

Chapter 1

March 1935

Flora, Mississippi

Hidden in the shadows of the front room hallway, fifteen-year-old Mary Johnson tugged at the front of her shirt and fanned the sweat that dripped down her chest. For early spring, between the sparse rains, the Mississippi heat was already oppressive. She watched through the screen door as her papa and the old preacher sat on the front porch, smoking their pipes. She listened to the two men talk about the weather and how bad the crops were looking this year. Her papa, Reverend Charles Johnson, complained about not having enough hay for the mules, and the old preacher, Will Bevers, talked about how Papa could give up the mules and get a real tractor or maybe one day get elevated to bishop and stop farming altogether.

This was Bevers's second time visiting the Johnsons, and today, her papa had told her that the preacher had come to court her. At first, Mary laughed and promised there was no way she'd entertain the wrinkly old man, but then her papa had threatened to get a switch, and it wasn't so funny anymore.

So Mary had sat on the front steps of her ramshackle wood-frame house, third step from the bottom, and the old preacher had stood in front of her, leaning on the rail and fanning himself with his hat. He talked about teaching at the college in Jackson and how different city life was from country life. He told her his house had a gar-

den with food in the back and flowers in the front. Mary didn't know why he seemed disappointed that she wasn't impressed. He asked her a few questions about herself, but mainly, he talked about who he was, what he did, and what he had. Mary had sat quietly and mostly stared at the bugs in the dirt, wishing she had a stick to poke one or two. She hadn't hidden her relief when her mother announced that dinner was ready.

At the table in their wallpapered kitchen, Mary was seated next to Bevers, and she was careful not to glare at her parents over the seating arrangement. Dinner was Augusta Johnson's famous chicken and dumplings with homemade bread that earned her high praise from the old preacher. For dessert, Mary served an apple cobbler made with some apples she had helped put up last fall. During dinner, Bevers regaled the family with tales of life in the big city of Jackson. He bragged about his position in the college and talked about how smart you had to be to get in.

After dinner, while the men went outside to smoke, Mary had helped clean up and listened to her mother's lecture on being a godly woman and how blessed she was that a man like Will Bevers was interested in her.

"But, Mama, I don't want a man like him. He too old—"

"He ain't that old." Augusta stirred a pitcher of lemonade. "He just got some life behind him. All that mean is he know some stuff."

Mary carried a stack of dirty plates to the sink. "Please don't make me court that old man. He ugly too."

"Watch yo' mouth!" her mother snapped. "Shame on you! God don't make nobody ugly. You just ungrateful. You got a good man wantin' to court you, and you got nothin' but attitude. Like you too good for a godly man. But I bet you think that Carter boy is just fine, right?"

"But, Mama—"

“I see how you act when he come down the road. He ain’t godly at all, and you just be smilin’ and wavin’ like one of them Jezebels. Tha’s why yo’ papa want you married soon. You’a pay a mighty price if you shame the family wit’ that Carter boy.” Augusta lowered herself into a kitchen chair and pointed at two glasses of lemonade. “Take those out front.”

Mary sighed and picked up the glasses. Heading out onto the porch, she let the screen door slam behind her and placed the glasses on the small table between the two men. Her papa had grunted a response, but Will Bevers smiled and offered thanks.

So now, standing behind the screen door, Mary considered her options: be courted by an ugly old preacher and keep her family happy or spend time with Mason Carter and shame her family. It was an easy decision, really. She’d sit for the courtship on Sunday afternoons and then sneak and spend every other moment with Mason.



MARY ALWAYS KNEW PAPA wanted her to “marry up” when she turned eighteen—find a good husband with land or status—but now, at fifteen, after she took up with Mason Carter, Papa said she was too fast and might get big and shame the family, so on a warm March afternoon, he introduced her to Reverend William Bevers. The man had to be at least sixty if he was a day, and now every Sunday, Mary would hide when she saw the old preacher’s fancy car coming up their dirt road.

At first, he just brought Mary flowers and candy. Then, he sometimes brought tobacco for Papa and flour or sugar for Mama or candy for her sisters. Soon, he started bringing Mary perfume, gloves, scarves, or books. Then, one day in May, he came with a bolt of white lace to make a wedding dress and offered to buy Papa a real tractor and help him get elevated to Elder in the church, maybe even get him into a fancy new church. He told Mary about his own big church

and that her sisters could go to Jackson College and that his house was much better than the shack she lived in—*shack?*—and that she would have a maid. *Why would I want a maid?*

Reverend Johnson immediately agreed to the marriage, and a date was set for the third Sunday in July. Where her parents saw a bright future for all their daughters, Mary saw only an old man with beady eyes, wrinkled skin, and gnarled hands with thick knuckles. His mostly white hair stuck out from his hat, and he shaved his mustache into a thin little line. The thought of those old hands touching her or those old lips kissing her turned her stomach, and Mary smiled politely and prayed he would up and die before June.

But it was Mason's idea that if she got big, they could get married, so they went out to the barn, and Mary lay down and lifted her dress. She told herself it was okay because he was gonna be her husband, and when Ruthie caught 'em, Mary told her little sister that Papa would skin her alive and sell her to white folks if she told. Ruthie cried and accepted candy and some jacks and marbles for her silence.

When they weren't working on a baby, Mary and Mason sat under the willow tree and flipped through the *Chicagoan* and *New Yorker* magazines and dreamed of life outside Mississippi. Mason would play his horn in a club in the big city, and Mary would stay home with the baby, maybe finish high school and be a nurse or something. On the days he couldn't stay long, Mary would find letters under the loose boards in the hen house, and she would go to sleep dreaming of the high life with Mason.

"Mary, pretty soon yo' pappy'll hafta let us get married. Then we can go to Chicago."

Hidden behind the curtain of the old weeping willow tree, Mary leaned back against Mason's chest. She loved the way he smelled like earth and a hot spring day. She cradled his trumpet in her arms like a baby, stroking the bell with her thumb. "Well, we hafta hurry up. Papa wants me married next month."

Mason kissed his hand and laid it against Mary's belly. "You the finest girl in Mississippi, Mary, but why that old preacher want a young girl like you if he got a maid and all? His church prolly got plenty women his age. Why he cain't get none of them?"

"Cuz he old and ugly." Mary laughed. "Ain't nobody gon' look at him on Sunday and then every other day of the week too. Yuck!"

Mason wrapped his arms around Mary, squeezing her closer. "Well, we not gon' worry about him. We gon' get us a nice place in Chicago and live it up. I hear they got trains that run under the ground and up in the air. You gon' come hear me play and sit right up front, and I'mma play just for you."

Mary rocked the instrument she held. "We'll have a pretty little baby boy." She cooed at the trumpet. "He gon' look just like you, and you gon' teach him how to play, and y'all gon' make music together."

"Nah." Mason laughed. "It's gon' be a pretty little girl just like you, with yo' same pretty eyes and yo' same pretty smile, and I'mma hafta get a shotgun to keep boys away."

"Oh, you gon' protect her from boys like you?"

"Yup." He kissed Mary's cheek and then pressed his hands against her shoulders. "I need to go now. Yo' pappy be back soon and—"

"Yeah... we don't want him to get *his* shotgun." Mary stood up, still holding the trumpet like a baby. "A boy named Mason Carter Junior." She smiled down at Mason still sitting against the tree.

He stood up and brushed himself off then took his horn from Mary and kissed her cheek. "Go on... check if it's clear."

Mary quickly kissed his lips then ducked through the curtain of the willow tree and walked right into her younger sisters racing toward her. She held her arms out and caught the two girls, nearly tumbling the lot of them to the ground.

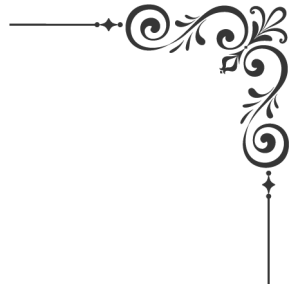
“Why y’all runnin’ round like wild animals?” Mary fussed, she hoped, loudly enough for Mason to hear. “What you need under that tree?”

Martha, the youngest, spoke up. “Ruthie said you was under the tree kissing a boy!”

“I didn’t say that!” Ruth snapped, reaching out to hit her little sister.

Martha ducked out of the way. “Yes you did!”

“Y’all are so silly.” Mary herded her sisters back toward the house. “Didn’t Mama have something for y’all to do?” Mary looked over her shoulder and caught a glimpse of Mason heading down the road, his trumpet gleaming in the afternoon sunlight.



Chapter 2

“I didn’t raise you to be nobody’s maid nor mammy! Wit’ that Carter boy, thas’ all yu’a eva’ be!”

“But Papa—!”

“Girl, thas’ the end of it! That boy’s got no schoolin’. His people got no land. Nothin’!”

Mary stamped her foot. “I won’t marry that old man! I’ll run away—”

She wasn’t surprised by the slap. It was the second one in as many days. Her papa’s rough palm scraped her cheek, and it stung, but she didn’t move and wasn’t about to cry.

“Girl, Bible say honor yo’ mama and papa. You’a pay the price’a Job if you shame this family.”

Mary matched her father’s glare until he turned away.

“Gussie, talk to yo’ daughter,” he said as he walked out of the kitchen.

“Girl, why you need to have this fight every day?” her mother’s tired voice asked Mary. “Yo’ papa’s mind is set, and you could do a lot worse than Reverend Bevers.”

“Cuz I don’t wanna be married to no old man, Mama!” Mary huffed. “I don’t want him to look at me, I don’t want him to talk to me, and I sho’ don’t want him to touch me!”

“Watch yo’ tone, girl.” Augusta Johnson rose from her seat at the kitchen table. Her back bent to balance her great belly, her fifth baby

due any day now. “Quiet down. Ain’t like you ain’t been touched already. One man’s touch just like any other.”

“Mama, no, I haven’t—”

“Ruthie, go cut me a switch fo’ yo’ lyin’ sister.” Augusta patted her second daughter’s head. “Hurry now. Take Martha with you.”

The nine- and five-year-old girls jumped up from their seats and took off out the back door without a word.

“Mama, would you at least listen—”

“To you lie some more? Why should I? Start gettin’ them dishes to the sink.”

Mary let out a long sigh and started stacking the dirty dinner plates while her mother waddled over to the sink.

“You a lie, and the truth ain’t in you,” Augusta chided. “Ruthie told me all about you and Mason layin’ in the hay wit’ yo’ dress up an’ yo’ leg on his back.”

The silverware Mary carried went crashing to the floor.

“Mmm-hmm,” Augusta continued. “Surprised you ain’t big as me.” She turned and looked at Mary. “When yo’ monthly?”

“It just passed,” Mary mumbled, stooping to pick up the silverware. She stayed near the floor until she heard her mother’s shuffling feet turn back to the sink.

“Good. Least you won’t need cotton root today.”

Mary left the silver on the table and threw her arms around her mother. “Please, Mama,” she begged, pressing her cheek to her mother’s back. “I don’t wanna get married. I swear I’a quit Mason and neva’ touch another boy. Mama, please. I promise I won’t get big. Just don’t make me marry that old man.”

“Baby,” her mother said with a heavy sigh. “I seen how you light up when that boy come down the road. You couldn’t quit him if you wanted to. Yo’ papa was gon’ get the shotgun to him a couple of times. Preacher’s daughter got no business with folks like them

Carters. We wanna give you the best life you can have, and tha's wit' Reverend Bevers in Jackson, not some dirt farmer here in Flora."

"Can I at least stay to help you with the baby? 'Til next spring? Please?"

"I'll talk to Papa about puttin' it off a few weeks, 'til after the baby, but you hafta stay away from that boy. Promise me!"

"Yes, ma'am! I promise."

As her little sisters ran in through the back door, sword fighting with braided willow switches, Mary lay against her mother's back and smiled. Her mother was right... about everything. She couldn't quit Mason if she wanted to, and her monthly was definitely late.



TWO WEEKS BEFORE HER wedding date, Mary actually cried tears of joy as her father relented and agreed that his wife needed their oldest daughter's help with the new baby, Elizabeth. The next day, however, Mary cried different tears as he raised welts on her legs and backside with a willow switch after he caught her kissing Mason behind the barn... and the wedding was back on again. A week before her wedding date, Mary told her mother her monthly was late, and her mother whipped her for probably lying but promised to bring her cotton root after the wedding just to make sure.

The night before her wedding day, Mary kissed her sleeping sisters and whispered blessings to them. Then she took the bag Ruth helped her pack, along with a sack of sweet-potato pie and wedding cake, and climbed out of their bedroom window. By the light of the full moon, she walked a mile to the crossroads, where Mason waited for her. They walked on in silence until Mary reminded him that he should be carrying her bags.

The gray sharecropper's cabin, where Mason lived with his mother and younger siblings, leaned slightly to the left and stood in a dirt yard littered with sleeping dogs that just sniffed the air when Mary

and Mason approached. The carcass of a tractor lay beside a shiny car and a beat-up truck. In the distance, Mary could make out other such shacks dotting the field, shacks where Mason said his brothers lived with their families. Mary's papa said those were all slave cabins, but she kept that to herself.

Music and celebration could be heard coming from inside the cabin. Mary thought it sounded like the juke joints that always seemed extra loud on Sunday mornings, and when Mason opened the door, it looked exactly like she imagined a juke joint would look, except extra dingy. Lots of men who looked vaguely like Mason danced with women who were probably their wives. A table was piled high with food and jugs of something Mary knew she wouldn't touch, and an old phonograph in the corner cranked out worldly music that made her wanna dance too.

"So, this her?" A heavyset woman pulled Mary into a hug without waiting for an answer.

"Yes, ma'am." Mason placed a hand on Mary's back. "Mama, this is Mary. Finest girl in Mississippi. Mary, this is my mama, Miss Margaret."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Margaret." Mary tried not to mumble as she struggled to breathe against the woman's giant bosom.

"I don't like that 'Miss Margaret' stuff unless you payin' me, baby." The woman released Mary but quickly pulled her into another hug. "I'm a Georgia girl, and folks call me Sweet. But in a few minutes, you gon' call me Mama Sweet just like all my boys' wives. Ain't that right, y'all?"

"Yes, Mama Sweet." A couple of women pulled at Mary's arm. "Now let her go so us can get her fixed up."

"Wait—!" Mary reached for Mason as the women pulled her toward the cabin's other room.

Mason took Mary's hand. "It's okay. I told you, we hafta get married tonight. Yo' pappy be here by sunup with his shotgun." He

placed his hand against her belly. “I be dam’ if somebody else gon’ raise my kin. Once you my wife, ain’t nothin’ he can do about it, and we headin’ north in the mornin’.”

Mary nodded and let herself be led off by her soon-to-be sisters-in-law.

The ceremony was so short that Mary wasn’t sure it was a real wedding—no preaching or singing or anything, and the preacher from the next county had a drink in his hand the whole time! But in less than five minutes, fifteen-year-old Mary and eighteen-year-old Mason were Mr. and Mrs. Carter. Mary knew she wasn’t far enough gone to feel her baby yet, so the pain in her stomach had to be guilt, and she prayed for forgiveness for shaming her family even as she celebrated her new freedom.

And then her papa walked in.

With his shotgun.

And the music stopped.

And all of Mason’s brothers and uncles had pistols...

And so did the preacher...

And Mama Sweet.

But Reverend Charles Johnson only pointed his shotgun at Mary. “C’mon, girl. Time to go home.”

“Beggin’ yo’ pardon, suh,” one of Mason’s uncles spoke up. “Y’all cain’t come up in here pointin’ no shotgun at our womens. How ’bout you put it down and join the celebration?”

“Papa.” Mary held up her left hand. “Mason and me is married now.” Even in the dim light of the cabin, she watched the vein throb on her father’s forehead and the rage simmer in his eyes.

“Take off the ring and tear up the paper. I said it’s time to go home.”

Mason moved to stand behind Mary. “My wife ain’t goin’ nowhere, sir.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. “She in the family way, and ain’t nobody but me raisin’ my kin.”

Mary watched the rage in her father's eyes boil over and come out as a single tear when he lowered his gun with trembling hands. "Bible say honor yo' mama and papa. You gon' pay the price'a Job for sham'in' yo' family, girl... the price—of—Job!"

"Tell me, *Reverend*." Mama Sweet stepped up, pressing her body against Reverend Johnson. "What kind of pappy cusses his girl-child like that? If you cain't celebrate these young'uns and they new family, I'mma need you to git outta my house."

"Mary," Reverend Johnson addressed his daughter over Mama Sweet's wide shoulder, "you can always come home." Then he turned and opened the door and left.

Surrounded by her new family whooping and hollerin', celebrating their victory and her father's shame, Mary stood rooted to the spot, feeling like a mule had just kicked her in the stomach. It wasn't until she found herself engulfed in Mama Sweet's arms that she felt herself break and let tears come.

"Hush now, baby," the older woman sang. "Yo' pappy still loves you. He'a come around soon enough. He just don't know we good people yet."