the folks who had come to the Lawson house and of what was said and what was left unsaid. Mama thought it was a shame none of Ward's folks had sent for the preacher. Papa thought it was too late for a preacher to help matters.

Papa wanted to know if Miss Lida Belle had mentioned Addie Mae. Mama said that woman didn't part her lips about the girl all day long.

Then Mama told Papa where Miss Lida Belle got the white shirt. And Papa told Mama about the red fox squirrel the doctor found in Ward's pocket.

"Poor little squirrel!"

"What makes you say that, Bandershanks?"

"Mama, they threw him to the dogs! And he was so soft and warm. He was a pretty thing! Wasn't he pretty, Papa?"

"So soft and warm?"

"Yes, sir."

"*Great Jehoshaphat and gully dirt!* Yeah, he was pretty! But I didn't know he was still warm! My Lord! Nannie, do you realize what that means?"

"I sure do! If he wasn't cold yet, somebody stuffed that squirrel into Ward's coat pocket this morning!"

"Exactly!"

"What's the matter, Papa?"

"Nothing, Bandershanks. We probably won't ever know all the truth about that fox squirrel, or about the so-called coon Ward wanted to kill."

I leaned over to put my head in Mama's lap. She told me that I could just go to sleep and she'd wake me when we got home. So I shut my eyes tight. Dale's feet kept clumping. The wheels kept grinding.

"Poor little gal. What a day for her. Look, Nannie, she's already sound asleep."

But I wasn't. So, I shut my eyes tighter.

"Jodie, what do you aim to do?"

"It's too late now to do anything this evening, Nannie. Besides, I don't know that we ought'a try. If you stop to think about it, you couldn't prove who put the squirrel in his pocket. I reckon the doctor saw that. I'm trying to remember just what all he said. Him and Bandershanks was the only ones who touched that red fox squirrel. I know he must've noticed it was still warm."

"Do you figure it was Wes, or who?"

"I just don't hardly know what to think, Nannie. When I recollect and piece together what Doanie told you, and what Ophelia told Wes, and what Doctor Elton told me, it all seems clear enough. Either Wes or Ned killed him, I reckon. Still, Ward could've shot himself."

"Yeah, he could have."

"And any one of several persons, who did or didn't know what all had happened, might've slipped the squirrel into Ward's pocket to cover suspicious-looking circumstances. It might've even been that Hicks fellow who was in on the whiskey-making. Remember, he was over there early this morning."

"Jodie, it's bound to have been Wes Bailey."

"Well, maybe. Ward ruined Addle Mae. But, Nannie, had you thought of this: Wes couldn't afford to kill Ward. If he did, folks would ask why, and that would bring up Addie Mae's name. So Wes didn't dare."

"You guess then it was Ned?"

"I wouldn't think it of Ned. But Ward must've thought Ned had told the Law about the still. You remember Ophelia said that Ward was going to 'get him a coon'? The *coon* was Ned!"

"Jodie, oughtn't we to tell somebody about—"

"Nannie, for the time being, I aim to put the whole mess outta my mind. Sometimes, what happens is best left to the Good Lord. He can handle justice for all kinds of creatures: black coons, red squirrels, white men, black men—any kind, any color. Your pa used to preach that."

"Yeah. Pa got it outta the Bible. It says He takes note when a sparrow falls."

Chapter 12

"Bandershanks, wake up! Wake up, hon!"

I could feel Mama shaking my arm.

"Time to get up!"

"I'm sleepy."

"I know. But you have to get up early this morning. You're going to the store with Papa."

"He needs me?"

"Well, yes—in a way. See, I've gotta go back over to Miss Ophelia's to help Aunt Vic get all those young'uns' clothes ready for the funeral."

"Where's Papa at?"

"He went on out to saddle Jake. Now, soon as you eat your biscuits, hunt up that old mail-order catalogue I let you and Mierd have. You can cut out paper dolls this morning while you're up at the store."

"When you gonna come get me?"

"I ought'a be back before dinner."

I played paper dolls a long time. Papa let me spread them out on the floor, right under the candy counter. Along about the middle of the morning, he even said they could have some lemon drops. But none of my dolls liked lemon drops. I had to eat them.

I'd just swallowed the last bite when Wiley came running over from the schoolhouse. He had to have a brand new writing tablet. He wanted one with slick paper, but Papa said regular ones were plenty good for penmanship practice.

I asked Wiley what was penmanship, but he just told me I sure was stupid. I didn't care. I got Wiley to start bending some pasteboard strips into chairs and beds for my dolls. He didn't much want to make them—wouldn't till I begged and begged and said "please, please, please" so many times he couldn't stand it any more!

"Wiley, son, you'd better hurry on back across the branch. It's time for the taking-in bell to ring. Surprises me Mister Shepherd let you come over here during recess."

"Just a minute, Papa, soon as I fix Bandershanks one more chair."

Before Wiley could finish the doll chair, Doctor Elton rushed in through the back door! He didn't even glance at all my nice catalogue dolls, or me, or Wiley.

"Jodie, things are in a devil of a mess! We've gotta do something about Ned! And you!"

"Morning! What are you talking about, Doctor?"

"Jodie, we'd better get that poor nigger away from here! And I don't know what to advise you to do!"

"What's up? You think Ned—"

"Old Man Hawk's out getting the men together. He vows Ned shot Ward. We can't allow no lynching, Jodie! What's worse, Wes Bailey's gone to town to get the sheriff to come arrest you!"

"Great Jehoshaphat and gully dirt!"

"Wes thinks you killed Ward!"

"Where'd you see Wes and Old Man Hawk?"

"Hawk phoned just a minute ago. Said he had proof on Ned."

"Proof? What sorta proof?"

"He was so excited he didn't say. And, dolt that I am, I didn't have gumption enough to ask him. Anyhow, him and Hal Goode and three or four more want me and you to go with them to get Ned. They'll be here any time now."

"We'll stop them! I figure myself that Ned might've done it, but we don't know it for a fact! And we can't let him get killed just 'cause of some notion Old Man Hawk's got!"

"No! Hawk's in his second childhood! Besides, I don't believe it was Ned."

"How come Wes Bailey says I had anything to do with the killing?"

"Jodie, all I know is that he took off for town before daylight! Lida Belle told my wife he went to get the sheriff to arrest you! Why, I can't imagine."

"I wouldn't 've thought it of Wes. He knows me better'n that!"

"I tell you what, Jodie: whoever gets here first, you keep them in the store as long as you can, while I go to warn Ned. If it's Wes and the sheriff, get Wes to talking; get him wound up. Mention the old feud or something to set him off! Then, quick as I get back, I'll set Wes and the sheriff straight. If Old Man Hawk comes in first, ask him about his mule! Get his mind on Nellie, and he'll forget all about Ned."

"I'll do the best I can."

"Try anything to stall them. I'll hurry across the creek and tell Ned he'd better hide. I'm not worried about you, Jodie. But Hawk may try to kill Ned!"

"Yeah, he might! He's just crazy enough for something like that!"

"I wish to Heaven I knew how to run a automobile! I'd get Ophelia to let me borrow Ward's! Then I could rush Ned off somewhere!"

Wiley threw down my pasteboard chair and scrambled to his feet. "I can run it, Doctor Elton!"

"You knocked over all my beds and chairs, Wiley!"

He wouldn't listen, much less come back and help me. I had to straighten up my whole playhouse by myself.

"Wiley! Son, I thought you'd left already! You—"

"Papa, 'member I watched that Mister Hicks driving last summer? I know 'zactly which pedals to push!"

"Jodie, let him go! If he can show me how to do the foot work, why, I can sure keep the thing in the road! It might save Ned's life!"

"All right! Son, you can go. But you be mighty careful!"

"Hot diggity!" Wiley started running toward the front door.

"No, Wiley, not that way! Through the back here. My buggy's behind the store."

Wiley slammed the door as they rushed out.

It wasn't half a minute before Doctor Elton stuck his head back inside. "Hey, Jodie, what if the thing ain't got enough gasoline in it? What'll I do?"

"Lord, I don't know. Reckon coal oil would work?"

"It might. Pump me up a few gallons. I'll take it, just in case."

"My drum's slam empty. All I've got's some in a one-gallon can."

"Just give me that!"

Papa handed the oil to the doctor and had scarcely had time to close the back door when the front door opened, and in walked Shoogie and Black Idd. Then Little Stray and Ned.

"Shoogie! You look funny!"

"It's sho' 'nuff bad sick this time, Bandershanks. Grandpa Idd, he takin' me up to the doctor's house, soon's we warms our feets."

"Doctor Elton ain't— He just— Doctor Elton went to get—To get you, Ned! You gotta ride far away on Mister Ward's automobile!"

"Baby, what's you talkin' 'bout?"

"You! You better go far off!"

Ned kept standing in the doorway, looking down at me. I talked as fast as I could, telling him he'd better hide, but I couldn't make him get scared! He was carrying a big wooden crate on his shoulder, and he didn't even put that down.

"Baby, where's Mister Jodie at? I got him the puppies here."

"Puppies? Papa! Com'ere! Ned's got us some puppies!" Lemme see, Ned! Open the box! Lemme see them!"

"Ned! My Lord! What're you doing here?"

I didn't know Papa could walk so fast! He was at the front of the store before Ned could set the puppy box down.

"Mister Jodie, I done fotched you them two puppies what I promised you!" Ned lifted the lid. "See 'em, Mister Jodie! They's up good size. Both fat and pretty!"

Papa wouldn't even glance down at the puppies.

"Doctor Elton's looking for you! Did he see you coming in?"

"Naw, sir. I ain't see'd the doctor. Black Idd, he on his way to his house with Shoogie."

"Aw! For goodness sakes! You must've been coming in the front door at the same time he was going out the back! It hasn't been a minute! Lemme through the door! Maybe I can make him hear me!"

In his rush to get out on the porch, Papa stumbled into the puppy box, and almost knocked me down. Black Idd pulled me back out of his way.

"Doc! Hey, Doc! Wiley! Y'all come back!"

"They ain't no stoppin' him, Mister Jodie," Black Idd told Papa. "He's got them mares in a long lope. And they's way past the grist mill!"

"Papa?"

Papa wouldn't listen.

"Move your catalogue and scissors, Bandershanks! I gotta get to the phone!"

"Papa, look at the puppies!"

"This is no time to think of dogs! I gotta call your mama to head them off! I hope to goodness she's already back."

"Ned, can I hold this one?"

"Sho'. Stray, pick the puppy up for the baby."

Stray handed me the fat, spotted puppy, and he got the brown one. We lugged them down to where my playhouse was set up under the candy counter. Shoogie followed us, but she didn't want to play with the puppies or the paper dolls. She just sat down on the floor and leaned her head against her knees.

"Hello! Hello? Who's this on the line? Pa, is that you? This is Jodie. I'm trying to get Nannie. She's not back yet? Pa, I wish you'd step down to the road real quick and try to flag down the doctor and Wiley! Tell them to come back! Tell them Ned's here! Yes, sir, they'll know what you're talking about. I'll explain it to you tonight!"

Papa slammed up the phone and rushed back over to Ned and Black Idd.

"Ned, me and Doctor Elton think you'd better leave! Get clean away from Drake Eye Springs, quick as you can! Go hide out somewhere, Ned!"

"Mister Jodie, you wants me to hide on 'count of that squirrel?"

"The squirrel? Ned, did you stuff that squirrel in Mister Ward's coat pocket?"

"Yes, suh. I puts him there so's hit'd 'pear like Mister Ward was just a-huntin'."

"Did you kill him?"

"Well, yes, suh, and no, suh! I shoots the fox squirrel, but I ain't for sho' that hit was me what kill Mister Ward."

"What do you mean, you 'ain't for sure?"

"See, Mister Jodie, hit was like this: Sunday, just awhile 'fore sundown, me and Little Stray was walkin' 'cross the cornfield, lookin' for rabbits. Sylvie, she was with us. You knows Sylvie, Mister Jodie. She was sniffin'—"

"Yeah, I know all about the dog. But what about Ward?"

"He come 'long with his shotgun and starts shootin' at me!"

"What'd you do?"

"I runs, Mister Jodie! Fast! But I falls down—hangs my feets under a corn stalk—and I draps my shotgun. I hears three, four shots! But I ain't hit. Sylvie, she's down lickin' my face. Quick, I gets up and looks back sideways to see how close Mister Ward's a-gettin'. No Mister Ward! I looks again, and there he is layin' down on the ground, the gun in his hand, and hit still smokin'.

"And there stands Little Stray, holdin' my gun in his hand, and hit still smokin'! I say, 'O Lawd!' I gets up. Then I tries to 'cide what to do. The blood, it's a-gushin' outta Mister Ward's neck like a stuck hog!

"I grabs the chile and shakes him. I say 'Little Stray Boy, what make you shoot Mister Ward!'"

"He yell, 'I didn't! I didn't!' But, Mister Jodie, there he stand, still holdin' my shotgun in his hand. And Mister Ward, he layin' there 'tween the corn rows. I tries some more to 'cide what to do. First I say I go get the doctor. Then I say hit's too late. He dead. Then I figgers hit out. I totes Mister Ward up to the lane and leans him over by the fence. He was gettin' cold and stiff a' ready, Mister Jodie. I lays his gun on the ground, right 'side of his boots. Then, I takes Little Stray and Sylvie and goes back to the house. That was Sunday just 'fore dark, Mister Jodie. I don't sleep nary wink all that night. I starts out early yestiddy mornin' to see can I get a squirrel. 'Course, Little Stray, he follow 'long. 'Fore we gets outta my yard, here come that white man with the peg leg. He say come quick and help to tote Mister Ward to the house.

"We fetches him in the house and lays him on the bed. The peg-leg man sends me to tell Mister Wes. After that, I heads for the woods. I gets me a squirrel—first shot, Mister Jodie! Then, when you sends me in there with that kindlin' wood, I crams the little fox squirrel in Mister Ward's pocket!"

"My Lord, Ned! You oughtn't to have done that!"

"Mister Jodie, I just can't let the Lawmens get Little Stray! Look down there at him, Mister Jodie, a-holdin' the puppies and playin' on the floor with the chillens. See, he done give your baby one o' his empty shells. That boy love empty shotgun shells better'n anything he ever see'd. He tromp up and down the roads lookin' for shells. Look at him! His poor back won't never be straight!"

"Ned, you don't seem to understand!"

"I hates to lie, Mister Jodie, but I gwine t' do it for Stray. This mornin' Mister Wes passes by early. Say he be fetchin' the Law! I gets plum worried!"

"If Mister Wes does bring the sheriff, he—"

"I wants you to take me to town, Mister Jodie, quick as you can. I gwine t' tell the Lawmens I killed Mister Ward 'fore I lets them take the boy!"

"No, Ned! No! That wouldn't do! It'd just make matters Worse!"

"Papa, come look here at my shell!"

"Baby, don't bother me right now!"

"See? Stray's got lots of them. He just give me one, and Shoogie one."

"One what?"

I could tell Papa wasn't half listening.

"A done-shot shell, Papa. See? It's pretty yellow. See? And Stray may give me his best one, too!"

Papa wouldn't take time to look. Stray emptied another handful of shells out of his pocket and spread them on the floor, but before I could decide which one to beg for, Papa called Stray to come over to the other side of the store and talk to him and Ned and Black Idd.

"Come on, Stray. Com'ere. We've gotta straighten out just what happened in that cornfield Sunday evening before the sheriff and Mister Hawk and all of them get here. It'll be too late then."

While Shoogie and I were standing all the shells up straight along a crack in the floor, Papa kept on telling Stray not to be scared and that everything was going to be all right.

And Black Idd told Stray not to be afraid of Papa. I noticed Papa was talking to Stray the very same way he talked to me any time he wanted me to be good and not bad.

"I don't aim to scold you a-tall, Stray. Just tell me how come you to shoot Ned's gun."

"I ain't teched the trigger, Mister Jodie. Pa Ned draps his gun and hit goes off. I just picks hit up off'n the ground."

"The Lawd be praised! Hear that, Mister Jodie? The chile didn't kill him! The boy didn't do hit, Mister Jodie! O Lawd God, is I glad!"

"I'm glad too, Ned. But I don't know how many folks will believe your gun went off accidentally and killed Ward. I declare, I don't know what to tell you. It would take the wisdom of Solomon to straighten the tangle we're fixing to have here in a few minutes—if I don't think of something quick!"

"Pa Ned, I wants to tell Mister Jodie somethin'. Mister Jodie, I— Mister Jodie, when we was— Uh, I gets me a new shell, Mister Jodie, when I see'd—"

Black Idd leaned over and tapped his cane against Stray's back. "Son, this ain't no time for talkin' shells to Mister Jodie. He worried. Mister Jodie, I hears 'em comin'!"

"Yeah! It's them!"

Both Shoogie and I ran to the window. "Oh, Papa! Look a-yonder! Look comin'!" Papa didn't come.

"Come see, Papa! It's a big gang of men and horses just a-galloping and kicking up dust! Look how fast they're coming up the hill! Mister Wes is in the buggy with a town man! There's Uncle Dan! And Mister Goode! Just ever'body!"

Papa still didn't come. I didn't have time to turn around to see what he was doing. I knew he could hear me!

"The automobile! Papa, Wiley's making it go! Him and Doctor Elton! Grandpa's on it! Papa, how come all that smoke's boiling outta the back end? Is it gonna burn up?"

Papa wouldn't answer. And he didn't know what he was missing! The saddle horses and the men and the smoke and Mister Wes's buggy were all getting mixed up together! And Wiley was heading the automobile straight for the porch! And Doctor Elton and Grandpa Thad were both grabbing the wheel! And Old Man Hawk was standing up in his wagon, waving his arms and Nellie's reins and making her run way down toward the branch!

"Papa?" I turned around to see what on earth Papa was doing.

He had grabbed Ned's arm and was pushing him toward the back of the store!

"Hide, Ned! Quick!"

"Where, Mister Jodie? Where?"

"Jerk the top off my oil drum and scrooch down in there. It's empty!"

"Where's I gwine to put Little Stray?"

"Stick him in the flour barrel! Make haste! But don't shut that lid tight! Bandershanks, baby, come 'way from the window. You sit back down under the candy counter and be playing with them paper dolls! You too, Shoogie! Don't let them puppies get outta that box or make any racket. And, Bandershanks, if you ever in your life kept your mouth shut, do it this time! Don't say a word—not a word—when all the men come in. Don't mention Ned and Stray. Just keep playing and keep quiet!"

Papa dashed back toward the heater. "Black Idd, the men are after Ned! And Mister Bailey's got the sheriff, figuring to have me arrested, I reckon! You gotta help me till I can talk some sense into them!"

"What I do, Mister Jodie?"

"Get farther back there behind the heater and sit on the keg. Make out like you're dozing off to sleep! It'll look like everything's the same as usual."

Papa leaped over the counter and ran to the far end of the store, where he started moving bottles of snuff from one shelf to another. He began whistling, of all things. Next minute, when Mister Wes shoved open the front door and all the men came crowding in, Papa didn't so much as halfway look around.

"Hey, Jodie!"

"Why hi, Wes! I'll be up there in a minute. I was sorta straightening things up back here in the back, getting this conglomeration of snuff together on one shelf. Well! Looks like we got quite a delegation here! Morning, Sheriff. Morning, Mister Hawk. Hal, Dan, all y'all. Come on in, Doctor Elton. Why, Pa, I didn't see you. Y'all find yourselves some chairs. I got one or two more here in the back.

Wiley, son, you bring them up here so everybody can sit down. I'll roll up another nail keg or two."

"We ain't in no sittin' notion!" Mister Hawk told Papa. "Jodie, it was that darkie Ned that murdered Ward! We gotta get him. Doc says he won't go. Says we gotta be legal. I say we can save the sheriff here some time and trouble."

"Hold on, Mister Hawk. Let's take it slow. We ain't got a lick of proof that Ward was murdered. Besides, I don't figure Ned's been studying shooting anybody."

"Well, what about the squirrel in Ward's pocket?"

"The squirrel? What makes you so certain that squirrel—"

"I figgered it out, Jodie! All y'all say I'm losing my mind, but I still got it! I woulda know'd yesterday things wasn't right, if I'd 've been thinking. But I reckon I plain wasn't thinking. You recollect Ward's two dogs tore that squirrel to pieces?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Jodie, when we all walked past where them hounds had been a-fightin', I seen drops of blood had dripped on the sand. We was all talkin', and I didn't pay it no mind till last night when I kinda got my wits together. Then it struck me! That squirrel was fresh killed! Jodie, Ward didn't shoot it Sunday evenin'! That thing would've been froze stiff as a fire poker—its blood too! So, all I had to do was find out who shot a squirrel early Monday mornin' and slipped it in Ward's pocket!"

"But, Mister Hawk, you can't—"

"Lemme finish tellin' you. I done told Hal and the rest. I said to myself, 'Hawk Lumpkin, whoever done that was pretty smart. He figgered we'd all think Ward went huntin' and just had a accident!' But he didn't figger on me! This mornin' it taken me just about a hour to get at the truth!"

"How's that?"

"You ever seen that scrawny-lookin' boy Ned's been keepin'?"

"Lots of times. They call him Little Stray."

"Jodie, early this mornin', real early, I found that humpbacked young'un sittin' down by the road, his overall pockets just stuffed with empty shotgun shells. I began to question the boy, and he just up and told me that Ned shot a young fox squirrel yesterday mornin' and stuffed it in Ward's coat!"

"You gonna believe what a little colored boy says?"

"Shore, Jodie. Little young'uns don't lie. They ain't learned it yet. They gotta learn lyin' from grown folks!"

Doctor Elton moved over closer to Mister Hawk. "You don't think a jury would put any weight in what a young'un says about a squirrel do you, Mister Hawk?"

"Shore, Doc. I figger they would. It would prove Ned shot Ward!"

"No, no, I don't think so. I'm not saying who hid the squirrel, but—"

While the doctor was talking to Mister Hawk, Papa turned around to ask Mister Wes what he thought about Ned and the squirrel.

Mister Wes took a deep breath, and for a minute didn't answer Papa. Then he cleared his throat two or three times and said, "I tell you, Jodie, Old Man Hawk's right 'bout that red fox squirrel bein' fresh killed. I'd done figgered that out myself. Like I was tellin' the sheriff here, that's how come me knowin' Ward didn't have no accident. Now, Jodie, I don't want you gettin' mad at me—and I hate to say it 'cause I never know'd you to harm a fly before—but me and the sheriff figger it was you that killed Ward! He's come to arrest you!"

"Just do some more figuring, Wes. I didn't kill him!"

"You was over at Ward's place late Sunday evenin', Jodie! You can't deny that! I seen you pass my house. Then just in a little while I heerd shootin'. Then pretty soon you come back by, headed towards home—your shotgun lyin' cross your knees! Your wife was with you, and some young'uns in the back of the buggy! I seen you!"

"Yeah, Wes! I went over there! But I didn't go to kill Ward Lawson! Me and my wife went to take some vittles to his young'uns! And, as for the gun, that old rusty thing belongs to Miss Dink!"

"Now, Jodie! On top o' that, yesterday mornin' you was one of the first ones sayin' it looked like Ward shot hisself accidental tryin' to climb the fence."

"Good Lord, Wes. We all thought that!"

"Me, I don't blame you for killin' him, Jodie! You had—"

"Now look here, Wes! You—"

"You had ever' reason—all the dirt Ward done you! Ever'body knows that!"

"Wes Bailey! Sure, I hated Ward's guts! But I didn't kill him! Now if you want to see the man with the motive, you go look in a mirror!"

"Naw, Jodie, all that ruckus about the old feud didn't amount to nothin'."

"I ain't speaking of the feud, Wes. I ain't wanting to talk what took place at your house Sunday night, but if you insist, I'll tell every last man standing in this store!"

"Hold on a minute, Jodie! Hold on! Let's— Let's not— We better talk this over! Sheriff, don't you aim—"

"Mister Jodie, regardless of what happened Sunday night, or what was said yesterday, or who killed this squirrel y'all been talking about, I'll have to ask you to come back to town with me for questioning. We've got to get to the bottom of this!"

I looked up at Mister Wes. His face had turned red, and he was breathing loud as a horse. I looked back at Papa. His face had gone white, and he was hardly breathing a-tall! He reached to jerk his hat off its hook.

"Come on, Sheriff! Let's go! I'm just as anxious as anybody to get this tangle straight! Once and for all!" As Papa started toward the door, he stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out his keys. He handed them to Uncle Dan.

"Dan, I'll have to get you to lock up for me."

"Sure, Jodie, if you say so."

"Papa, you going to town?"

"That's right, sugar."

"But you gotta see all my shells first!" I grabbed my best shell and ran to Papa. "Stray did give me his newest one, Papa! The one outta Mister Hawk's gun when he was shooting Mister Ward. It still smells good, too! See?"

I held the shell up for Papa to smell. He wouldn't take it. He just stood there looking down at me.

"Smell of it, Papa! Stray saw Mister Hawk drop it and—"

Papa grabbed me up and whirled around to face Mister Hawk.

"What do you think now, Mister Hawk? You still say little young'uns tell the truth?"

Mister Hawk began to laugh. But it didn't sound like real laughing. He kicked open the door of the heater with one foot and spit his wad of tobacco into the fire. Then, he could laugh better. But he still sounded strange, like a frog that couldn't croak. Or sort of like a rooster choking instead of crowing.

"Yeah. They do, Jodie. I'm seventy-odd years old, and I never know'd a little young'un to lie. I killed Ward Lawson. I did! I killed him!"

Mister Hawk reached over and patted my knee. "This baby's tellin' the gospel truth! I didn't figger nobody seen me do it, but I reckon that humpbacked little darkie seen me, all right."

"Mister Hawk, do you realize what you're saying?"

"Jodie, 'course I realize what I'm sayin'! I shot Ward late Sunday evenin'! Had to. The fool, he scared my poor mule outta her wits with that damn automobile of his'n! She ain't et a good meal since he bought the devilish thing!"

"Mister Hawk, you say—"

"Sheriff, I'd do it again!"

"Step out here on the porch with me, Mister Hawk. I'll have to take you—"

"Sheriff, I don't mind tellin' you where I done it. I shot the son-of-a-gun out in the middle of his cornfield! He was tryin' to kill Ned, hisself. I put a stop to that! Then I went straight and told Nellie. I said, 'Nellie, I done it for you.' I said, 'Now the road's all your'n. That damn Ward Lawson and his automobile ain't gonna run you in the ditch no more!'"

The sheriff looked at Papa, at Mister Wes, and then at Doctor Elton. All three shook their heads. The other men, too. Grandpa Thad just kept on shaking his head, and he went over to stand by Mister Hawk.

"What you waitin' on, Sheriff? Let's go. You can lock me up—on one condition: I take my mule with me! If I go to jail, Nellie's goin' to jail. Where I go, my mule goes."

"Papa?"

"Bandershanks, baby, you've talked enough for one day! Don't say no more!"

"Papa, I just wanta know when you're gonna let Black Idd wake up! I ain't gonna tell nobody Stray's in the flour barrel and Ned's in the oil drum!"

"Bandershanks!"

Every man in the store looked at me. Then at Papa. They began to laugh. And their laughing was real—not like Mister Hawk's.

"You ain't mad at me, are you, Papa?"

Papa said something about being glad of the day I was born, but I couldn't understand much of it because the men were still laughing.

"You ain't gonna switch my legs?"

"No. But I was just thinking—if your legs were growing as fast as your ears and tongue, you'd be grown already."

"I'd be a lady?"

"No doubt of it!"

"Could I go to school?"

"I aim to send you to school right this minute! Wiley, son, you take Bandershanks over to the schoolhouse. Just ask the teacher to let her sit in one of the empty desks 'till dinner time. She's got no more business here at the store right now."

"But, Papa, how'll I get across that branch?" Somehow, I didn't want to go to the schoolhouse. I wanted to go home and hide under Grandma's bed.

"Wiley can show you a narrow spot."

"Come on, Bandershanks, I'll help you jump the branch! It ain't wide!"

"Mrs. Goode! You're still here? Church is over! The congregation's gone home. Why, the custodian is ready to lock up! Come on. I'll help you across the street."

"What's that you say?"

"I said, 'I'll wheel you across the street.'"

"I thought you said you'd help me jump the branch. Oh? It's you, Dr. Shirey! Why, thank you. Yes, I must get back to the nursing home. You're so kind to bother with an old lady like me. My, my, I was lost in a reverie that took me back, way, way back, Dr. Shirey."

"How far was that, Mrs. Goode?"

"Just a minute. Let me get my hearing aid adjusted. This thing's a nuisance. Pastor, I don't think you could understand how far it was. Things were different then. It was over half a century ago, when I lived back along the Ouachita hills, in a plain, bare, dogtrot house, where bread was white and the goose was fat and a man's mule was part of his family. We still thought God had made us all—man, goose, and mule—out of the same gully dirt. Ah, I was a child! If things went bad, all I had to do was crawl under my grandma's bed! Or run to Papa. Or to Mama."

"The grownups—what'd they do when things were bad?"

"Well, come to think of it, they just did the best they could and let the Good Lord take care of the rest. My father did. No matter what came, Papa would just holler out '*Great Jehoshaphat and gully dirt!*' and keep going."

As Dr. Shirey rolled my chair around and started me up the center aisle, the fringe of my shawl brushed against the chancel rail. I was ashamed that an hour before I had wanted to kick at it.

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