

Turn Back Time



A NOVEL BY

Lisa Kay Hauser &
Philip Dale Smith

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DEDICATION

To Ma & Pa.: Together their roots twined and went deep into the soil and grew a family tree that is a living legacy of their love. To Daddy and Mama for carrying on the tradition. To Richard who understood my need to tell the story. And to Tracie, Ricky and Garrett, my own torchbearers to the next generation. —Lisa Kay Hauser

To Rhea Nell Rhoads Bowman Spurlin: As fine a big sister as a little boy (or grown man) could possibly have. For the special love we share. For the popcorn balls, divinity candy, and chocolate fudge I enjoyed as a child and the southern cookin' I still enjoy. For being, as a little girl, the inspiration for Dulcie in this novel. —Philip Dale Smith

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And finally, my thanks to my big brother, Kent, and all the aunts, uncles, and cousins who help keep the story alive by striving to live the example that Ma and Pa set for all of us.

PREFACE

We found special and delightful challenges in creating this story. While the book is fiction, we've incorporated much that is real about the people, mines, and mining towns of Muhlenberg County, Kentucky as they existed during the Great Depression. We wanted the story to be true to its setting and circumstances, but at times, to make it easier for readers without knowledge of mines to follow the story, we modified mining terminology slightly. We've included a glossary. It should help, not only with terms related with mining, but also with the slang of the day and words not used today that were "hand-me-downs" from previous generations. We created an imaginary mining community, Coaltown, Ky., to be the scene of several key happenings in the book. But the book is mostly about people: people facing difficult times with fortitude, joy, and love.

To fit the plot, some actual happenings were moved forward or backward from the dates when they occurred. For example, many early efforts to unionize the mines took place in the 1920s rather than in the 1930s. A strike-related ambush near Ebenezer happened in 1936, not in 1934 as portrayed in the story. The man killed was a miner, not a management man. The struggle for unionization was as bitter and bloody as we've described it. It devastated families and communities, sometimes causing rifts and hard feelings that continue to this day. We've tried to present, without taking sides, various views held by the people of that time.

This book was inspired by the lives of John Orville Smith and Ethel Skipworth Rhoads of Drakesboro and nearby Mondray, Kentucky. As it is a novel, a large part of it comes from our imaginations. But woven into the fabric of the story are many bits of history and much family lore. It is true, for example, that in his younger years Smith really was the short-fused, fast-fisted, hard-drinking gambler we've portrayed him as being. Then he met Ethel Rhoads. Her gentle love tamed him. But that's getting ahead of the story. We hope you'll find it fascinating.

PROLOGUE

Deep underground in Coaltown Mine, in one of the myriad passages that honeycombed Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, Smith Delaney made his way through the darkness. He could feel the mine's dampness and smell its stench. His mouth and throat filled with the air's cold bitterness. A quarter of a mile to go, and he would be at the face of coal where he would earn his next meager paycheck.

Above ground, the surrounding countryside was poor—dirt poor, but coal rich. Even the air held the acrid scent of coal. There was money to be had in the mines, but also treachery and death. Not much wealth trickled down to the men who dug the black bituminous coal out of the ground. Vast areas had been dug and scraped, leaving deep scars on the land. Huge heaps of inferior grade leavings were piled in ugly gray-black mounds, lying about the county like mock mountains. Coal dust was everywhere.

It was land that had been predominantly settled by immigrants from England, Ireland, and Europe. Many had come west when Kentucky was still Indian Territory. Their language was full of colorful Old World terminology. These multigenerational families, through heritage and faith, had deep loyalties and strong ties to God, church, family, and neighborhood. Farms and mines were their livelihood.

Just as his father, uncles, and brothers had done before him, Smith Delaney slogged doggedly through the darkness to where, with pick and shovel, he and others on the “hoot-owl” shift would mole their way into the face of coal for a ten-hour stretch.

This ain't no way to live, he thought. No way to live, just a way to die. Maybe die quickly. Or maybe to die slow and miserable. Surely a man was created for better'n this. As Delaney moved, his awkward, stooped posture and uneven gait under the low ceiling caused the carbide light on his head to bob up and down.

The vein of Number-Nine coal at Coaltown Mine was four feet, eleven inches thick. Delaney, five-feet-nine inches tall, was narrow-waisted and broad-shouldered. Years of swinging a pick and shovel had hardened his body and developed his massive biceps and forearms. He found no consolation in still being strong and powerful, or in the fact that, due to his small stature, it was easier for him to work there than it was for taller men.

The mines will get me: a fire damp explosion, other gases, a cave-in. Or coal dust will clog my lungs and smother the life outta me like it did my dad, and is doin' to Eldon Stoneworth and most of the rest of them older men workin' down here. I gotta get out. Somehow, I just gotta get outta here.

A distant shriek of pain and terror jolted Delaney from his dismal reverie. *That's not a human. That's a bank mule in trouble!* he thought. His brow

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furrowed into a frown. *Sure's the world, Jeb Sawyer's on one of his rampages again.* Smith crouched lower and broke into an awkward but rapid trot. Soon he could hear the slap of a whip accompanied by the pain-filled whinnies of the mule. Running through a breakthrough and rounding a corner, he could see the scene at a distance. It sickened him. The tiny old mule, harnessed to the coal car, couldn't get away—yank at the traces as it might. With his left hand, Jeb Sawyer, the huge mine boss, gripped the mule's head by the bridle. With the whip in his right hand he flailed the animal. The mule's eyes rolled wildly in its head as it collapsed, writhing and twisting, to the ground. The five miners working the face of coal stood slack-jawed in dismay, their picks and shovels at their sides. The changing expressions on their faces told Delaney that they were looking past Sawyer and watching his bobbing light rapidly approaching. But Sawyer didn't see or hear him.

“Get up, you miserable excuse of a mule. Get yourself up and pull that there coal car. You hear me? You ain't a layin' down on me, or my name ain't Jebidiah Sawyer. I'll cut you to shreds! I'll turn you to hamburger for these lazy, no account, good-fer-nothin' miners. I'll ...”

As Sawyer again drew back the whip, the steel grip of Smith Delaney's left hand clamped the foreman's wrist. Delaney spun the big man toward him, and in the same motion began an uppercut that swept in an arc beginning near his feet. His fist crashed flush into Sawyer's face. The bully's head lunged upward into the low ceiling. He crumpled in the muck.

Smith stepped over him and knelt by the mule. “Easy, Boy, easy. I'm gonna get you outta here. Easy!” He began unhitching the mule. A couple of the miners joined him.

“All right, Delaney! All right!” said one miner. “He deserved what you give 'im and then some. Wish I'd a done it! I prob'ly would've, if you hadn't.”

“Better hush up, McKinney,” said another miner. “Sawyer might come around and hear you.”

Smith Delaney continued to talk to the mule. The animal calmed and gained footing on shaky legs. Smith held the bridle and gently stroked the animal. The mule quivered under his hand. He called to an older miner who was arranging the loose harness, “Eldon, I'm takin' Smokey out and turnin' 'im loose. I'll send somebody down with a new mule. You throw some water in Sawyer's face. When he comes to, tell 'im not to start yammerin' about how he's gonna fire me. I know I'm fired. And I ain't comin' back this time.”

“You done the right thing, Smith,” said Stoneworth. “I'll take care of Sawyer. We're obliged to you.”

Smith didn't respond. He walked away, leading the old mule. He had plenty of time to think about his plight as they trudged the dank, dark, three-

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quarters of a mile to the elevator cage that would lift them to the surface. *Fired. Fired again! Out of work again.* His grip tightened around the harness. *Where to now? Not another mine! Hit the road again? Back to gamblin'? I'm good at cards. Back to runnin' bootleg whiskey? Good money, but a man can get hisself killed or, worse'n that, put away.*

Smith shook his head in frustration. *At this point in my life I shoulda found me a wife—and have me a bunch a little kids to love. Ain't I ever gonna get my life turned around? Surely this ain't all that's meant to be for me—But what else is there?*

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Chapter 1

Hattie eased down into the chair. She rubbed the small of her back with one hand and her swollen belly with the other. Her labor had begun in the dark of the early morning. Already, her back was aching in time with the rhythm of her breathing. She could feel the pressure pushing down, down, down. Soon, she'd have to walk up to Radburn's Store and have them call her sister to come for Dulcie and bring the midwife. Someday she might have a phone of her own. But this was 1933. The Depression was deepening and a phone was a luxury she couldn't afford.

Even before sunup the heat was stifling. Beads of perspiration trickled down between her breasts. She pushed her dark hair off her forehead with the back of her wrist. Loose tendrils wrapped around her damp arm as she pushed it back into place. Her hair was so dark it was almost black. Her deep-set eyes were the same color as her hair. With a sigh, Hattie pushed herself up from the chair and walked to the counter. She stirred up biscuit dough and with a rolling pin pressed it out into a round on the floured enamel work surface. With swift efficiency she cut biscuits with the circle of tin that her husband, Jack, had made from a clean Pet Milk can. He'd been so careful to turn the top edge back so it wouldn't cut her hands. Earlier she had prepared the pie tins with bacon grease. Now it only took a moment for her to turn the biscuits in the grease, flip them over and place them in the pans and into the oven. She quickly fried the eggs. She worked flour into bacon grease in the still-hot, black cast-iron skillet and added milk, stirring in salt and pepper as the gravy thickened. When it was bubbling, and just the right consistency to pour over the biscuits, she moved the skillet to the back of the stove where it would stay warm. Now, all was ready.

Soon her little girl would be stirring, but right now there was time for a quick cup of coffee. She spooned a careful amount of sugar into the blue enameled cup she had carried up the one step from the kitchen onto the screened-in back porch where the table and chairs were. Hattie loved this morning ritual of sitting and looking out at the trees, listening to the birds greet the morning. Here she could escape the sweltering heat and feel the breeze as it passed through the porch. She watched the purple martins swoop down to their two-storied, many-holed birdhouse. Single bluebird boxes scattered across the back of the acreage encouraged those birds to settle there and raise their babies in the spring.

"Mama," Dulcie's curly dark head peered around the doorframe. "Dulthy hungwy", she said as she climbed onto the porch.

"Are you, Darlin'?" Hattie asked. "Well, it's a good thing Mama made you somethin' to eat then, isn't it?" She struggled to her feet, giving the three-year-old a quick hug. Then stepping back into the hot kitchen, she

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removed the golden biscuits from the oven and made a plate for her little girl. She helped Dulcie up on the four-legged wooden stool and sat down again. They held hands and Hattie said, “Lord, we thank you for this food, this day, and all our blessin’s. Be with us as we go on through the rest of it. In Jesus Name, Amen.”

“Amen,” Dulcie echoed.

Hattie smiled at the little echo. *How mighty is the faith of a little child,* she thought. *Lord, let my faith be like that, too. Especially today.*

After they had eaten, Hattie washed and dressed Dulcie and tied on the child’s sunbonnet for the hot walk up the road to the little store on the edge of town. She’d washed the few dishes quickly in the old dishpan with water from a bucket she’d drawn from the box well on the outside porch. *Daddy knew what he was doin’ when he put that well on the porch,* she thought. *But, oh, what it must be like to turn a knob and have water in the house!* Her sister Carrie had water in her house. It was a pure pleasure to turn that handle and see it rush right down into the sink. And it ran right back out down the drain. You didn’t have to haul it in or haul it back out. Gene, Carrie’s husband, said someday most everyone would have running water in their homes, but Hattie wasn’t so sure. Seemed like a big luxury for poor folk.

She took her sunbonnet off of a hook on the porch and loosely tied it under her chin. She opened the screen door, then took the child’s hand. As she walked, Hattie gazed across the yard at the rutted road running up the hill, then glanced back over her shoulder at the old house where she’d grown up, and where she and Jack had come to live after their wedding. Hattie loved the azalea bushes and lilacs her mother had carefully tended from the time she was a young bride until her death. Hattie had kept them pruned and added a few more in the last few years. It was peaceful there, sheltered by soft hills on three sides and by the steep ascent into town. Looking back up the path where she was going, she thought, *When Daddy built the house down here, was he thinkin’ to keep the world out, or us in? Some of both, I reckon.* She smiled at the thought of the many trips she’d made up and down the path beside the road that led to Drakesboro, with her daddy’s big, rough hand gently holding hers just as she now held Dulcie’s.

“See that bug up there on the wild rose, Dulcie?” Hattie asked, pointing out a small insect. “That’s a mayfly. Don’t it have funny wings, all stickin’ up like that? And that white flower over yonder? That’s Queen Ann’s lace. It looks just like a piece of fancywork for a Sunday dress collar. I reckon that’s why they call it that, don’t you?”

Dulcie had the two middle fingers of her left hand in her mouth. Her huge brown eyes took in all they saw. “Whath’s that?” she lisped around her fingers, looking at green growth on a half buried, rotted log along the path.

“That’s moss. It’s like a carpet of green, isn’t it? I read in a book about a man that made an outdoor room in a beautiful forest. It had a carpet of moss

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on the floor. He made himself a place he could go and just feel God all around him. Wouldn't that be somethin' to see? I hear there's big churches in places all over the world that have colored glass windows and big stone walls and statues with real gold on 'em. But I think I'd like that man's moss-carpet room in the woods better for worshippin' the Creator than any of those old man-made buildin's."

As they walked, she continued to point things out to the child. It was her way. She talked and explained what she could and was always careful to show her respect for the world of nature around her.

After they crested the hill they passed the homes of several friends and neighbors in the quiet little community. Hattie told Dulcie who lived in each house as they went by. She nodded at a house to their right. "That's where the Sumners live. They're the ones who helped us when the snow blocked the road last winter. They're good folks." Later Hattie asked, "See that little place set back over there? That's Miz Shropshire's place. She's always so sweet." Without thinking about it, Hattie was planting seeds of security in Dulcie's mind: they were surrounded by people who cared about them.

The walk was only a mile or so, but it took its toll on Hattie. She had to stop once as a contraction caught her off guard. She was relieved to see the store come into view. The little bell over the door tinkled as she pushed her way into the dim interior.

"Be there in a minute," came the voice of Annie Radburn from the door to the backroom that led to their living quarters. "Here I am—Hattie, what are you doin' walkin' all this way, and your time almost on you? Come set yourself down."

The storekeeper bustled over to help Hattie into a chair set at a table in the corner of the store and fussed over Hattie and Dulcie. She lifted the little girl up onto one of the stools at the counter and gave her a penny candy. "There now, Dulcie, you jest set and let your Mama talk to me a minute."

"Miz Radburn, I don't have a penny to pay for that candy. I didn't come to shop today." Hattie held her head up, but she was deeply embarrassed.

"Why, Honey, did I ask you to pay for that candy? That's a gift to Dulcie for brightenin' my day with that smile and those dimples of hers," said Mrs. Radburn with a smile.

"Well, thank you, then. I can't stay but a minute. I wonder if you'd call Carrie and see if she'd come after Dulcie." She added quietly, "I'm thinkin' it's my time."

"Mercy sakes alive, and you walked all the way up here? Didn't I tell you not to sell Mr. Jack's truck 'til after the baby come?"

"Miz Radburn, I had to pay for Jack's buryin'. 'Sides, I don't know how to drive, so it wouldn't of done me any good to 'ave kept that old heap of tin. Jack just barely kept it going, and half the time I think it was my prayers that

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got him home—not that old truck.” Hattie smiled at the older woman. “Seems to me sellin’ it made more sense than keepin’ it. Now, do you think it’d be all right to call Carrie?”

“Oh, of course it’s all right, but then I’m gonna have Mr. Radburn run you back down home in his Dodge. Mr. Radburn! Mr. Radburn! Hattie Crowe’s here and you’re gonna drive her home. You hear me?”

Harwell Radburn poked his head around the corner from the backroom and said with a twinkle in his eye, “Oh, yeah? What’s in it fer me if’n I do? Is Dulcie gonna give me some sugar?” Dulcie hopped off the stool and ran to Mr. Radburn, throwing her arms around his thighs.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi, yourself, young’un. Whatcha got there? Did Annie give you a candy? Good thing. I’d take her to the woodshed if she forgot to give my girl a candy!” He threw a mock glare at his wife and scooped Dulcie up for a quick hug. Dulcie giggled when he scraped his beard on her soft cheek.

“You scwatchy!” She squealed.

Mr. Radburn laughed and shifted her to his hip. “You wanna listen to the ocean?” he said, picking up a large pink shell from the shelf behind the counter. “Hold it to your ear, Darlin’. You hear that? That’s the ocean!”

Dulcie’s eyes grew large as she listened to the rush of sound from the shell. A shy smile spread across her face.

Hattie also smiled, remembering listening with wonder to the same shell when she was a child not much older than Dulcie. Annie’s parents had run the store back then, and Annie was just a teenager.

Annie clapped her hands and laughed outloud, “Good gracious, Mr. Radburn. I don’t believe there’s hardly a young’un in the county ain’t heard the ocean in that shell. When my cousin sent me that shell all those years ago I never dreamed so many would get to see it and imagine the ocean while alistenin’ to it.”

Harwell replaced the shell and turned back to Hattie. “What are you fine ladies doing out on a hot day like today, and so early, too? Did you bring me some eggs, Hattie?”

“No, sir. Not this time. I just come to see if y’all would call Carrie for me.”

Annie Radburn turned a fine shade of pink and said quietly, “Well, it ain’t nuthin’ for men to be thinkin’ on, but we need to get Miz Carrie to come pick up Dulcie, ‘cause well, ‘cause Hattie’s got some bizness to take care of that ain’t fittin’ for a young’un to be in on.” She tilted her head toward Hattie and cut her eyes swiftly to her belly then back at Harwell.

Harwell’s face blazed as pink as Annie’s. “Oh, I see. Well, then, uh, I reckon you best git on the phone to Carrie while I go start the car.” He turned to Dulcie. “Wanna come with me, Punkin’?”

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Solemnly she nodded her head. "All righty then ... " Out they went through the door in the back toward the old shed where he kept his car under a tarpaulin.

Annie reached for the phone. She rang the exchange and asked for Carrie Beckwith. In just a moment she was connected.

"Carrie, Honey, Annie Radburn callin' you. How're you? Fine, just fine. How's your Mr. Gene? Fine. That's fine. I'm just callin' you to let you know you need to come. It's Hattie's time. Now, on the way could you stop for Ma Richards? We don't want Hattie havin' this baby by herself. 'Course you will. All you Stoneworths are good young'uns. I always said your mama raised the sweetest bunch of children in the county. Wish she was alive today. I'd tell her to her face. She was the kindest woman, never turned nobody away fer nuthin'.. Always up to the church doin' and takin' care of things. I'm right proud to be shirttail kin to her even if it is just by marriage."

Hattie gasped as a sudden contraction took her breath away. "Miz Radburn, 'scuse me, but I think I need to get back home soon," she hissed through her teeth. "Could you just ask Carrie to be careful and to hurry?"

"Mercy, you're laborin' and I'm conversatin'! Sakes alive, what's the matter with me? Carrie, you come right away, and stop for Ma Richards. I'll keep Dulcie with me, and Mr. Radburn'll drive Hattie home in the Dodge. Now, don't stop to get your sisters. I don't think there's time."

With that, Mrs. Radburn hung the receiver on the hook. "Now, don't argue with me, Hattie Crowe, Dulcie will stay here, and Carrie will come to you with the midwife. After you're all ready, Carrie can come for your little girl and bring her back home. You need wimen-folk at a time like this, and I know how close you and Carrie are. 'Course, all you Stoneworths are close."

As Annie rattled on, she was helping Hattie out the door to the waiting car. She plucked Dulcie off the front seat and eased Hattie in. As the car crunched down the gravel road she was prattling on to a big-eyed Dulcie as though the child were a little old lady from the Thursday morning ladies' Bible Study, "Just the finest bunch of folks this county ever laid eyes on. I'm proud, I tell you, just right proud to be shirttail kin, even if it is by marriage ..."

Hattie gritted her teeth as the Dodge dropped into a deep rut. Pain flamed around her middle and caused her to suck her breath in. She reached one hand up to grip the door handle.

Harwell Radburn reached over and patted her other hand. "Did you ever hear a woman could talk like my Annie? She can go on and on and not say nuthin' at all. She's a good 'un, though. She'd break her own heart afore she'd hurt another soul. She sure loves you and your Dulcie. I reckon if she's said it once she's said it a hundred times 'If I coulda had a daughter, I'da wanted one just like Hattie Stoneworth Crowe!' I'm mighty fond of you too, Hattie. We feel powerful bad about your Jack. He was a good man. We

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couldn'ta been prouder when he was made deacon of the church, if'n he'd been our own boy. “

Hattie closed her eyes and laid her head back on the seat. She would not cry. Not now. There was too much to do when she got home to give in to a fit of the sorrowfuls. But, oh, how she missed Jack today. *Of course, If he was here to help*, she thought, *he'd be all fumblefingers, tripping over his feet and getting in the way the whole time*. She thought of him on the day Dulcie was born. *He pert near burst his buttons he was so proud of that baby girl*. She'd heard of men that got angry when their wives had a girl first, but not Jack. He'd whooped and hollered and fired off the shotgun to let the world know how proud he was. Waste of good ammunition, but it made Hattie smile to think of it now.

Mr. Radburn pulled up the slope next to the house, as close as he could get to the door so Hattie wouldn't have far to walk. “Can't help you with much more here, Hattie, but I could chop some wood and bring in a load, if you're needin' some.”

“No, thank you, Mr. Radburn. My brother, Forrest, cut and stacked plenty last week. I brought some in this morning when I first started ... well, you know, when I realized. I sure appreciate the ride, though.”

“Oh, that's fine then,” Harwell quickly said. “I'll just let you get on with your, uh, work then. Carrie'll be here anytime now with Miz Richards, and she'll let us know after ... well, anyway, you come to us if you need anything, now.”

He backed carefully down the slope and eased up the hill. Hattie turned and walked slowly into the house. *Okay, Lord, it's just You and me. I'll do my part, and you do Yours*. She knew she had a little ways to go, so she set about straightening things. Old Ma Richards was the best midwife in the area, but she was a little on the abrupt side and wouldn't think anything of criticizing the way Hattie kept house if she thought it weren't up to snuff. It wouldn't do to give her anything to talk about.

Hattie took out of her bureau drawer a clean baby gown, an outing flannel baby blanket, and little flannel booties all edged with careful feather stitching. She'd worked hard on the little clothes and knew they were beautiful. Mama had taught her to sew almost as soon as she could hold a needle.

She'd done most of the work while Jack slept. He'd slept a lot the last few weeks before he died. The cave-in at the mine that had cruelly crushed him hadn't killed him quickly. He'd lingered for almost two months before the end came. She'd sat by his bed for hours on end as he labored to breathe. That's when she'd made the baby clothes. Jack had been so happy they were having another baby and proudly inspected each little piece of clothing as she finished it. He'd been her anchor, and she and Dulcie had been his whole life.

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Some days Hattie still half expected him to come roaring through the door. “Where’s my girls?”

Hattie slid down in the rocker as a tear slipped down her cheek. *Jack, how’m I gonna do all this by myself? Raise these babies and take care of all that’s needin’ takin’ care of? How’m I gonna do it when I’m missin’ you so? Oh, Jack, why’d you have to go and die?* She cried quietly for a minute, then took a deep shuddering breath. *Well, that’s that then. I’ll just do it, ‘cause I have to. There’s nobody gonna do it for me.*

She got up and poured water from the pitcher on the washstand onto a clean towel and bathed her face. Then turned back to the bureau. She pulled out two white cotton nightgowns. One for the labor and one for afterward. Ma Richards was particular about cleanliness though some thought her foolish. Hattie gathered up clean sheets and toweling and tied two dishtowels to the wooden uprights on the headboard of the bed. Then she went into the kitchen to start water to boil. She boiled her scissors and laid them out on her nightstand on another clean dishcloth. She went to the closet under the stairs and retrieved the stack of soft white cotton strips she’d need after the baby came. Then, when everything was ready, she made a pot of coffee and poured a cup. Walking out on the porch, she sat down to wait.

Well, Lord, it’s gonna be a big job, but I think we can handle it. Or at least, You can. I’ll just let You do the work. It’d be real nice if You could make it quick work, though, if it wouldn’t be askin’ too much. She grimaced as another contraction shook her body. *Whew! They’re comin’ swift and sure.* Hattie bit her lip as the pain slowly passed, then took a deep breath. *I... I thank You for being with me. Be with Dulcie, too, up at Radburn’s, and Father, if you could just give Jack a message, could You let him know I’m having the baby today? I reckon he’d like to know.*

The car that came over the hill a little while later was crowded with women. All but one had dark hair, dark eyes, and sweet faces. Five Stoneworth women and one gray-haired midwife. Ma Richards looked pained, squashed as she was between Carrie in the driver’s seat and Lalie on the other side. Marva, Willa and Chloe sat in the back seat. The noise those six women put out was incredible.

“Hattie, what are you doin’ sittin’ there?” asked Carrie.

“Hattie, why aren’t you in bed?” chimed Marva.

“Hattie, did you put a knife under the pillow to cut the pain?” asked Willa.

“Hattie, did you eat?” added Chloe.

Hattie started laughing as they piled out of the car and headed for the screen door.

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“Let’s see, I’m drinking coffee. I don’t feel like going to bed yet. No, I saved the knife for Ma Richards. How’re you, Ma Richards? Thanks for coming. And ... what was the last question? I remember. No, I didn’t eat today. Just had a little coffee. Carrie, I know I heard Annie Radburn tell you not to take the time to pick up your sisters. Don’t you ever listen?”

Carrie gave Hattie a gentle squeeze. “Mama always made us look out for you ‘cause you was the least’un. Just seemed nat’ral to round up the girls to look after you today. I only had to make two stops ‘cause Marva, Chloe and Lalie were planning a trip to Greenville to go shoppin’ and were all at Lalie’s house gettin’ ready to go when I got Annie Radburn’s call. And Willa, she’d just stopped at my house for coffee. You know, Hattie, I don’t believe I said a thing to Miz Radburn except, ‘Hello, fine, yes ma’am, and, well bye then’. She was talkin’ so fast I could hardly understand her, but I got ‘Hattie, Ma Richards, and you’ve got to come.’”

They all laughed because each had spent considerable time with the storeowner’s wife over the course of their lives and knew what a verbal tidal wave she was.

Ma Richards gave all the girls a hard look and said, “You girls orta be a little more respectful of your elders and them that serves you. Where would we all be right now if Annie Radburn hadn’t been kind enough to call? Carrie Stoneworth Beckwith, you need to learn to curb your tongue. And you, the oldest of this family, carryin’ on like that!”

“Ma Richards, you’re right. I’m plum ‘shamed of myself. We all love Annie. Please forgive me. You know how my tongue runs when I’m excited.”

“Humph! Ain’t for me to forgive, but you’re settin’ a fine example is all I’m sayin’.”

Carrie turned and winked at Hattie, who bit her cheeks and looked down to keep from laughing. Oh, it was good to have the girls here! And even Ma Richards. It had been so long since there’d been any laughter in the house.

Hattie’s breathing shallowed, and she gripped the edge of the table hard. Her eyes suddenly seemed to lose focus as she tried to breathe through the pain that racked her body. A rush of water forced its way between her legs. She looked at the wet porch floor. “Oh my!” She sighed. “I reckon y’all made it just in time.”

“Fiddlesticks!” said Ma briskly. “We got here with plenty of time to spare. You ain’t dropped that baby on its head yet. Lalie, don’t stand there with your mouth open! Help me git your sister into a nightgown and into that bed. Carrie, you carry my bag. Marva, you start a pot of tea with the packet in my bag. No, the other packet. That one’s for bowels. Willa, pour me a cup of that coffee with a smidgen of sugar. Make that two smidgens. And you, Chloe, get my Bible and read to me from the book of John. I don’t care where. I just love John.”

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Instantly, everyone was in motion. Each person had a job to do and did it swiftly and carefully. Hattie was undressed, put into a nightgown and put to bed before she realized she had her shoes off. Marva was pressing a cup of Ma's special tea into Hattie's hands while Willa was placing a cup of heavily sugared coffee into Ma's. Carrie was standing on one side of the bed gently stroking Hattie's hair back. Chloe sat down in a straight backed chair and read quietly, "In the beginning was the Word ... " Lalie straightened and restraightened the little baby clothes that were waiting. Everything was under control.

Hattie's labor was intense. The Stoneworth girls carried the kitchen chairs into the bedroom and sat in a circle around something that Hattie couldn't see. They worked quietly, but with lots of good humor. Each would take her turn coming to the bedside to see to Hattie for a few minutes. They offered words of encouragement during contractions and quietly rubbed her wrists in between. Hattie knew she was blessed. As she rested between contractions she looked around at her sisters and knew that Annie Radburn was right. They were the "sweetest bunch of young'uns in the county."

Ma also looked around the room. She'd delivered every one of the Stoneworth girls. The Stoneworth boys, too. There were three of them: Eldon, Forrest and Berkley. She shook her head and said, "I reckon your brothers'd be here too, if'n y'all didn't know I don't brook no men at a birthin'. Them boys sure are partial to Hattie. 'Course, everyone's partial to you, Hattie. You bein' the least'un an' all. Ain't you the tiniest little thing? Don't b'lieve you stand five foot tall, do you, girl?"

"Just barely." Hattie answered.

"Can't weigh more'n a hunnerd pounds, neither, not countin' the baby. And here you are ready to give birth any minute! You was the only one of your mama's babies I was ever afraid of losin', you know. You was so little when you was born, I was mortal afeared you'd die. But you didn't just surprise me by livin', you've done real good. You love your family, the Good Lord, all the wonders of nature, and life in general. Yep, you've done all right and I suspect you'll do fine by this little one you're about to bring out into our world."

Ma rose creakily from the chair next to the bed and went to the kitchen to pour herself another cup of coffee.

"Ma," Carrie whispered as she followed the old midwife. "Hattie really is awful little. I'm scared if she has a big baby it'll tear her apart."

Ma glared at Carrie. "You let me do the worryin'. I'll take care of her if she tears."

Carrie grimaced at the thought and Ma laid a hand on her arm.

"Listen here, don't you even think about goin' back in that bedroom with *that* look on your face. Dulcie was a purty good size baby, and Hattie birthed

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her without much trouble a'tall. Reckon she'll be just fine. We'll just have to wait and see. Won't hurt none to pray, though."

Before Ma sat back down in the old rocking chair by the bed with her handwork to busy herself during the wait, she carefully placed a paring knife under Hattie's pillow. "Now, I don't know if'n I b'lieve in this bizness or not," she said. "They say the knife'll 'cut the pain'. Maybe it does, maybe it don't."

Lalie watched the old midwife pat the corner of the pillow where she'd tucked the knife. "If'n you don't believe in it, why'd you do it?"

"Reckon 'cause my Mama done it, and her Mama afore her. I'd just as soon not be the one to break the tradition. It's a comfortin' thing to birthin' women. No one never asked me not to do it, so I reckon I'll jes' keep right on adoing it. If it makes the laboring wimen feel better, it's worth its weight in gold."

Between contractions, Hattie watched her sisters as they finished what they were doing and put their project away. She was mildly curious but figured they'd tell her when they were ready. Maybe they were making shirts for the boys for Christmas presents, or working on a quilt. You'd think they'd let her see it if it was a quilt, but maybe they just didn't want to bother her right now.

Time passed slowly 'til Ma sent Chloe and Lalie to the kitchen to make lunch for the rest of them. Just as they were leaving the room, Hattie let out a gasp. Carrie helped her reach the knotted dishtowels that Hattie had tied to the headboard earlier. Ma moved to the bottom of the bed and reached up under the sheet.

"Mmm hmmm, yup, it's time. You push now, girl. Like you've never pushed before."

Hattie pushed and panted and pushed and panted for what seemed like forever. The sisters gathered in a half circle to pray for Hattie and her coming baby. Ma frowned and waited. Finally, she said, "There's a head ... It's comin'.. Push, Hattie!" Hattie pushed, and there he was. All chins and wrinkles. A sweet baby boy. He was purple and mashed-looking and, oh, so beautiful. Ma gripped his ankles, held him up, and smacked his little bottom. He started to cry, and so did the rest of the house. Ma shook her head. Then she blinked her eyes hard to remove a suspicious wetness that had suddenly formed there. With the surety of experience, she tied off the cord and cut it, rubbed the baby in a towel, and wrapped him in a blanket. Then she laid him in his mother's arms.

"There he is, girl. You done good, real good. Lookee there! Don't he look just like Jack Crowe?" Ma chuckled. "Well, Jack told me back in the spring if I didn't bring him a boy this time, my reputation would be pure ruined 'cause he'd already told everyone I was agoin' to."

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Everyone laughed through their tears and crowded around to see the baby. Hattie said, “Jack’s boy ... I think he should be Jackie Stoneworth Crowe. That’s a fine name. Do you think Jack would like it?”

Carrie hugged her little widowed sister. “Honey, he’d love it.”

Ma moved back down to the end of the bed to deliver the afterbirth and then shooed the rest of them out of the bedroom. Willa washed the baby on a towel that had been heated in the warming oven of the stove. She dressed him in the little gown and booties, wrapped him in a blanket and brought him back to Hattie. Ma called to Chloe to bring Hattie another cup of her special tea and to Lalie to bring the cradle down from upstairs. Hattie had cleaned it and made it ready the day before, so they just needed to move it into the bedroom.

Carrie was talking quietly to Hattie whose eyes were drooping. Ma took the baby and settled him into the cradle. She took Carrie by the arm.

“Out of here, girl. Your sister didn’t cry out once the whole time she was laborin’. She’s exhausted fightin’ those pains. You get out to the kitchen and see to that lunch I sent those others to start a while ago. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Ma sat down on the edge of the bed. She didn’t allow much softness between herself and the women she helped. It was too hard when you lost one of them or one of their babies, but she felt a special bond with Hattie.

“Well, girl, you done it.” She roughly patted Hattie’s hand. “Answer me this. Why didn’t you holler like any one of them girls in there woulda done if it had been them, ‘stead of you?”

“Ma, they worry over me so. I just didn’t want to scare ‘em no more than they already were.”

Ma hooted with laughter. “Ain’t you the limit! You may be the least’un, but I b’lieve your heart’s the biggest of all them Stoneworths!”

“Oh, Ma,” cried Hattie, “that’s just *exactly* what Jack used to say!”

The old granny, unexpectedly choked with emotion, cleared her throat, “Go to sleep. You’re tired.” She stalked from the room.

Hattie gazed at the tiny baby in the cradle beside her bed. *Lord, It’s me, Hattie Crowe. You done good work today. Thanks for givin’ Jack the message and for letting him send one back to me through Ma Richards. Ain’t You somethin’.*

Chapter 2

Eunice Ruby Crowe descended on them like bad news on a dark day. It was obvious she had worked herself into a state of near hysteria by the time she got out of the truck driven by her brother, Ferd. As she made her way to the door, he had to support her.

“Now, now, sister, don’t take on so. You’re gonna make yourself sick,” Ferd said as he helped her into the best chair on the porch.

Carrie and Willa greeted her politely. They were all careful what they said to Jack’s mother. The woman took offense easier than anyone they’d ever known.

“How do, Miz Crowe? Awfully kind of you to come. Hattie’s sleepin’.. She had a fine, healthy boy a little bit ago. We were just fixin’ to send Chloe up to Radburn’s to call the family with the good news. Would you like some coffee? How ‘bout you, Ferd?”

“No ma’am, thank you. I b’lieve I’ll jes’ step out in the yard while y’all visit,” Ferd replied.

“Carrie Beckwith, I find it hard to b’lieve you were going to send anyone to call me,” whined Eunice. “I had to hear it was Hattie’s time from Annie Radburn when I went into the store for a pound of bacon and a sack of flour. It just about mortified me beyond redemption to hear it from an outsider. You know that woman’s always thought she was a little better’n the rest of us. She just lorded it over me that Hattie had come to her instead of me when she needed help. Like I wouldn’t have taken poor little fatherless Dulcie into my home when she needed someone to watch her. I’m so ashamed I could die.”

Carrie rolled her eyes at Willa and went to get the coffeepot.

“Miz Crowe, I’ve never known Annie to put on airs,” said Willa. “Besides, your house is almost another mile and a half beyond Radburns. Surely you didn’t expect Hattie to walk all that way with a three-year-old, and in labor besides. I know it must have been hard for you to find out at the store, but we really were fixin’ to send Chloe up to call. The baby’s only been here an hour, and we’re just now gettin’ settled down to cookin’ so Hattie won’t have to when we go home.”

“She wouldn’t have to do none of the cleanin’ and cookin’ if she’d just let me move in here and take care of her and those poor fatherless children. I’ve just been waiting for the baby to come so she’d see how much she needs me. Jack would have wanted me here to help, but Hattie’s just been hateful about the whole thing. ‘No, Mother Crowe, I think it’s best if I stick to the routine that Dulcie’s used to. They’s been too many changes already.’ I know Jack’s just rolling in his grave that she’s bein’ so stubborn. It ain’t seemly for a woman as young as Hattie to be alone, even if she is a widow. It’d be better

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for all concerned if she'd bend her back a little and let me come down here with her. Surely y'all can see that it would be the perfect solution to the problem."

Carrie returned with the coffee, listening to Eunice harp at Willa about Hattie. She plunked the coffeepot down on the table, a little more roughly than was necessary, and glared at Hattie's mother-in-law.

Eunice was a pinched looking woman. Her hair was scraped back into a tight bun on the back of her head. Her long nose appeared to slice her thin face in half. She was severe from top to bottom. All the Stoneworths were amazed that laughing Jack Crowe had been this humorless woman's son. It just didn't seem possible. She wielded Scripture like a weapon and brought destruction wherever she went.

At the dinner after Jack's funeral, Eunice had announced that she was moving in with Hattie. That was just the way she was. She didn't ask if Hattie'd like her to come. She stood up and announced it to all within earshot. All her fine talk of Christian duty was nothing but hot air. Hattie knew she'd end up waiting on Eunice, hand and foot, for the rest of her life. So far, she'd been able to hold her ground, but it wasn't easy standing against Eunice. She could suck the joy out of Hattie in five minutes flat.

"Miz Crowe, there's only one bedroom in this house. Where would you sleep? It would be awfully crowded for you with Hattie and Dulcie and Jackie all in one bedroom," Lalie said as she joined them on the porch.

"Well, now, I'll just tell you where I'd sleep. I could take the bedroom, and we could move my little divan into the front room, and Dulcie could sleep on that. Hattie could have that big old couch that Jack insisted on buyin'.. The baby will be in his little cradle for quite a while yet ..."

"You expect a woman who's just given birth to give up her bed to you?" said Ma Richards as she stepped up on the porch. "My, my, aren't you a fine piece of work!"

The rest of the Stoneworth girls watched from the kitchen door.

"If you think I'm gonna stand by and let you railroad that young lady out of her bed when I just delivered her a fine baby, you've got another think coming. She's gonna stay right where she is. If you want to sleep on that couch, that's up to you, if you can get Hattie to agree. But Hattie's not gonna move one step out of that bed without my say so, and I ain't agonna say so anytime soon to you or the Queen of England or anyone else in the state of Kentucky, so you can just get shet of that thought right now!"

Two Stoneworths had coughing fits, and three others had suddenly become fascinated by their aprons. No one spoke for a minute, and then Carrie asked brightly, "More coffee anyone?"

Eunice Crowe went beet red from up under her old hat to the Victorian collar of her dress.

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“No, thank you. I reckon I’ll just see my new grandson and be on my way. I know when y’all get together there’s no reasoning to be had. I warned my Jackie about you Stoneworth girls when he first took up with Hattie. I told him, ‘Jackie, you’ll be in for the worst henpeckin’ of your life if you marry up with her ‘cause it won’t just be her! It’ll be the whole lot and litter!’ I’ll come back when Hattie’s alone. Then we’ll see how things are gonna be. Now, if y’all don’t mind I’d like to see my grandson.”

As soon as Chloe brought the sleeping baby out to her, Eunice started in again. “Oh, you poor fatherless boy. How you’ll *ever* survive in this world is beyond me. Don’t you worry, precious. Grandma will take care of you.” She carried on over the baby with wet, noisy sobs. The family sighed with collective relief when she gave the baby to Carrie and swept from the porch saying, “Tell Hattie I want to talk to her when things are quieter around here. Come on, Ferd.” And Eunice was gone as quickly as she had come.

Ma Richards blew out a breath and muttered something about “that woman would try the patience of a saint.” Then she said, “Carrie, Hattie’s gonna have a time when it gets out she had that baby. Every mother in Muhlenberg County who’s got a baby with ‘thresh’ is gonna be linin’ up at the door for him to blow in their babies’ mouths. By the time he’s old enough to blow, they’ll be coming down here in droves.”

It was a superstition that a child born after his father’s death had only to blow into the mouth of a baby with thrush for healing to begin. Unfortunately for Jackie, it was a strongly held belief for many of the hill folks. They were steeped in the traditions of a simple people in a simpler time when professional medical help was very limited.

Ma Richards continued, “Anyway, in a couple of years you might remind her to be on the lookout for anxious mamas with white-mouthed young’uns. I reckon I’m ‘bout ready to go. Carrie, if one of you will stay with Hattie, Chloe can drive me home in your car and come back for you later.”

“Of course, Chloe can run you home,” said Carrie. “And I’ll talk to Hattie about the thresh babies. Here, Chloe, take my keys and run by my house and get the little bag I packed, and bring it to me. I’m staying here tonight. Gene thinks he’ll die without me, but I’m sure he’ll survive. My girls can get supper without me and do the washin’ up after, so they’ll all be fine ‘til tomorrow.”

Chloe nodded and took the keys and turned toward the door.

“Wait, I’m still thinking,” Carrie continued. “Oh, stop at Radburns and pick up Dulcie on your way back. Hattie’d just kill me if we forgot to bring Dulcie home. After we eat, you can take the girls home and keep my car ‘til tomorrow if you’ll come for me around noon.”

As usual Carrie had organized all their lives in a few brief sentences.

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Chloe threw her head back and laughed. "You think you got us all raised up to mind you, don't you? Well, one of these days, we ain't none of us gonna do as we're told. Then where'll you be?"

Chloe was the tallest of the Stoneworth girls. Slender of form and fair of face, she was the only one except Carrie who could drive. They had all been surprised when Chloe told them she wanted to learn, because she was also the quietest. It was just so unexpected coming from shy Chloe. She and her husband Ray had four children. Like three of the other girls' husbands, Ray was a miner. He was also a good man who loved Chloe and the children beyond belief. Chloe only had to look at something once for Ray to try to buy it. She'd had to learn to tell him "no" when he'd reach for his wallet. All of them had heard her say, "Ray, Honey, that's real nice, but I don't need it. It's just not my style." It sounded kinda funny when she'd said it about a new Sears and Roebuck washing machine.

Ma went back in to check on Hattie one more time before she left, and then she and Chloe loaded her bag into the car and headed back to town.

Willa and Marva went to the garden to pick vegetables for the supper table. Lalie dug through Hattie's sewing basket 'til she found an apron with a torn pocket to mend. She gathered up needle and thread and walked out to sit on the porch-swing.

When Carrie saw everyone else was occupied, she looked in on Hattie. She was surprised that Hattie was awake gazing at her baby. "Well, did you sleep, Least'un?"

"Not much, not with Mother Crowe coming in like she did." Hattie looked up and smiled wearily. "I s'pose I shoulda come out to see her, but honestly, she just pushes and pushes... Carrie, how'm I gonna keep that woman out of this house? She would be the death of all that's peaceful in my life, and Dulcie's, too, for that matter. She fusses over her 'til she makes her cry, then fusses *at* her. And can you imagine not liking Annie Radburn? I don't understand Eunice. She wouldn't smile at a laughin' contest. I know she misses Jack as much as I do, but honestly, sometimes I just want to poke her."

"You're not the only one that'd like to poke her," replied Carrie. "I thought I'd just die if she said one more 'poor fatherless children' to me. She's just awful. How did Jack stand it growin' up in her house?"

"He said as long as he said, 'Yes, Mama. I know, Mama,' they got along pretty well. I just don't think I could do that for more than a few minutes before I'd be findin' me a sharp stick." Hattie laughed at herself. "I know that sounds awful. You know I'd never ... She means well. I've been praying for her and about her. Sometimes that's all that gets me through."

Carrie cautioned, "Try not to think about her anymore. You got that precious new baby to think about instead, and he's gonna wake up anytime now and want to be fed. You try to rest a little bit longer while we get supper

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ready. Chloe's taking Ma home and bringin' Dulcie back, so it'll get lively again in a little bit. Rest while you can."

Carrie smoothed Hattie's hair back. As she walked back into the kitchen, she chuckled to herself at the thought of sweet little Hattie chasing Eunice with a stick.

She let her gaze wander around the room. Jeb Stoneworth had built the house before he'd married Lettie. It was the house where they grew up together and raised their children. In those early days the two rooms upstairs had four bedsteads for the children, three for the girls on one end and one for the boys on the other. There was so much joy in that house! Then after Mama died when Hattie was ten, Daddy just seemed to give up. He said he was tired, so he went to bed. Six months later they gathered at the cemetery to bury him beside his wife. Carrie had a little girl of her own by then, but she came and packed up Hattie, Lalie and Berk and took them home with her. She and Gene Beckwith raised them with the same kind of love that Jeb and Lettie had given so freely when they were alive.

Carrie loved the kitchen in the old house. It was rectangular and had a door on each wall. One door led up one step to the screened-in back porch that ran the width of the house; one led from the end of the kitchen to the outside porch where the box well and porch-swing were. Another door went to the dining room, and the last one led into the bedroom. There was a small white enamel table-and-chairs set. A matching Hoosier hutch had a work surface. It had flour and sugar bins built right in, and the glass doors above rattled when you opened or shut them. Closing her eyes, she focused on the fragrance of the good kitchen aromas.

Carrie was tall, but not as tall as Chloe. At forty-five, the laugh lines around her eyes were becoming more pronounced. Last year, she'd cut her waist length hair and gotten a permanent wave! Gene said she was "purtier'n a speckled pup." She'd blushed and told him to "go on!" but she'd been tickled. She was a little on the plump side but not too much. She had the same dark hair and deep-set eyes as all the rest, but her features were softer. It was hard to pick a favorite out of the Stoneworth girls, but most said they'd sure like to be respected the way Carrie Beckwith was. She was a fine woman in a family of fine folk.

Lalie came in from the porch and sat down across the table from Carrie. "Did you see Eunice Crowe's face when Ma Richard's was tearin' into her?" she asked.

Carrie nodded, "I seen her and it worries me more than I like to admit. She's a menace."

"Oh, I don't know 'bout that," Lalie responded. "I think she's just lonely. If she weren't so all fired mean to Hattie, I think I'd feel kinda sorry for her."

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“All I know,” said Carrie, “is that I was mighty glad Ma Richard said what she did. Otherwise, I woulda had to figure out a way to keep her from movin’ in here tonight.”

Lalie laughed. “There’s enough of us, if we’d had to, each of us could have blocked a door. Can’t you just picture Eunice runnin’ around the outside of the house tryin’ to get in with one of us in each doorway?”

“Eulalie Ruth Stoneworth, you be nice,” Carrie cautioned, but the corners of her mouth twitched until a giggle escaped. “She’d be fit to be tied!”

“Hey, you know what she needs, Carrie? A husband! She’s been a widow a long time now. There’s no reason she shouldn’t get married again. She’s a real good cook. She keeps a clean house. Maybe we orta start prayin’ for her to find herself a nice man. Then she’d be too busy to meddle with Hattie.”

Carrie grinned and nodded vigorously, “And while you’re prayin’ for this miracle man, pray he’s hard of hearin’ so he’ll stay more’n five minutes.”

The other girls were coming in now. Marva and Willa had picked enough peas to feed an army. They begged a cup of coffee and went to sit on the screened-in porch.

“Whew! It sure is hot out there!” Marva said, wiping her face with a napkin. “I believe we’d have roasted if we’d stayed out there any longer. Hey, Lalie, hand me that bowl and I’ll shell them peas while we’re settin’ here.”

Marva was the cutest of the Stoneworth girls. She had the deepest dimples anyone had ever seen. She’d married young to the preacher’s oldest boy, Conroy Fenton. They’d never been able to have children, but my, how they loved all their nieces and nephews. Carrie said if there were ever natural-born parents it was Marva and Conroy. Conroy preached nearby in Beech Creek. Their church was small but active, and Marva was its heart. She did everything from teaching Sunday school to cooking and taking food to the shut-ins, and always with those dimples flashing.

“How long you reckon it’ll be ‘fore Chloe comes back with Dulcie?” Willa asked.

“I s’pose it’ll take about an hour or so. Why? You got plans for the evenin’?”

Willa blushed prettily, “No, I don’t have plans for the evenin’. I made a ragdoll for Dulcie, and I’m anxious to give it to her. I was thinkin’ with her mama havin’ a new baby, she might be needin’ one, too.”

“Willa! If you ain’t the sweetest thing. Wish I’d thought of that!” Marva cried. “Why, if I was three years old and my mama had a new baby, that’s just what I’d want. Will you show it to us?”

Willa walked back into the kitchen and returned with a paper sack. As she reached inside she said, “Now, I was thinkin’ on it, and it come to me that she might want the same kind of baby her mama had, so I didn’t put but just a little hair right on top of its head. I made two sets of clothes, one for a boy

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baby and one for a girl baby. That way we can dress it like a little boy just like Jackie.” She pulled out the little doll and the doll clothes she’d made. Carrie, Marva, and Lalie all exclaimed over the doll, and oohed and ah’d about the clothes while Willa dressed him. It was a thoughtful gift from a thoughtful aunt for a little girl who might be feeling a little put out with the real new baby brother she was about to have thrust at her.

Willa said, “I thought I’d save the other set of clothes for the next baby doll I make, and then I’ll be almost done with it before it’s even started.”

Lalie looked Willa up and down. “You know what you need to do, Willa? You need to find you a man and have you a bunch of young’uns of your own. There’s gotta be at least one man in Kentucky that meets your standards.”

“I’m sure there is. He just don’t happen to be throwin’ hisself down in my path, beggin’ for my hand in marriage. I’m almost thirty years old. You’d think some old codger’d be willin’ to take me on.”

“Hmmm. There’s always that Dawson Hastings at Depoy,” Lalie said coyly.

Carrie hooted with laughter, “Oh, yes, him and his seven young’uns. They’d prob’ly take you on. You bein’ such a good cook an’ all.”

Willa lowered her eyes. “Dawson’s a good man. It’s a shame he lost Caroline like that. She was gone before a body hardly knew she was sick.”

“Wiiiiilllaa! You are *not* makin’ eyes at Dawson Hastings, are you?”

“No, of course I’m not. I’m not makin’ eyes at anyone, but he is a good man. I feel right bad for him and his ... ” Willa pinched up her face, changed her voice into a fair imitation of Eunice Crowe, and said, “poor motherless children.”

All the Stoneworth girls howled with laughter.

Carrie replied in her best Ma Richards voice, “Why, Willa Stoneworth, you oughta be ashamed of yerself. Talkin’ that away about your elders. What would your mama say?”

The afternoon wore on with much of the same patter as the women worked around Hattie’s house. There wasn’t much to be done, as Hattie kept a clean house, but there were always little things to do. Marva took down the heavy portieres that hung from the door that led from the dining room to the front room and took them outside to shake any dust out. She knew Hattie would have to stand on a chair to take the curtains down and put them back up again. Lalie brought in another load of wood. Carrie drew fresh water from the well and peeled a mountain of potatoes. She sent Lalie to the smokehouse for a ham and cut thick slices to fry with the potatoes.

“Y’all are just too good to me,” said a voice from the bedroom door. Hattie stood there looking around at all the activity in her little kitchen. “I coulda got supper on.”

“Hattie Stoneworth Crowe, you get right back in that bed,” came the reply from five older sisters at once. They shoed her through the door.

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“Y’all wait, now,” said Hattie. “I’m not sick. I just had a baby. I made supper for Jack the night Dulcie was born. I’m fine.”

By then she was all tucked up in the big bed again.

“You ain’t doin’ nothin’ ‘til tomorrow,” said Willa. “Why do you think we’re here? So you can wait on us? Not likely.”

Carrie said, “Marva, go get that project we was workin’ on. Now’s as good a time as any to pass it on to Hattie. Now, Hattie, I know you said to give all Jack’s shirts away to someone who might need ‘em, but I just couldn’t, so I had this idea that we’d make a quilt for the baby so he’d have something of his daddy. I hope you don’t mind, but I asked the other girls and they all agreed. Here, Marva, let me show her.”

Carrie carefully spread the half-size quilt out on the bed for Hattie to look at, and pointed to a square. “See, that one there is his gray work shirt, and that’s the white Sunday shirt. That one’s his second best, and there’s the blue work shirt. We cut ‘em up into squares, and all of us pieced a few nine patches. We used a sheet for the stripping and the binding. You’re not mad, are you?”

Hattie sobbed as she gathered up the quilt and pressed it to her cheek. “Oh, Carrie! I wanted Jackie to have somethin’ of Jack’s, so I saved his pocketknife, but he won’t be able to have that for a long time yet. This is perfect. Thank you so much. Just look how much work y’all did! It’s beautiful. I love it, I do—I just can’t seem to quit cryin’ is all.”

All of a sudden, Hattie’s sobs were joined by a new little voice crying right along with her. Baby Jackie was awake and hungry. His little face was all scrunched up, bright red. Little fists flailed against the air. His mouth was wide open as he announced his displeasure.

“Would you listen to that boy holler? I reckon he’s gonna be a powerful singer when he grows up, just like his daddy.” Hattie wiped her eyes and reached for the baby. She unbuttoned her nightgown and settled him at her breast. As she eased back against the pillows she softly sang,

“In the pines, in the pines, where the sun never shines,
and we shiver when the cold wind blows.

Little girl, little girl, what have I done
To make you treat me so.”

As the old song went on, altos and sopranos, contralto and tenor all blended in womansong as the sisters joined in and watched Hattie feeding her baby for the first time. Each sang well alone, but together they were wonderful.

“I remember mama singin’ that to you when you was a baby,” Lalie said slowly. “I think one of my favorite memories of this house is all of us singin’ in the front room. And Daddy and Mama singin’ in the kitchen when I was dressin’ for school. Hearin’ that song again ... can’t you just feel ‘em right here with us?”

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“I think they are.” Hattie said quietly, “I hear Mama when I get up of a mornin’. I’ll be settin’ on the porch with my coffee and I hear her, plain as day, singin’ *Whispering Hope* or *Jesus, Rose of Sharon*. I hear Daddy out by the smokehouse bellowing out *Bringing in the Sheaves*. I know they aren’t really here, but I remember it so clearly that some days, well, I think it’s a gift from the Lord just to remind us of how He knows what we need. I guess He thinks I need to remember where I come from, so He lets me hear a little bit of heaven on earth. I’ve even heard Jack a couple of times since he’s been gone.”

“Course you hear ‘em, Honey,” Carrie said. “We all do. You’re right about it being a gift. Sometimes we need to be wrapped up tight in His love. I reckon it might be upsettin’ if He was to sing to us in His voice, so He sends a voice we know. One that’ll be comfortin’ instead of frightenin’. At least that’s what I figure. Don’t you reckon He knows how much those old songs mean to us? ‘Course He does.”

Jackie was full, and Hattie patted his little back until he burped. It was a big ol’ burp that seemed too big for such a little body. It broke the solemnity that had drifted over them all.

“Well, if that’s not a boy! He sounds like a miner already,” Marva said.

“No, I don’t think he’ll be a miner,” said Hattie. “Someday, the veins of coal are gonna play out. I’m thinkin’ I don’t want my young’un underground. I think he’ll go to school and be a lawyer or a doctor. Maybe even a preacher, like your Conroy, Marva.”

With the baby’s future settled, the women tucked Hattie back in with her Bible, and they returned to the kitchen.

“See about stirring up some biscuit dough, Lalie,” Carrie said. “I’m gonna set down for a minute with this coffee. It won’t be long ‘til Dulcie’s here, and then there won’t be another peaceful moment ‘til bedtime.”

In the bedroom, Hattie closed her Bible and let her eyes drift shut. *Lord, when You made this family You knitted together a treasure. I’m powerful proud to be part of it, Father. Help me to bring joy to those around me and to always remember where I come from.*

Chapter 3

Hattie was slipping her feet into her old felt slippers when she heard a car pull up the drive. A minute later the booming voice of Forrest Stoneworth sounded through the house.

“Where’s my baby sister? Where’s that baby boy? I heard he looks just like his best lookin’ uncle. That being me, of course.”

Marva called out from the kitchen, “Y’all are just in time for supper. Come on in.”

“Well, sure we’re in time for supper. Vida’s got a powerful appetite, and she said she knowed you’d be cookin’ so we better hurry.”

“Oh, go on with you, Forrest,” said Vida, his wife. “You was the one what had to come down here and see that baby. I told you we shoulda waited ‘til tomorrah or the next day and give the folks a chance to settle in. Marva, don’t think you need to feed us. I got a pot of beans on at the house just waiting for us to get back.”

Hattie smiled as she picked up the baby and walked to the doorway with Jackie on her shoulder.

“Well, here he is, Forrest. This what you come to see? Ain’t he purty?” She turned the baby in her arms so the newcomers could see his little face. She smiled up at her big brother. “What do you think? Don’t he look like Jack?”

“He sure does, Hattie. Look at those little fingers.”

Vida was expecting her first baby in a few weeks and looked at the baby wistfully. “Oh, ain’t he sweet? He’s not bigger’n a minute. Lookie there, Forrest.”

“You want to hold him, Vida? I’m thinkin’ maybe I need to sit down for a bit.”

“Course I do. Forrest, get Hattie that chair.”

Forrest moved fast for a big man. He grabbed the chair and spun it around, then scooped up Hattie and the baby and gently sat her down.

“Don’t move, Least’un’. You ain’t got no color in your face. What’re you doin’ up anyway?”

“I’m fine, just a little tired. I’ve had me a few things to do today.”

Forrest’s big hands took the sleeping baby from Hattie and passed him to his wife. He put his hands on his Vida’s shoulders and looked over. “Hattie, I b’lieve he’s the finest boy you ever had.”

“Course he is, you goon. He’s the onliest boy I ever had.”

“Well then, there I go bein’ right again.” Forrest grinned the famous Stoneworth grin and walked over to the stove where he snatched a fried potato.

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“Get outa there, Forrest, or I’ll whomp you with this spoon.” Carrie chased her brother out onto the side porch where he plopped himself in the swing.

“It’s too hot in that kitchen, anyway,” he hollered at the backdoor. “Too many wimenfolk to suit me.”

Vida grinned, “Y’all know he worships the ground you walk on, don’t you? I never knew a man who loved his family the way he does. Guess that’s why I fell for him. Couldn’t have been his good looks.” The last words were spoken in a much louder voice.

“Watch it, woman!” Forrest was so easy going that it was fun to tease him and take his teasing in return. He was the family character, always looking for fun.

Just as things settled down from the arrival of Forrest and Vida, Chloe came bumping up the driveway.

“Mama, Mama!” Dulcie’s little body flew from the car into the house. “We havin’ a birfday party?” she asked when she saw all the aunts. “I here. I have cake?”

Forrest crouched low as he came back into the kitchen. Growling, he grabbed up the little girl and held her close a moment. “It sure is a birthday party. You got you a new baby brother, and it’s his birthday. Wanna see him?”

“Nope,” said Dulcie, barely glancing at the baby. “I want cake.”

Vida handed Jackie to Lalie and said, “Give her to me, Forrest, and go get the cake outa the car. Aunt Vida knows what you like, Darlin’. I brought you a cake. It’s not a jam cake like mama makes, but I think you’ll like it. It’s got coconut on it. I think your mama’s gonna want you to eat supper first, though.”

Chloe came through the back door with a sack of sugar and one of flour. “She ate so much stuff up at Radburn’s, I don’t think she’ll be able to eat anything else. Annie and Harwell spoil her somethin’ awful. She was settin’ on the counter eatin’ licorice right out of the candy jar when I got there,” Chloe said with a laugh. “Hey, Vida. I’m glad y’all are here. ‘Sides the fact you brought cake, it wouldn’t have been the same without you. Hattie, Annie sent you these.” Chloe put the flour and sugar on the table. “She said they was a gift for the baby, and she wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

“Supper’s ready,” said Carrie. “Lalie, you, Marva and Willa help me carry in this food. Forrest, go get a pillow for Hattie to sit on. The rest of you find a place to sit.”

Forrest winked at Hattie and did as he was told. “She gets bossier the older she gets,” he whispered as he helped Hattie to her chair in the dining room.

They blessed the food and filled their plates. The rumble of conversation seemed to float over Hattie as she looked around the room at her family.

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Then she heard Forrest say, “I think he’s a good man. I know he’s got a reputation, but underneath all that, he’s real solid. Those folks from that part of the county are God-fearing and loyal. I don’t think there’s a really bad one in the bunch. Some of ‘em are a little wild, I grant you, but there’s none better.”

“Who’s that your talkin’ about?” asked Carrie.

“If you wasn’t chewin’ so loud you’d a heard me,” Forrest responded with a grin. “Smith Delaney—you remember him? I think he was in school a couple years ahead of me. Maybe in Eldon’s class?”

“I remember him,” said Chloe. “He was in my class for awhile ‘til he quit comin’—about the sixth grade—I think. Always thought he was nice, but he was wild when we were in school and for a while after, too. Didn’t he join the army?”

“Sure did. I b’lieve he lied about his age and got in when he was sixteen. As far as I know, that’s the only dishonest thing he ever did.”

“See there, Willa? There’s a nice man, just about the right age for you.” Lalie couldn’t resist a little teasing. “I bet you could turn his head if you tried.”

“I’m not lookin’ for a man. I told you that earlier. Sides, I got my cap set for those ‘seven motherless children’ in Depoy, remember?”

Forrest looked confused. “What are you talkin’ about? Are you seein’ somebody with seven children?” he asked.

Hattie laid her hand on Forrest’s arm and waited for the women to stop laughing.

“You mean you hadn’t heard, Forrest? Willa’s sweet on Dawson Hastings. They’s just about ready to set a date.”

“You are not! Are you really? Well, Dawson’s a good man, but with all them kids ...”

The house rang with laughter. Carrie held up her hand. “Y’all stop! I can’t eat and laugh at the same time. Shame on you, Hattie! Forrest, Willa’s not walkin’ out with nobody. We was givin’ her a hard time this afternoon, and somehow Mr. Hasting’s name got brought up and, well ... anyway ... what’s all this about Smith Delaney?”

“Nothin’ much, just that he’s lookin’ for work, and I was askin’ Marva if she knew anyone in Beech Creek that might need a hired man.”

“Shoot, the only person I know who *really* needs a hired man is Hattie.”

“What?” Hattie’s head jerked up. “I don’t know, Marva. I’m doin’ all right on my own. I don’t have a lot of money to pay for a hired man.”

“You’re doing fine, Honey, but what about the roof on the smokehouse? I know Jack was fixin’ to get it done this spring. Your garden needs attention, and the fencerow down at the end of the field’s leanin’.. You gonna do all that by yourself and watch two babies?”

“I not a baby, I big girl!” Dulcie said from her stool. “I help Mama.”

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“Yes, you do, Darlin’.” Hattie turned back to Marva. “I don’t know,” she repeated. “But I’m not sure I’m wantin’ anyone else on the place.”

“Hattie, you got to have help, and that’s all there is to it. You got that backroom in the smokehouse. The boys could help you fix it up with one of the bedsteads upstairs. I know there’s an old dresser of Mama’s and Daddy’s up there, too. He’d probably be glad for homecooked meals and a nice place to stay. You wouldn’t have to pay him much.”

“That’s good, ‘cause not much is ‘bout all I’ve got. Forrest, are you sure he’s a good man? I wouldn’t want no one drinkin’ and cussin’ around my young’uns.”

“He’d know better than that around any of us, Hattie. I’ll talk to him and see if he’s interested. If he is I’ll bring him by on Saturday. Will that suit you?”

“I... I guess it’ll have to,” Hattie said. “Seems like y’all got it all settled anyway.”

Carrie frowned, “If you don’t like the looks of him when he comes, you don’t have to hire him, Hattie. Nobody’s gonna make you. It’s just that you do need help, especially now with the new baby and all.” She rose from the big oak table and started clearing away the dishes.

Carrie continued to talk as she worked, “Hand me those biscuits. I’ll set ‘em in the warming oven. Now listen. Smith Delaney comes from good folks. I’d heard he was out of work but didn’t really think nothin’ of it. What happened to his last job, Forrest?”

“You know how it is at the mines. Men are laid off all the time for not more than looking at the strawboss crossways. He got into it with ol’ man Sawyer for beatin’ a bank mule. I guess he told Sawyer to quit hittin’ the poor ol’ thing, and when he didn’t, Smith like to took him apart. I heard Sawyer had him throwed off the place. Then somebody else said that wasn’t true, that Delaney quit and walked out before he could be fired.”

Hattie shuddered. “When I think about the conditions in the mine, it just makes me sick. If it hadn’t been Jack crushed in that cave-in, it would’ve been someone else, and I don’t guess it’ll be long ‘fore it happens again.” She blinked hard and twisted the napkin in her lap. “It was hard enough losing Jack, but to know it coulda been avoided with just a little bit of money spent to shore up the ceiling. If he hadn’t lingered so long and suffered so much ... I just hate to think who’ll be next. Seems like the men get younger and younger goin’ down the mines, as the old ones don’t last.”

Forrest reached over and placed a large hand over her small one. “A man’s gotta make a livin’, Hattie. We all live with knowing the whistle’s gonna blow, and there’s gonna be another cave-in, explosion, or other disaster. It’s just the way it is with minin’. Coaltown ain’t much worse than any of the others. Sawyer’s a bad egg, and he gets away with it. I reckon that’s the way it is when you marry the owner’s sister. And you get

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‘Assistant Manager’ tacked on after your name, to boot. Not much we can do to change it ‘cept pray and be as careful as we can when we’re underground.”

Forrest knew the dangers of the mines as well as anyone, and talk like Hattie’s made him decidedly uncomfortable. He rubbed the fingers of his right hand over the stubble of beard on his jaw. In his hurry to get to his little sister’s house, he hadn’t shaved. “We make a reasonable good wage. And we got roofs over our heads and food on the table. If word gets out that you’re talkin’ against the mines, all us Stoneworths could find ourselves out on the dole. You be careful who you’re talkin’ to.”

“You know I wouldn’t say it outside the family,” said Hattie, “but you can’t tell me you ain’t thought the same thing. I even heard you and Eldon talkin’ about it. Y’all were talkin’ when you was sittin’ with Jack’s body. You thought I was sleepin’ but I wasn’t. Y’all were even talkin’ about joinin’ the union or startin’ one of your own like others have done.”

“Hattie, I’m tellin’ you that’s dangerous talk! Just last week there was a man over at Central City got hisself horsewhipped for talkin’ union. There’s been murder, too. Not around here, but it’s happenin’ in the eastern part of the state, especially around Harlan.”

“Wait a minute, Forrest,” said Willa. “I heard about that killin’ at Bevier—they say it was for not much more than just talk.”

“That’s right! Hattie, you and the other women best be keepin’ your mouths shut. You could get yourself and them babies burned out, or worse.” Forrest was getting agitated. “Looks like the time’s here when you’re in trouble with some folks if you’re for unions, and in trouble with others if you’re agin’ unions.”

“Hush, Forrest Stoneworth. You’re scarin’ her, and me, too,” Carrie scolded. “Hattie knows better than to stir up trouble.”

Union talk was whispered wherever miners gathered but in most circles never discussed out loud.

“What me and Eldon was sayin’ was just grief talkin’,” said Forrest. “We wasn’t serious about startin’ nothin’.”

“Smith Delaney ain’t a union sympathizer, is he?” Marva asked as she wiped down the surface of the big oak table. “He wouldn’t be bringin’ no trouble on Hattie and the babies if he come here, would he?”

“Don’t think so. Everybody knows ol’ man Sawyer’s a hothead, and not too many people put much stock in what he says. Sawyer got what was comin’ to him. That Smith Delaney don’t abide no mistreatment of animals. He don’t abide anything he sees as unjust. I reckon he figured if Sawyer’s low enough to beat an old wore-out mule he’d be low enough to do just about anything. Sometimes I think the coal mines won’t never change unless somebody steps up and takes ‘em on. The coal companies always make the rules and we... we just gotta live with ‘em, like it or not.”

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The coal company controlled their lives in so many ways. It paid their salaries—or not. It gave them credit at the company store when money was tight, as it always was. Somehow, when payday came there was never quite enough to pay back the company. So you needed more credit to make it until the next paycheck. So the cycle continued. You always seemed to be in debt to the company, one way or the other.

“You don’t owe nothin’ to the store, do you Hattie?” asked Willa.

“No, Jack was smart that way. We do most of our buyin’ up at Radburns. Jack’d never let us buy nothin’ from the company store without cash money. He said chargin’ was a surefire way to be a slave, and he wasn’t gonna give up his freedom to nobody. He had that bit of money from when his granddaddy died, and when things were tight, we used a little of it. I’ve still got some laid by, and with selling that old truck, I didn’t have to go into debt for the funeral neither. I been selling eggs to Annie Radburn and doin’ some sewing for folks. So far, I’m all right.”

The table had been cleared. The girls did the washing up quickly and quietly. Any talk of unrest at the mines sobered most folks, as it did them.

Forrest put his arms around Vida from behind and rested his chin on top of her head. “Well, I reckon we better be gittin’ back up the hill and headin’ for home. I’ll be out Saturday mornin’ with Smith. You think about whether you want him or not.”

“Dulcie, come here to me,” Willa called. She took the little girl into the front room, sat down on the couch, and pulled her up in her lap. “I got somethin for you.” She reached into the bag where she’d put the ragdoll. “Lookee here. Your mama’s got a new baby and so do you.”

Dulcie’s eyes were big as saucers. “Baby for me?” She held the doll, slid to the floor, and jumped up and down. Then she scrambled up in the big rocking chair. “I rock da baby,” she said.

“That’s right. You gotta take good care of your baby. He needs lots of lovin’. What you gonna name him?”

Dulcie concentrated a long time, then she said, “I name him Hat.”

“Hat? Why Hat, Honey?” Willa looked puzzled.

“Mama’s baby haves daddy’s name. My baby haves Mama’s name!” Dulcie said proudly.

“I guess that’s right. Yup, that’ll do just fine,” said Willa with a smile. “Young’un, you are sharp as a tack! Nothin’ gets by you.”

Lalie walked in on the tail end of the conversation.

“Whatcha got there, Dulcie?”

“This my baby. His name is Hat. He vewy good boy like Mama’s baby.”

“Yes, I can see he’s a good baby. Honey, your mama wants you. Can you run in there and see her?”

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Dulcie slid to the edge of the rocker and hopped down. She scooted around the corner and out of sight holding her doll by one foot.

“What do you think of Hattie takin’ on a hired man?” Lalie asked Willa.

“I don’t know. I reckon she’s gonna have to do somethin’. Eldon and Forrest have families of their own to look after, and I know they been down here a lot tryin’ to help. I’m just thankful she’s got the house. At least she don’t have to worry about bein’ turned out.”

“Ain’t it the truth. I’ve always thought it was a shame, turnin’ the womenfolk out of the company houses when their men get sick or killed. Hattie’d been in a bad way if she’d been in a company house.”

“Well, she wasn’t, and thank the Lord for it. Jack and Hattie put this old place back together with sweat and hard work.”

“I know. Carrie and I thought they were crazy to want to move down here, but when they asked if they could try, it seemed like we had to let ‘em. They did a real good job. Don’t you know Daddy would be proud to see it standin’ so clean and tall?”

“I always thought it was nice when Berk was livin’ here, but let’s face it, it had fallen on hard times by then. And a man just don’t keep a house clean like a woman. As much as I miss Berk, I think I’ll always be glad Nan didn’t want to live so far from her mama ‘cause look how good it turned out for Hattie.”

“Uh huh. Remember how heartsick we were when Berk said he was going to Louisville to live. Now, I think I understand why that happened. God knew Hattie was goin’ to need a safe place to live. Guess that goes to show you Who’s really in control.” Lalie looked up as Chloe came to the door.

“Y’all, I’m fixin’ to go. Marva’s just about ready, too. If you’re wantin’ a ride, better come on. I need to get home ‘fore Ray thinks I run off with the Tinker.”

“Ha! He’d come after you if you did!” laughed Lalie. “All right, let’s go say our good-byes. I know you got to run all over the county droppin’ us off.”

Soon they were loaded up and heading for home. Hattie, Dulcie and Jackie were all kissed goodbye.

Willa said, “Be sweet, I’ll see you soon.”

“Let us know if you need anything,” said Lalie as they went out the door.

Carrie bathed Dulcie, told her the story of Daniel in the Lion’s Den, and tucked her into the bed she’d shared with her mother since Jack’s death. When Dulcie’d finally closed her eyes, thumb in her mouth and arm hooked around her new ragdoll, Carrie left her and went to find Hattie.

Hattie was nursing Jackie on the porchswing. The swing jiggled a little as Carrie sat down beside her.

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“Well, I’m glad they were all here,” said Carrie, “but I’m glad they’re gone now, too. I’m about wore out. How ‘bout you, Honey?”

“I’ll live, I reckon. I’m tired, but it’s a good tired. It’s been an awful long day. You and the girls was so good to come.”

“It won’t be long now ‘til we’re in the middle of it again at Forrest’s. Vida’s lookin’ fit to pop anytime. Ain’t she sweet? I’m so glad he got him a good woman. I think I worried over all you kids marryin’ up with the wrong kind more than anything else after Mama and Daddy died. Every one of us did good with our choices, though, don’t you think?”

“Yes, ma’am, I do.” Hattie shifted the baby to her other breast. “We wouldn’t none of us brought shame on the family, Carrie. Why would you worry ‘bout that?”

“Hattie, there’s all sorts out there that talk big and even act like they’re good folk, but behind closed doors they beat their wives or drink or both. Look at poor ol’ Mamie Dunford. If she comes in to church with a black eye one more time It just makes me so mad! And to look at Deke Dunford, you’d think he was the sweetest man in the world. He’s gonna kill Mamie one of these days—you mark my words—and there’s nothin’ nobody can do to stop it. It’s that kind of thing that scared me, I reckon.”

“I see what you mean. You know what’s really scary? One time at Bible study, I heard Miz McPherson say a man wouldn’t hit his woman if she didn’t need hittin’. I b’lieve there was another woman there that agreed with her. Can you imagine thinkin’ like that?”

“Course not. But we didn’t never see that kinda carryin’ on when we was growin’ up. Daddy’d have cut off his arm ‘fore he’d have hit Mama, but if he had beat her, maybe Eldon and the boys would have thought that was the way to act.” Carrie shifted in the swing, setting it to rocking sideways. “Hattie, I know this is changin’ the subject, but would you really object to havin’ a hired man?”

Hattie bit her lip. “I don’t guess so. I just ... well, it seems awful soon to have another man on the place. Jack’s only been gone for three months.”

“Nobody’s askin’ you to marry him, Hattie.”

“I know. I guess I’m a little concerned how it’ll look to the folk, and you *know* Eunice Crowe is gonna have a fit. I won’t let her move in, but I’ll take in a strange man. Course, I guess if I let her move in too, it wouldn’t look unseemly to have him here.”

“Don’t you do it! Don’t you even *think* about doin’ it. She don’t need to move in here. She’s just wantin’ to get her hands on Mama’s things. She’d turn herself inside out if she thought she could tell folks she’s livin’ at the Stoneworth homeplace. After all her fine talk of Annie Radburn puttin’ on airs, she’s the one that tries to make out she’s better’n folks!”

Turn Back Time

“I know that, Carrie. I’m just trying to keep the peace. You don’t know how hard it’s been trying to hold her off and not make an enemy of her. Jack wouldn’t have wanted that, and neither do I.”

Hattie got up and walked back through the side door into the kitchen and through to the bedroom. She reached down and pulled the covers up over Dulcie, then carefully laid the sleeping baby down into the cradle. Carrie watched her from the door until she came back to the kitchen.

“You’re lookin’ a little peaked. Why don’t you get ready for bed, and I’ll get the kitchen ready for the mornin’.”

Hattie nodded, then wrapped her arms around Carrie. “What would I do without you? You’ve been my sister, my mother, and my friend. I know I’d just be lost if you weren’t here to give me what for.”

“What? With all your other sisters you think you’d miss me?” Carrie laughed softly into the hair of her baby sister, holding her tight. “I think you’d do just fine. Mama and I raised you up to get by no matter what the circumstances, and you’ve had to do that. I’m powerful proud of you, Darlin’. Now, let go of me ‘fore I start to bawlin’ and wake up them young’uns.”

She gave Hattie a gentle push toward the bed and turned away. “Sleep well, Hattie.”

“I think I will. You gonna be all right in the front room?”

“Uh huh. I’ve slept on worse than a couch before. Remember the time ...” They talked quietly back and forth between the rooms as Carrie hooked the latches on the screen doors, then turned down the kerosene lamps and blew them out. Slowly everything quieted, and Hattie heard the springs on the big couch give as Carrie lay down. She could hear the crickets and the cicadas humming outside. The old house creaked as it settled down for the night.

Lord, I know You’re there watchin’ over. Would You help me decide what to do about Mr. Delaney? I ... I ain’t sure, Lord. It just seems like an awful big thing to have him come here, and I know it’ll tear Mother Crowe from one end to the other. Help me make the right choice.

Chapter 4

Hattie rose early Saturday morning. She sat down in the quiet of the porch and tried to think of reasons why she should hire Smith Delaney.

Eldon and Forrest had put in a crop of corn for her before Jack died. Jack had always planted corn as a cash crop. It was late summer now, and she'd need help with the harvest.

It wasn't just the harvest she'd need help with though. Marva was right about the smokehouse roof. It definitely needed fixing. She and Jack had put off tackling the outbuildings until they had gotten the old homeplace back in order. He had bought all the materials to fix it last fall with the corn money, thinking he'd do it this year. But this year Jack was gone. The roof wouldn't last another winter and everything inside would be damaged. The temporary patches he'd put on last fall were just barely keeping the rain out.

The fence *was* in bad shape. Firewood and coal would have to be bought and hauled in. She could use help with the garden. There was plenty for a hired man to do.

Even knowing all that, Hattie was reluctant to hire Mr. Delaney—or anyone else.

Why couldn't things just go on the way they were? Forrest and Eldon would keep on helping her ... but Hattie recalled the conversation she'd had with Rose Ellen, Eldon's wife, the afternoon before when they'd come down to see the baby and help clean the smokehouse.

"Hattie, you know Eldon and I'd do anything in the world for you. I wasn't gonna say nothin' about it, but I'm worried about Eldon. He's been up coughin' every night for the last couple weeks. I think the coal dust is gettin' to him."

When Hattie's eyes grew large with fear, Rose Ellen had continued, "Now, I don't think it's real bad, but Honey, he's got all he can do to keep up at the mine and around our place. When Carrie told me you were thinkin' on hirin' a man to come help out around here, it sure made me feel better. I just want you to know it'll ease Eldon's mind not havin' to worry over you."

"Eldon never said a word ..."

"Course he didn't, and he never would. You got enough on your plate right now, but Eldon's my husband and ... well, when Carrie said you was thinkin' about takin' on Mr. Delaney, it just seemed like an answer to prayer."

Not my prayer, Hattie thought as she swirled her coffee absently.

"Think on this, too," Rose Ellen continued, "When Vida's baby comes, she's gonna need Forrest more than ever. She don't have a mama to come be with her. He's not gonna want to leave her."

Turn Back Time

“No, I don’t reckon he will.”

“It ain’t that we ain’t willin’ to help. It’s just that if you got the chance to hire somebody, well, it’d just make it easier on everyone. You wouldn’t be alone out here anymore, either. I ‘magine there’s been a time or two since Jack’s been gone you’ve wished there was a good man around.”

Hattie thought of the night in June when a truckload of drunk men had come tearing down the hill whooping and hollering, their truck spinning around and off the edge of the road. They got it on again and headed back over the hill. They hadn’t done anything except make a lot of racket, but it had scared Hattie. It had scared her badly enough that she’d slipped out of bed in the dark, loaded Jack’s shotgun and watched until they’d turned around and headed back toward town. You could never tell when a bunch of liquored-up men might turn ugly. It had taken a long time for her hammering heart to slow down.

Rose Ellen had changed the subject after that, and it wasn’t long ‘til Eldon had come in from moving the furniture she’d chosen from the attic. Hattie had a hard time putting the conversation out of her thoughts. Rose Ellen wasn’t one to worry needlessly. If she was concerned about Eldon, there was reason to be.

Hattie laid her head down on the table and prayed: *Lord, I don’t want to do this. I ... I just want to turn back time and have Jack here with me and the babies ... I know that’s not gonna happen, but I don’t want another man here. Yet, I don’t want to be a burden on my family either. You seem to be openin’ this door, but I’m not wantin’ to walk through. Help me to know this is Your will. I’m not so certain. What if he ain’t clean? What if he don’t like my young’uns? What if he don’t know You, Lord? And what’s Eunice Crowe gonna say? It’s gonna be bad, Lord. I just know it will!*

Hattie lifted her head. Crossing her arms on the table, she put her chin down on them. She looked out at the wakening dawn. The birds were beginning to sing. Closing her eyes, she continued to pray: *Help me, Father. I can’t do this by myself, and I ain’t wantin’ this man to come. Help me make the right decision even if it’s not what I want.*

Smith Delaney looked out the window of Forrest’s beat up old truck and wondered what he was doing there. Why was he even considering being a hired man for a widow woman? He was a miner, not a hired hand. There were other mines in the area; he could go to one of those. He knew the answer to the question. He was sick of it. Sick of the dust. Sick of the dark. Sick of the death. He didn’t want to die coughing up coal dust like most of the old men he knew, including his own father. He guessed it wouldn’t hurt to go see the woman. It probably wouldn’t come to anything anyway, and

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nobody was going to make him take the job. He'd see what it was about and then decide.

The truck jounced down the hill and up beside the house. Forrest jumped out of the truck, and yelled, "Hello, the house! Hattie, you there?"

"I'm here." Hattie opened the screen door. Dulcie hid behind her mother's skirts and peered at the stranger getting out of the truck.

"Smith, this here's my sister I told you about, Hattie Crowe. Hattie, this is Smith Delaney."

"How do, Miz Crowe."

"Mr. Delaney."

Smith was stunned. This beautiful young girl was Forrest Stoneworth's widowed sister? He'd been expecting someone older, and definitely not so pretty. She couldn't be more than twenty-two or twenty-three years old. She was the widow? Sympathy shot through Smith like an arrow. Someone needs to be taking care of her. Just look at her, with her hair so shiny and those big dark eyes.

"I'm right sorry to hear of your loss, ma'am," he said. "Sounds like you've kinda got your hands full around here."

"Thank you. I guess I do. Please come in. We'll set out here on the porch where there's a breeze if you don't mind."

"That'll be just fine," replied Smith.

"Hey, Hattie, where's the baby?"

"He's sleeping."

"Guess I'll have to make-do with my number one girl then. Come here, sugar."

Dulcie ran to her Uncle Forrest and let him pick her up.

Hattie led the way back to the table, sat down, and motioned for the men to sit.

When they were seated she said, "I've never hired anyone before. I'm not real sure how to go about it. Maybe you could tell me a little about yourself."

"I'm not a real big talker, ma'am, but I'm from the Old Hebron-Mud River area. I'm a hard worker and I do an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. I'd do right by you if you take me on." *What am I doing? I'm practically begging this woman for the job.*

"I don't reckon I could ask for more than that. Is there anybody that would recommend you? I mean... somebody we know?"

"Well, ma'am, I don't know. I know Forrest, and I'm on noddin' acquaintance with Gene. I worked with your brother, Eldon, too, at Coaltown."

"I guess I meant someone outside the family who'd vouch for you."

"Let's see... You know Annie Radburn? Up at the store in Drakesboro?"

"Yes, sir."

Turn Back Time

“She’s my cousin on my mama’s side.” Smith’s eyes twinkled. “Poor Annie. She’s always been so quiet and shy. Reckon she’s about the only one I can think of on the spur of the moment like this.”

Hattie smiled at his ridiculous description of Annie Radburn. “That’s all right. I reckon that’ll do. Did Forrest tell you what I can pay you? I know it ain’t much, but I’m a good cook, and I’d make sure you don’t go hungry.”

Forrest jumped in at this point with eyes twinkling. “I don’t know ‘bout that; she pert near killed me one time with her biscuits. And one time her gravy’s real watery and the next it’s lumpy.”

Smith grinned, “I’m sure it’ll be fine. I understand you got a room for me to stay in?”

“Not in the house.” Hattie blushed and said quickly, “It’s in the back of the smokehouse. I guess you’ll want to see it.”

When Smith nodded, they rose and made their way to the old smokehouse. It was used mostly for storage these days. The building was divided in half down the middle by a strong wooden partition. The back half had two windows and a door that led onto a small roofed porch.

Hattie opened the door and held it for the men. Smith gestured for her to go in ahead of him.

“It’s clean, and there’s a bed, a dresser, and a washstand. I guess it don’t look like much, but I tried to make it comfortable. We’ll put in a stove for the winter if you’re still here. See, there’s already a chimney. I think there’s a couple of chairs on the other side. You can have one for in here and one for the porch if you like.”

“It’s just fine, ma’am. In fact, it’s a lot nicer than some places I’ve stayed. I’ll take those chairs. And thank you.”

“When ... um ... when do you think you’d like to start?”

“I reckon I could move in tonight if that’d be all right with you.”

Hattie took a deep breath. “Oh. You’ll want to go get your things. Forrest going to drive you back down here?”

“No, ma’am. I have a truck. He’ll run me on home, and I’ll come back down in that. Is there some place you want me to park it?”

“Anywhere is all right, I guess.”

Forrest looked from Smith to Hattie. “Well, now that we got that settled, you need anything? I can stop at Radburn’s for you and have Smith bring whatever you need back when he comes.”

“I guess I do need coffee as long as it’s on your way.”

“I’d be glad to stop on my way back, Miz Crowe. Do you want me to put it on your account?”

“No, sir! If I can’t pay for it, I don’t buy it. I’ll get you the money.” Hattie tilted her chin in the air, turned, and went into the house.

“She’s a little prickly, ain’t she?” asked Smith.

Turn Back Time

“Who? Hattie? I’ve never knowed her to be,” Forrest answered. “She’s been through an awful lot, with losin’ her husband and havin’ a new baby, though. She might be a little touchy right now. You watch out for her, will you?”

Smith didn’t have time to reply before Hattie was back with her purse. She carefully counted out the coins for the coffee and handed them to Smith. He tucked them into his pocket.

“Miz Crowe, can I ask you somethin’? What’s your little girl’s name? She’s a purty little thing.”

“This here’s Dulcie.” Hattie said, thawing a little toward the man.

“How do, Dulcie? I’m Smith.”

Dulcie slid completely behind her mother, then peeped around her skirt.

“I reckon I’ll be back around five. Will that be all right?”

When Hattie nodded, Smith and Forrest got into the truck and pulled out.

Hattie slowly let the breath leave her body. She didn’t think she’d drawn a full breath the whole time the men had been there. She didn’t remember saying, “You’re hired”, but she’d got herself a hired man anyway. How did that happen? She shook her head. The deed was done. She’d just have to make the best of it.

The bell over the door at Radburn’s rang as Smith went in. There were several people in the store, and it took a few minutes for Annie to notice him.

“Hey, Smith. How’re you?”

“I’m fine, Annie. You doin’ all right?”

“Fit as a fiddle! What’re you doin’ in Drakesboro? I don’t generally see you ‘til Granny’s birthday in September.”

“You’ll be seein’ more of me now. I’m working for Miz Crowe.”

Annie looked at him as if he’d suddenly grown a third arm.

“You ain’t! Well, well, well! I’ll tell you one thing, cousin, you cut yourself a mighty big chaw if you’re takin’ on Miz Crowe. Why, that woman’s meaner’n a striped snake. You ain’t gonna last very long workin’ for her. Not with your temper.”

Smith was shocked, “She seemed nice enough to me ...”

Annie leaned across the counter and locked her gaze onto his. “Well, maybe she was durin’ the hirin’, but I’m tellin’ you, you’re gonna have to watch your tongue ‘cause she ain’t gonna take no lip off’n you ...”

“That little thing?”

“She may be short in stature, but she’s big on hateful! Why, you shoulda heard what she said to me just last Tuesday. She carried on like a scalded cat!”

Turn Back Time

Smith couldn't believe what he was hearing. Hattie Crowe had seemed so gentle and reserved, but Annie seemed awful certain about what she was saying. He guessed it must be true.

All of a sudden, Annie burst out laughing. "Wheweee! I'd like to be there when you get enough of her. I've never known you to bite your tongue. I 'magine you'll give as good as you get. It'd be a sight to see! And if anyone deserves a good comedown, it's Miz Crowe."

They talked of mutual family for a few minutes, then Smith paid for the coffee he'd come for and headed for Hattie's. *It just figures I'd get m'self hired on with a harpy.* He shook his head. *We'll just see how long this lasts. It's a low-down shame, though. She's awful purty.*

Thirty minutes later Eunice Crowe marched into Radburn's just as Annie was about to lock up for the day.

"I'll have a pound of coffee."

"Coffee? Oh, but ..."

"What's the matter? My money don't spend here? Somebody else's greener'n mine? If you Republicans don't want Roosevelt paper, I got Coaltown Mine flickers." She extended her hand with several brass disks etched with the Coaltown mark.

"No, no ... 'Course your money's fine, Miz Crowe, but ... I mean, wasn't Smith just in here buyin' your coffee?" Annie was confused.

"Smith? What are you talkin' about? Nobody bought nothin' for me." She smiled with feigned concern. "Is the heat gettin' to you?"

"No, but ... he said he was workin' for Miz Crowe, and I thought ..."

"Ain't nobody workin' for me! Have you taken leave of your senses? You're talkin' nonsense!" Eunice stopped in the middle of her tirade as a glimmer of the truth dawned on her. "Annie Radburn, you start from the beginnin' and tell me what you heard. Don't you leave nothin' out!"

For once in her life, Annie was speechless. She couldn't very well repeat what she'd said about Eunice to Smith. She stammered, "My, my cousin, Smith Delaney come in here. He said he was workin' for Miz Crowe. Natr'ly, I thought he was talkin' 'bout you, but he must've been talkin' 'bout Hattie."

Eunice snatched up her purse, whirled around and slammed out the door. Faithful Ferd was waiting in the truck.

"Take me to Hattie's!"

Hattie heaped a plate with porkchops, mashed potatoes, gravy and biscuits and carried it out to the smokehouse. Smith answered the soft knock.

"I fixed you a plate. You can bring the dishes down to the house later. The screen door'll be unlocked. You can leave 'em on the table on the porch."

Turn Back Time

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you, I will.” Smith breathed in deeply to catch the rising aromas of food. “Smells mighty good.”

Hattie turned toward the house then back again. “I’d like to go to worship in the mornin’. I was wonderin’ if you’d take me and the children in your truck?”

“If that’s what you want,” he replied. He hadn’t been to church in years, but if Hattie wanted to go, he’d take her.

“Good. That’s settled then. Well, goodnight.”

Hattie was cutting paperdolls for Dulcie a little while later when she heard the roar of an engine cut through the quiet.

“Set there, Darlin’, while I go see who that is.” She dropped a kiss on Dulcie’s forehead and went to the door. Her heart sank when she saw who was marching toward the house. She hoped Eunice hadn’t heard about Smith yet.

“Mother Crowe ... ”

“Don’t you ‘Mother Crowe’ me!” Eunice’s shrill voice cut through Hattie like a knife. “I just heard you’re movin’ a man in down here, and my Jack not even cold in the ground! You ain’t gonna do it, Hattie. I’m tellin’ you, you ain’t! You ain’t gonna bring shame on his memory!”

“Mother Crowe, I’d *never* do that! You know I wouldn’t. Please calm down. Let me explain ”

“Ain’t no explainin’ needed. I got it on good authority you moved a man in here, and I’m gonna put a stop to it.”

“I didn’t ‘move a man in here’. Not the way you’re sayin’ it anyway. I need help with the place and ” Hattie realized her mistake the instant the words left her mouth.

“Oh, I see! Now you need help, but you didn’t need no help from me. You need ‘man’ help,” Eunice hissed. “I ain’t gonna stand for it! If you don’t put him off the place *tonight*, I’m gonna call the law. They’ll take them young’uns you’re so partial to and give ‘em to decent folk!” The veins on Eunice’s neck stood out like ropes.

“You ... you don’t mean that! They wouldn’t take my children just on your say so,” Hattie cried, panic filling her voice.

“*Yes, they would!*” Eunice was vicious now. “I’ll tell ‘em how you brung a man out here, and they’ll name you unfit. See if they don’t!”

Smith had heard enough. He strode out of the shadows where he’d been standing and watching since the truck pulled in. He’d witnessed the whole scene.

“Scuse me, ma’am. I think you’ve said ‘bout enough. Let me help you to your truck.” He took a firm grip on Eunice’s arm and propelled the sputtering, stammering woman to the waiting Ford. He put her inside and closed the door firmly, then leaned in the window.

“This your woman?” he asked Ferd.

Turn Back Time

“Sister.”

“Uh huh. She’s ready to go home now.”

“Yeah, thought she might be.”

Ferd started the truck just as Eunice found her tongue again. “You remember what I said Hattie Stoneworth ... ”

Smith cut her off. “Well, bye now. Thanks for comin’. Y’all be careful now. See you in church ... ” He kept up a steady one-sided dialogue, that cut Eunice off every time she tried to open her mouth, ‘til Ferd had the truck pointed back in the direction of town.

“I take it that’s the *other* Widow Crowe?”

Hattie sagged against the side of the porch. She looked like she’d been slapped.

“Miz Hattie, you all right? Now, don’t you go worrying ‘bout what that old woman said. She’s just blowin’ smoke.” Smith couldn’t believe how protective he felt about this woman he’d known for less than a full day. He wanted to take her in his arms and hold her ‘til the fear was gone. He knew that was out of the question. If she didn’t kill him herself, her brothers would. He made up his mind to stick close by the house for a while though.

“Could they take my young’uns?” Hattie asked in a voice tight with emotion.

“I reckon they could if you was breakin’ the law. You ain’t, are you?”

“Course I’m not.”

“You ain’t got a moonshine still on the place, do you?”

“No!”

“Well then, you take good care of your kids? Feed ‘em and love ‘em and the like?”

“Yes, of course.”

“HMMMM ... then, I’d say your young’uns are purty safe.”

“But ... ”

“I heard her. Miz Hattie, I got a feelin’ that woman’s fairly well known around these parts. I don’t imagine too many people put much stock in what she says. She’d have to prove you been immoral to get them young’uns, and since you ain’t been ... ” Smith grinned. “Did you see her face when I said ‘see you in church’?” He chuckled. “Thought she was gonna have a fit right then and there!” He laughed out loud.

Hattie was suddenly furious. How could he possibly laugh at a time like this? She whirled around and let the screen door slam behind her.

Smith laughed all the way back to the smokehouse. This job was turning out fine. Just fine.

Chapter 5

Hattie had spent a restless night. She knew she wasn't her best that Sunday morning. It had taken everything she had to dress herself and the children, find her Bible, and walk out the door.

"Miz Hattie, might be best if I was to drop you and the young'uns off at the door when we get to the church. Y'all can go on in, and I'll just slip in the back and sit with Clarence Hunt. He still sit on the back pew?" Smith negotiated the gravel road with careful precision.

"Yes, he does. Always has as long as I can remember."

"Me and Clarence go way back. We started back-pew sittin' when we was boys up at Old Hebron church. When everybody'd stand for the openin' song we'd sneak out and play in the woods behind the church 'til the invitation song. Then we'd slip back in. We got away with it for a long time. At least we did 'til my Mama figured out what we was doin' and took a switch to me. I ain't been real partial to church-going since," Smith grinned.

Hattie wasn't in much mood to laugh. "I reckon that could put a man off going," she said absently. All she could think of was Eunice being at church. She hadn't ever missed a church service that Hattie could recall. *Please, Lord, don't let her make a scene in front of everyone!* Hattie reached up to adjust her collar with shaky fingers.

"Anyway, I was thinkin' that there ain't no point in stirrin' up a hornet's nest by walkin' in together. I got a feelin' Miz Crowe's gonna be lookin' for any cause to make trouble. We'll try not to give her one. Now, if I was you, I'd go in and sit right in the middle of your brothers and sisters. That way she ain't likely to come at you. She won't be wantin' to get into it with you with all them there to take up for you."

Hattie always sat with the family, but she resented that Smith was telling her what to do. "I'll sit where I always sit. I don't need to be told."

"No, ma'am, I didn't reckon you did. I'm just thinkin' how to get you through this with the least bit of fuss. No offense intended." *Good*, he thought, *she's gettin' her dander up. That's better than walkin' in lookin' ashamed.* "You just do like you always do, Miz Hattie. You'll be fine."

"I will!" she snapped.

Dulcie looked from Mama to Smith. Mama didn't get mad very often, and Dulcie didn't like it when she did. "Mama? You mad at Mr. Baloney?"

"What? Oh. No, Honey. I'm not mad at Mr. *Delaney*. I've just got a lot on my mind. Look over there at that big house. That's where Mr. & Mrs. Billy Bridges live. Did you ever see such a house? They got electric lights! Doesn't it look fine? See the curtains? They're made of real lace. I think they're awful purty. How 'bout you? Mr. Bridges is one reason Drakesboro

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has such good streets. He's always usin' Black Diamond's workers and equipment and slack from the mine to make 'em better." She was talking a mile a minute but couldn't seem to stop.

Hattie took a few deep breaths to calm herself down. She'd not let anyone see her looking so distraught. She hadn't done anything wrong, and she wasn't going to hang her head! The more she thought about it, the more she was determined to act like everything was fine.

The truck bumped to a stop at the door of the Jackson Chapel Church, and Hattie got out. She reached one hand back to help Dulcie down, then straightened Jackie's blanket.

"I'll be in directly," said Smith. "I don't b'lieve I'll go to Sunday school, but I'll be in for the worship service."

"That's ... that's fine."

Hattie walked toward the familiar faces of friends and family. They looked the same as always. There were the Graysons, the McPhersons, Mamie Dunford, with fresh bruises on her arms, and Carrie, Willa, and Chloe.

Carrie hurried to her.

"What's wrong?"

Hattie should have known she couldn't fool Carrie. "I'll ... I'll tell you later. I don't wanna talk right now. You seen Mother Crowe?"

"No, not yet. Why?"

"I was just wonderin', that's all. We better go in." The family moved toward the door.

Jackson Chapel was a one-room building. Its wooden pews were hard and scarred from years of use. Bare wood showed in spots where the shellac had been worn off. The room was strung with wires across its length and breadth. Long brown curtains were hung from the wires. During Sunday school, the curtains partitioned off separate "rooms". Hattie took Dulcie to Miz Fenton's corner and left her there. They moved down to the front of the building where the adults met. Hattie could hear Miz Fenton leading the youngest children in song. Hattie and her sisters slipped into a pew.

Brother Fenton led the adult group in prayer. He opened his Bible and began a discussion of the Book of Acts. Hattie was just beginning to relax and enjoy the message when Eunice appeared. As usual, she was dressed all in black. *She even looks like a crow*, Hattie thought and felt instantly ashamed.

Eunice glared at Hattie, then turned to the preacher.

"Brother Fenton, I got a question to put to you," Eunice interrupted. "Ain't it a sin for a man and a woman to live together without being married?"

Eli Fenton looked shocked. "Why, of course it is, Miz Crowe."

Turn Back Time

“And if you was to get word that one of your flock was livin’ in sin with a man, it’d be your Christian duty to do somethin’ about it, wouldn’t it?”

Hattie was horrified. *Don’t do this, Eunice. Please don’t do this. Lord, I’ll die right here, if she does!*

“Well, I reckon it’d be my duty to go visit with ‘em and find out what was goin’ on before I did anything. Now, If they were willin’ to repent and make things right ...”

“But, say they didn’t repent. You’d have to put ‘em out of the church, ain’t that right?”

“If they didn’t repent? I reckon I might have to ...”

“And if the woman had young’uns. Wouldn’t you have to go to the law and say how they’s bein’ ruined by the morals of their mama? It would be your duty, wouldn’t it?”

“I’d purely hate that, but ...”

“Uh huh, and you’d make sure their reputations was ruined in this here county, wouldn’t you?”

The preacher frowned and paused a moment before he answered, “Well now, I don’t know about that. The way I see it, they’d have ruined their own reputations. That wouldn’t be my doin’.”

Carrie had heard enough. It hadn’t taken her long to figure out what was going on.

“Brother Fenton, what if a woman was alone in the world, and she hired a man to come take care of her land and her buildin’s? That wouldn’t be wrong, would it?”

“No.”

“And as long as he didn’t live in the house with the woman, couldn’t nobody say nothin’ about it, right?”

“Well ... it wouldn’t be the best situation even if he wasn’t livin’ in the house, but if they were both good, God-fearing folk, livin’ moral lives, I guess there wouldn’t be nothin’ to say about it.”

“All right ... and if *someone* tried to stir up trouble for those folks by say, startin’ talk, that’d be a sin, ain’t that right?”

Brother Fenton purely hated gossip. It was one of his favorite themes. “I’d be mighty put out with anyone who’d start talk about it! ‘Let him who is without sin cast the first stone’,” he quoted.

“Thank you, Brother. That’s all I wanted to know.”

Eunice was purple. She was so angry. Hattie saw her stare daggers at Carrie, but Eunice clamped her mouth shut and didn’t say another word.

Brother Fenton said, “Now, if we can return to the Second Chapter of Acts we’ll go on.”

Hattie wanted to slide under the pew. She knew her ears were burning. She glanced around the room. Every Stoneworth was lookin’ fit to kill. There was a storm coming, and Hattie knew she was going to be in the center of it.

Turn Back Time

When Sunday school was over and the worship service had begun, she tried to take comfort in the familiar rituals that had been such a part of her life. The service started with an old favorite hymn, and Hattie let herself be comforted by the familiar words:

Rock of Ages cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.

Hide is right, Lord. I just want to hide! The service went on. Hattie found herself wondering if Smith was sitting on the back row. Over and over her mind ran through the scene that had played out during Sunday school. She wasn't able to concentrate on the sermon.

Annie Radburn looked fit to be tied. She fidgeted on the pew until Harwell reached over and patted her hand. As soon as the last hymn was sung and the closing prayer said, she marched down the aisle and grabbed Smith by the arm. She dragged him outside and around the corner of the church.

"Smith, why in the world did you let me think you was workin' for Eunice Crowe? Why didn't you tell me it was Hattie? That woman 'bout made mincemeat of her this mornin' during Sunday school. Don't you know nothin' 'bout the Stoneworths? They're good folk, Smith. Real fine."

"Annie ... "

"Hattie's just the best little thing. You ain't got no business working for her. You gonna ruin her reputation and make her life miserable. Now, I ain't never cared whether you and Colt took a drink once in a while or caroused a little, but Hattie'll care. It'll pure tear her up if you behave like that. You hear me? And the rest of them Stoneworths ain't gonna be real happy neither."

"But, Annie, I ain't makin' no claim on her. I just ... "

"Now, I love you, Smith, you bein' kin and all, but you ain't good enough for the likes of Hattie. I'd never've introduced you to her. She's just as fine as they come and you ... well, you got your temper, and you don't think nothin' 'bout gettin' liquored up." She paused, took a breath, looked hard at Smith and continued, "You just ain't good enough for her."

"Annie, if she'd have me, I'd quit all that. I wouldn't touch another drop of liquor. I'd quit gamblin', too. I'd flat out tear myself up doin' right by her. You just wait and see."

"I don't believe you could! A man can't change his stripes like that. Don't you hurt her, Smith. I'll ... I'll never forgive you if you do!" Annie turned on her heels and stormed off, almost in tears.

Smith slowly walked back around the side of the building where the congregation was coming out.

Turn Back Time

“Smith, you old dog!” said Clarence Hunt. “I couldn’t believe it when you sat down next to me in there. How long’s it been?” Clarence seemed genuinely tickled to see Smith.

“I don’t know. A while I reckon. You been up to anything good?”

“Not much. You?”

“Not much. I’m workin’ for Hattie Crowe. Just started yesterday. I’ll be livin’ down there on her place from now on.”

“Yeah, I heard you was let go at Coaltown again. I’m real sorry to hear that. It’s a cryin’ shame the way they run that mine. If they was all like Mr. Duncan’s Graham-Skibo mine, you wouldn’t have to worry none about conditions.”

“He’s a good man, Mr. Duncan is,” said Smith, “but he can only hire so many men. Reckon we’d all work for him otherwise. I don’t know why the other mines don’t follow his lead.”

“The way I see it, things are gonna get worse ‘fore they get better. You hear they’re tryin’ to unionize at ...”

They talked of mines and miners and reminisced about some of the pranks they’d pulled as boys until Smith saw Hattie walking toward him with Dulcie in tow.

“You ‘bout ready?” he asked.

“How do, Miz Hattie.” Clarence pulled his cap off his head and held it between his hands. “You got you a real good worker in Smith here. Ain’t nobody works harder than he does.”

She nodded. Smith shook Clarence’s hand and slapped him on the back. Turning, he walked with Hattie to the truck. He scooped Dulcie up onto the seat and then helped Hattie in with the baby.

As they pulled out onto the highway, Hattie caught a glimpse of Eunice’s pinched face. She quickly looked away.

Smith saw the silent exchange and wondered what had happened during Sunday school. *I reckon she’ll tell me if she wants me to know.*

“Mighty fine singin’ this mornin’.”

“Yes, it was,” Hattie replied.

“I always liked that song. You know, ‘When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder I’ll be There’? It can get the roof to raisin’ when it’s sung right. ‘When the roll...’

He started in on the chorus of the song. Hattie looked at him sideways. He didn’t have a bad voice. In fact, it was a pretty good one. He sure was getting into it. Dulcie sang along while Smith tapped his fingertips on the steering wheel in time to the music. “When da woll is called up yonder I be deeeeeere.”

On second thought, I’ll just ask her right out. She can always tell me to mind my own business. “Miz Hattie, I got somethin’ to ask you. My cousin

Turn Back Time

Annie had a few things to say to me after service this mornin'. She said Miz Crowe made a scene durin' Sunday school. That true?"

Hattie explained what had happened and was surprised when Smith laughed.

"That Carrie is a character! I reckon she put ol' Eunice on notice."

"I don't think so. Eunice isn't that easy to stop. She gets somethin' in her craw, and she'll get it out or choke to death tryin'."

"Well let her choke, then."

"Mr. Delaney, Eunice Crowe is my Jack's mother. I'll thank you to remember that. She's these babies' granny, and I got to live with that." The strain of the last hours was starting to tell on Hattie. "I got to keep the peace with her if it kills me tryin'. Don't you understand?" Tears suddenly sprang to her eyes. "Oh, shoot! Why am I even talkin' to you?"

Smith's heart nearly broke at the sight of her tears. He pulled the truck off to the side of the road where there was a little grassy clearing.

"Dulcie Darlin', will you go pick your Mama some flowers for her Sunday dinner table? See them yellow ones over there? They'd be real purty." He lifted the little girl across him and set her on her feet. She scampered happily into the field.

"Miz Hattie, I promised Annie I wouldn't do nothin' to hurt you. I meant it. If my bein' on your land's gonna make you cry, I'll clear off today, as soon as we get back. But, I just want to say that it don't matter whether it's me or another man working for you. You're gonna have trouble with Miz Crowe no matter what you do. So, I guess it's up to you. You gonna let her push you around or you gonna stand up to her?"

"I ... I don't know. I don't feel like I can fight her anymore. I know you're right but she's ... she's just so ... " She let the sentence trail off.

"Well, you let me know what you want me to do. Now, dry your tears. That little girl'll be back in a minute, and she don't need to see her mama cryin'." He handed her his handkerchief.

"Listen. I ain't always lived the way I should. I ain't always done things the way my mama raised me to do. I reckon I ain't in the same league as you Stoneworths, and some folks might think they got reason to point their fingers at me. And maybe they do. But if you want me to stay, I won't do nothin' to bring shame on you and yours."

Hattie looked deep into Smith's blue eyes. She believed him. He was a kind, compassionate man. Look how he'd taken up for her last night and how he'd gotten Dulcie out of the way so they could have this talk. "I ... I want you to stay."

"Then I'll stay."

Turn Back Time

“Ferd, I want you to do somethin’ for me,” commanded Eunice. “I’m thinkin’ you need to go out to Coaltown Mine and talk to Mr. Sawyer. Find out why that Mr. Delaney was let go. Then I want you to go down to the poolroom and shoot you a game or two and, just casual-like, ask around about him there, too.”

Eunice wiped her hands on her apron. “I been thinkin’ there’s gotta be a way to get him off that property. I’m gonna move in down there one way or the other, but him bein’ there is complicatin’ things.”

“I don’t know, Sister. I’ve heard tell of them Delaney boys. By all accounts, they’re real clannish. I don’t think they’d take kindly to my meddlin’.” Ferd preferred to take the path of least resistance. No point in working up a sweat unnecessarily. If he could change Eunice’s mind, it’d be worth the effort.

“All the more reason to find out what you can. I don’t care whether they like meddlin’ or not. They’re nothin’ but white trash, anyway. I want any dirt you can dig up on him, and I want it soon as you can get it. Come tomorrow, you’re gonna drive me over to the sheriff’s office, and I’m gonna have me a little talk with him, too.”

“Now, Sister, you ain’t really gonna make trouble for Hattie, are ya? She was a good wife to Jack, and she’s a good mother to them kids. And for all you know, she ain’t doin’ nothin’ wrong.”

“She moved him in there without a second thought, but she wouldn’t let me move in with her—and me them babies own grandma! Don’t you even think about taking up for her, Ferd Barnett! This here’s my house, and you’ll find yourself out on your ear if you don’t do as you’re told. You want to go back to diggin’ coal?”

Ferd looked offended. He reached down and grasped his suspenders from where he’d dropped them as soon as they’d gotten home from church. He lifted them back to his rounded shoulders. He had come to live with Eunice after her husband died. Over time he’d just stopped going out to work at the mine. Finally he just stayed home. Mostly he hung out on the porch and whittled, though he drove Eunice wherever she wanted to go and did a few things for her now and again. It was an effort though.

“I reckon it’s a nice day for a drive out to Coaltown,” he replied, shuffling toward the door.

Hattie stood behind the house and looked out over the field. Another day without Jack had ended. After putting the children to bed she’d come out for a few minutes in the quiet of the dusk.

“You got a mighty purty piece of land here, Miz Hattie,” Smith’s quiet voice came out of the shadows.

Turn Back Time

“I’ve always loved it. My Daddy built the house for my Mama when they were courtin’. We were all born in this house.” She turned back toward the house. “See that big oak down there in the corner of the front yard? Jack was always gonna hang a swing for Dulcie in that tree. I wouldn’t let him last year ‘cause she was too little. Now I wish I had.”

“I could do it for you, Miz Hattie.”

“No, that’s all right. I don’t guess it’s important. We got the porch-swing. I was just thinkin’ out loud.”

“Ma’am, when I was gettin’ those chairs outa storage yesterday evening, I saw a good length of chain. It wouldn’t take nothin’ to hang it. I could notch a board so it wouldn’t slip off the chain, and Dulcie’d have a fine swing. It seems a shame for a little girl not to have a swing.”

Hattie hesitated. She didn’t want this man doing the things that Jack had been going to do. It almost seemed like he was trying to take Jack’s place. Still, it wouldn’t be right to make Dulcie lose out on having a swing just because Smith wasn’t her daddy.

“I reckon that’d be all right if you got time. Don’t rush to put it up. There’s no hurry.”

“I’ll do it first thing in the morning. The summer’s passing fast. We want her to have time to enjoy it.”

He’s right. Time’s passing so fast it seems to be whizzin’ by me. This time last year we was getting ready to harvest the corn and buying materials for the roof. We were planning the rest of our lives together. Who’d have ever dreamed what would happen between then and now. I sure didn’t. I just thought we’d go on and on ‘til we were old together. Hattie shivered.

“You cold, Miz Hattie?”

“No, I’m fine. Just thinkin’. I reckon I’ll go in now. Good night, Mr. Delaney.”

“Miz Hattie, before you go, I just want you to know I’m glad you’re lettin’ me stay. It’ll work out. You’ll see.”

“I hope you’re right. Good night.”

Hattie went through the house putting things right for the morning. She blew out the lamp and climbed into bed with

Dulcie. Tonight she felt hopeless. She didn’t even feel like praying.

Smith watched the light go out in the house and then walked into his room. He pulled off his boots and stretched out on the bed.

Lord, You ain’t heard from me for a while. It’s Smith. There’s a little gal in that house down there with a broken heart. Worse yet, her spirit’s ‘bout broke in two. Her man’s gone. She’s got trouble with his kin. I know she ain’t

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got much money. Now, I don't expect You to do nothin' for me, 'cause You know I ain't done nothin' to deserve it, but could You help her? She's so good, and she loves You. You can just see it shinin' in her eyes. She needs You, Lord. Real bad. Well, I reckon that's all I got to say. Thanks for listenin'.

Chapter 6

Hattie stood at the kitchen window and watched Smith on the roof of the smokehouse. He had peeled away the old layers of shingles and laid bare the undersheathing. Carefully, he'd rolled out tarpaper and tacked it down. Now he was shingling. His bare chest gleamed with sweat as he worked under the hot August sun. His flat cap was pushed back on his head as he tipped his chin back to drink deeply from the Mason jar of water that Hattie had taken him earlier.

Dulcie was bouncing on the bottom rung of the ladder. She chattered away and questioned every move he made. He always answered patiently. Once in a while he'd peek over the side, just to make her giggle. Through the open window, Hattie could hear their conversation.

"Whatcha doin' now?"

"Nailin' down shingles."

"Why?"

"So the rain won't get inside."

"Why?"

"Cause if the roof leaks, everything inside'll get wet."

"Oh. Can I come up now?"

"No, ma'am. It's too dangerous up here. You might fall off. Then your Mama'd be mad at me."

"Can I come up one more step?"

"Don't think so, Sugar. You're too short a horse to be climbin' ladders."

"I not a horse!"

"You're not? Let me look at you ... " Smith leaned over the edge of the roof and gazed at the eager face looking up at him. "Hmmm ... you got a mane of hair and a velvety nose and dark eyes. Your ears ain't exactly right for a horse, but ... " Smith rubbed his chin as though carefully considering the creature below him, "Lemme see your teeth."

Dulcie curled her lips back and showed him all her baby teeth.

"They don't look quite right neither. You got hoofs?"

"Noooooo! I gots feets. See?" Dulcie held up one little bare foot and wiggled chubby toes at Smith. "Dem's feets."

"I reckon they are at that. Guess you're right. You ain't a horse after all. Don't know what I was thinkin'."

"You're funny!" Dulcie dissolved into a fit of giggles.

Hattie smiled at the nonsense and walked away from the window. She hated to admit it, but Smith was nice to have around. Dulcie was crazy about

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him. Hattie hadn't thought much about how the little girl must miss having her daddy around. She'd figured Dulcie was so young she probably wouldn't remember him much. It was obvious to her now, though, after seeing Smith interact with her, that Dulcie very much craved a man in her life. As she had so often in the last few months, Hattie wished she could turn back time to before the accident. If only—so many “if onlys.”

Jackie fussed from his cradle, and Hattie went to pick him up. He was a good baby and didn't cry much. Quickly she changed him and sat down to nurse him. All the while she crooned a lullaby her mother had sung to her.

When the shades of night are softly creeping,
Down across the garden at the zoo.
Children would you like to take a peek in
At the sleepy lions and kangaroos?
Rosalie, the polar bear is slumb'ring.
Hear the parrots talking in their sleep.
And the monkeys off their perches tumbling,
One by one lie huddled in a heap.
Good night, Mr. Elephant.
Tigers, cease your play!
Lie down and you're sure to dream,
That you're roaming in the jungle far away.
Sleep well, Missus 'Rangutang.
Good night, zebras, too.
When another day is breaking,
You will all of you be waking,
In the zoo, in the zoo.

Jackie dozed and nursed, and nursed and dozed. Hattie loved the quiet with him. He was such a precious gift, just as Dulcie had been. She lifted him to her shoulder and patted his little back. He burped, then snuggled close. The feel of his fuzzy little head beneath her chin was a cherished treasure. The sleepy baby pushed away from her shoulder and raised his wobbly little head to look at her. She smiled as he concentrated on her face. His mouth was a perfect little “o”.

“Know what, Jackie? There's a whole world of wonder waitin' just outside that door over yonder. There's trees, flowers, bugs, and all sorts of things. Wait'll you see the stars peekin' at you from the dark on a cold winter night. Sometimes it looks like they're winkin' at you.”

Jackie looked like a sleepy owl. He blinked and solemnly regarded Hattie's face. He seemed to follow every word.

“We'll go for walks, and I'll tell you the names of all the trees. Just like my Mama told me. You and me'll have a great time. Your big sister knows most of 'em already, but you, you got a lot of learnin' to do. It won't be long,

Turn Back Time

and you'll know 'em all, too. We're gonna have us the best time. You just wait and see.

"Next summer we'll go to Horton's Chapel for the 'Singing'.. They have one there every summer. Folks from all over come in their Sunday clothes, and they sit in the church and sing one song after another, new ones and old ones. Brother Roy up there can lead anything. Sometimes it's so purty it makes me cry. It's just like all the angels in heaven come down."

The baby's eyelids had started the gradual downward slide that spelled naptime. She snuggled him against her and rocked quietly until he was completely asleep. Wishing she could stay with him all afternoon, Hattie sighed, and then she carefully rose and tucked him into the cradle.

Once again her eyes strayed to the open window and to Smith as he nailed shingles to the roof. He wasn't a large man. In fact, by comparison to any Stoneworth man, he'd be considered small. He was maybe five feet, nine inches tall and slender of build.

Without his shirt on though, you could see the muscles he'd developed across his chest, back, and arms by swinging a pick in the mines. The muscles rippled with each blow of the hammer. Skin stretched tightly over well-defined flesh and hard sinew. The muscles of his upper arms bulged like softballs as he clenched his fist around the hammer and brought it down to strike a nail.

Hattie blushed and turned her back to the window when she realized she'd been staring.

What's wrong with me today? I just seem so flighty. Can't seem to get nothin' done for lookin' out that window. Smith seems like a nice enough man. He's been here three weeks now, and I haven't seen any signs of the wild streak everybody seems so worried about. Can't say I've got any reason to complain 'bout him. He's real responsible. Look how he chased Eunice off that first night. He sure didn't have to do that. Coulda just stayed up there in the smokehouse and left me to face her alone. It really weren't his place, after all. I... I reckon, I'm glad he did, though. I don't know what I would'a done if he hadn't. 'Course, it never would'a happened in the first place if I hadn't hired him, so he prob'ly felt obliged to do somethin'. That's the kind of man he is. Takes responsibility real serious like.

Hattie carefully carried a pot of beans to the countertop and spooned them into a serving bowl. She took cornbread from the warming oven and placed it on the table. Then she went to the well and pulled up the bucket that held a jar of cold milk, chilled by the icy well water. She wiped the outside of the jar with her apron and poured the milk into a pitcher. When she'd set the table on the porch, she called Dulcie and Smith to eat.

"Y'all come on in. I've got lunch 'bout ready."

"I comin' Mama."

"I'll be right there, Miz Hattie."

Turn Back Time

Smith stopped to wash the sweat and grime off his body and arms, then slipped his shirt on. Hattie had been fixing him a plate and bringing it outside to him, but today, she held the door open to the screen porch.

“You might as well eat with us. It’s awful hot out there.”

“Much obliged, ma’am. It feels real good here in the shade with the breeze blowin’ through.”

“Thought it might. You set here, and I’ll dish up.”

Hattie fixed a plate heaped with beans and cornbread, slices of ripe tomatoes from the garden, and her own bread and butter pickles. She handed it to Smith and then prepared a smaller version for herself and another for Dulcie. When all was ready, she reached for Dulcie’s hand. Dulcie reached for Smith’s. He hesitated for a moment, then took the little hand in his and reached for Hattie’s. She blushed, then slowly extended her hand to his. He closed his fingers around hers, completing the circle, and bowed his head expectantly.

“Lord, we thank You for this food. We thank You for Your many blessin’s. We ask You to forgive our sins and help us to serve You better. In Jesus name, Amen,” Hattie prayed.

“That was real nice, Miz Hattie. I heard you and Dulcie prayin’ the other mornin’ and I thought that’s the way it ought to be done. Just real straight, like talkin’ to a friend.”

“Why it *is* like talkin’ to a friend, Mr. Delaney. It’s exactly like that. Don’t you ever pray?”

“Yes’m, I do, but more in my head than out loud. I reckon I figure the good Lord don’t need me to say the words to hear what’s in my heart.”

“I s’pose that’s right, but don’t you reckon He’d like to hear ‘em once in a while?”

“Never give it much thought. S’pose so, now that you mention it.” Smith took a bite of beans and cornbread, savoring it slowly. “This sure is good. I b’lieve I’ve eat more since I been down here than I have since I lived at home with the folks.”

“You work hard. You got to eat good to keep up with the work. That’s what Jack always said.”

“He was a lucky man.”

“Thank you.” Hattie didn’t know what to say. She was still a little uncomfortable being alone with Smith. She took a sip of the cold milk and turned to help Dulcie.

“Miz Hattie? You reckon you could drop that ‘Mr. Delaney’ business and just call me Smith? After all, I told Dulcie she could call me Smith. Somehow, I like that better’n havin’ her call me ‘Mr. Baloney’.” Smith chuckled. “If’n she’s gonna call me ‘Smiff’, it seems kinda funny for you to keep callin’ me ‘Mr. Delaney’.”

Turn Back Time

Hattie didn't respond. She just looked at him with her big brown eyes.

"I mean, we ain't strangers no more, what with me livin' here and all," Smith said as he flashed her a lopsided smile.

"I'm not sure that would seem proper to folks, said Hattie."

"You still worried about Miz Crowe? She ain't been around since that first night."

"That's what worries me. I'd almost rather she was settin' here on the porch. At least I'd know what she was up to."

"Shoot! Don't you go losin' no sleep over her. She's like a hundred other old women with nothin' else to do but meddle in other folk's business."

Jackie woke up and started to cry. Hattie looked at her half-eaten food regretfully and then started to rise to go get him.

"Let me fetch him. You eat. I was so hungry I 'bout swallowed everything whole. You finish."

Smith didn't wait for an answer. He slipped past Hattie into the house and moved toward the sound of Jackie's cries. In just a minute he was back and settled into his chair with the baby in his arms. He hooked an ankle over his knee and laid Jackie in the pocket made by his crossed legs.

"Whatcha fussin' about, Feller? What is it? You got the weight of the world on your shoulders? Don'cha know that's Mr. Roosevelt's job? You ain't worryin' about this here Depression, are you? Well now, you just leave that to the Democrats, boy. They think they got it all figured out. Don't believe it myself, but it ain't for you to be worryin' over."

Hattie watched with amazement. The same strong hand that had tightened around the hammer a short time ago, now gently stroked the fuzzy hair on the baby's head. A tiny fist tightly gripped one rough finger. The coal miner with the wild streak was baby talking to her boy. It was a little hard to see him there doing the things that Jack would have been doing, had he lived, but somehow it seemed right, too.

Dulcie watched Smith talking to the baby and looking at him eye to eye. "Smiff?" she said.

"Yes, Honey?"

"Jackie don't know what you talkin' about."

"That's right, but he knows I'm sayin' somethin' to 'im. He's workin' on it. He don't know the words, but he knows somethin's goin' on. Just watch—in a minute he'll have so much to sort out that he'll turn his head and quit lookin' at me and figure on it a while. Then he'll look back at me. You just wait and see."

Smith started talking to the baby again, and sure enough, in a little while Jackie diverted his eyes and was quiet and seemed to be deep in thought and ignoring them. After a bit, he again focused on Smith, who had continued his patter.

Turn Back Time

“Oh, you’re a smart little feller, that’s what you are, a mighty smart little feller.”

“I’m smart, too!” said Dulcie, hopping down from her chair and coming over to lean against Smith.

“You can say that again!” he responded, as he freed a hand from under Jackie and gave her a hug. “And you’re a good helper, too.”

“How much longer ‘til you get the roof finished?” Hattie forked a bite of red-ripe tomato into her mouth.

“Lemme see ... I figure I should have it done by Friday. Shouldn’t take me any longer than that.”

“You’re doin’ a real good job. Dulcie’s not botherin’ you, is she?”

“I not a bother, Mama. Smiff said so. I askted him.”

“You’re no bother at all, Darlin’.” Smith turned to Hattie. “No. She’s a pleasure to have around. I’m used to workin’ with men folk who don’t think much about what they say or how they say it. Sometimes that gets a little old. Dulcie’s a nice change. I just can’t always answer her questions is all.”

Hattie laughed. “I know what you mean. She keeps me on my toes.”

“Me an’ Smiff is fixin’ da roof so da rain don’t come inside.”

“That’s right. We sure are.”

“I gonna help him all day.”

“Well, not all day,” said Hattie, “‘cause after you eat, you’re gonna take a nap. When you wake up you can help some more.”

“Mamaaaaa. I not tired.”

“Wheweeeee! I sure am,” Smith jumped in. “A nap would be mighty fine right about now. That sun’s hot, and I got me a full tummy. I sure wish I could take me a nap, too.”

“You do?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’d just set myself down under that tree out there and sleep for an hour or two, then I’d wake up feelin’ good and strong.”

“You would?”

“Uh huh.”

“Mama, I done now. I gonna take a nap!”

Hattie looked from Dulcie to Smith and back again. Nap time had become a challenge lately, but today Dulcie was ready to go to bed without an argument just because Smith said he’d like to take a nap. He’d worked a full-fledged miracle, right before her eyes.

“All right. Let’s wash your face and hands. Smith, will you be all right with the baby ‘til I get her down?”

“Why sure. We’re talkin’ politics, ain’t we, Feller?”

Jackie looked perfectly content in Smith’s lap, so Hattie led Dulcie into the house. Quickly she wet a cloth, wiped the little girl’s face, and helped her wash her hands. She stripped the little dress off over her head and laid her down in the bed.

Turn Back Time

“Mama, the music box?”

“Sure, Honey. I’ll get it.”

Hattie took the round blue metal music box from her dresser, carefully wound it, and lifted the lid. The melody floated through the room. She’d started playing it for Dulcie when she was a baby, and now it was a tradition that Hattie treasured as much as her little girl did.

“Night, Mama.”

“Night, Honey.” Hattie responded as she kissed the sweet little face and went back to the porch.

“So anyway, once you get to be growed up a little more, we’ll do us some huntin’. How’d that be? Hmmmm? You like the sound of that?”

“You takin’ him huntin’ already?”

“Well now, we solved all the politic problems, so figured we’d just work on havin’ us a good time for awhile. Didn’t we, boy?”

Jackie looked at Smith solemnly and hiccuped.

“He’s so wide awake. His eyes are open and everything.”

Hattie laughed. “He’s not a puppy or a kitten. ‘Course his eyes are open. They’re born with ‘em open.”

Smith grinned, “You don’t say? Well, ain’t that somethin’!”

“I b’lieve you’re teasin’ me, Mr. Dela... Smith.”

“I b’lieve you’re right. Reckon I’d better give this young’un back ‘fore I get too comfortable and take that nap I told Dulcie I was needin’.”

Hattie looked at Smith. He did look a little tired. Maybe she was working him too hard.

“If you need to rest, you don’t need to...”

“No, ma’am. I’m fine. Just lazy is all. Good food, good company. Makes me sleepy every time. Well, Jackie, reckon it’s time for you to get back to your Ma. She’s crackin’ the whip again. Better watch yourself, boy. She’ll have you haulin’ coal ‘fore you’re out of short pants.”

“Thanks for holdin’ him so I could eat. Seems like every time I get ready to eat a bite, someone hollers for me. If it’s not Jackie, it’s Dulcie. It was real nice of you.”

“Anytime, Miz Hattie.” Smith pulled his cap out of his waistband and tugged it down over his forehead. “I’ll be up yonder on the roof, if you need me.”

Smith whistled a tuneless little ditty as he worked on the roof. She’d let him in the house! Well, not exactly in the house. She’d really only let him onto the porch, but it was a start.

The last three weeks had been the best in Smith’s life. He’d worked hard, but it had been rewarding to work for Hattie Crowe. She smiled her gentle smile and spoke so sweetly.

Turn Back Time

Only once had he felt uncomfortable at the old house under the hill. Once, during the second week he'd been there, Hattie had come out to the porch in the middle of the night when the heat and humidity had been stifling. He'd been dozing in the shadows on the smokehouse porch, and she'd never known he was there. Her lovely face had suddenly crumpled, and she'd laid her head on the table and sobbed. Smith's stomach had twisted at the sight of her broken heart. He'd wanted so badly to hold her, to comfort her.

Now, as he nailed a shingle down he thought, *Someday—someday, I'm gonna make you mine, Hattie Crowe! I'm gonna dry your tears, and somehow, I'm gonna wipe the sad right outa your heart. You just hang on a little while longer, Darlin'. Someday...*

Chapter 7

Late summer slipped into fall, and with the fall came rain—great driving sheets of rain that turned the roads into impassable quagmires of mud. Rain filled every crevice and fissure. Many mines were flooded. Men couldn't work. Unrest at Coaltown and other mines grew. Coaltown Mining Company demanded rent from the workers who lived in company houses even when there was no work and no way to earn the money to pay the rent. People were evicted from their homes. Those who had raised a cash crop, like Eldon and Rose Ellen, were the lucky ones. They were able to pay, but just barely. And for those that did, the crop cash was their gettin'-through-the-winter money. When it looked like the tension couldn't get any worse, influenza hit the county. It seemed to fly through the countryside, picking and choosing who would live and who would die. The miners were restless, and their wives were exhausted. Men turned to drink and meanness to get through the dark days.

Smith and Hattie had fallen into a comfortable routine by now. She cooked and took care of the children and the house; he took care of the land, the buildings, and the animals. He'd brought in as good a harvest with the corn as could be had, but corn didn't bring much that year. It would be a long winter.

One night in October Hattie woke up. She was thirsty, so thirsty. She crawled out of bed and staggered to the kitchen. *Water. Have to have some water. It's there in the bucket, but the bucket is so far away!* Hattie dropped to her hands and knees and crawled across the floor. Each square in the linoleum looked bigger than the last. *Just a little further, Hattie. Keep going. Got to get the water.*

Hattie paused. She could no longer recall why she was crawling across the floor. She knew she needed help but couldn't quite remember why or who was there to help her. Then she remembered. Hattie changed directions and crawled back across the floor to the door of the screened-porch. It seemed to take forever to pull herself up the step and onto the porch. *Got to get help. Smith ... Smith will help me. He'll come and get the babies and help me with 'em. He's a good man. Smith ...*

She crawled across the porch floor until she reached the outer door. Slowly, carefully she reached up and pulled herself up from the floor to unhook the door latch, She stumbled through the doorway. *Just a few steps now. Just a few steps now.* With each rasping breath she repeated the words to herself until she tripped on a branch and fell face down in the mud. Then

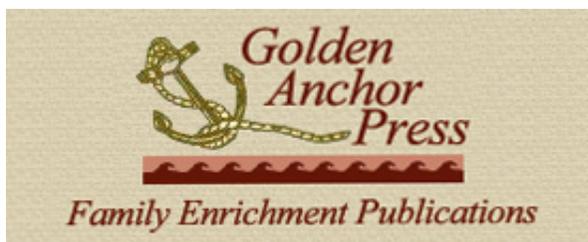
Turn Back Time

she crawled again, through the mud and the muck . The porch outside Smith's room loomed ahead. *I'll just rest a minute, just one little minute. Then I'll go on.* She laid her head down. It felt so good to rest. The ground was soft and cool against her hot skin.

The babies are waitin' . The babies are waitin' in the house, she thought. Once more she raised her head and moved forward on her hands and knees. She didn't feel the rocks bruise her flesh or the sticks jab into her. She pulled herself up onto the porch and collapsed. One hand reached out and struck the porch-floor over and over again.

Note from Dale Smith:

Well, I hope it's Smith Delaney to the rescue, don't you? In this free reading you've gotten a feel for the community where I grew up and some of the people there. Most of the main characters are modeled after people who really were part of my childhood. There really was a flood and a flu epidemic that took the lives of many. This story of Hattie, the rest of the Stoneworths, their friends, their enemies—it all rings true to the times and the people. I hope you'll want to continue the story—and we've made it easy and inexpensive for you to do so. Just click below and order the eBook—or you may get a hardback copy, or both. Happy reading! Hattie is waiting for Smith to open that door, but I'm afraid she's not aware of that any more...



For the eBook:

<http://www.tinyurl.com/cqdodho>

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