



ANGEL SISTER

A Novel

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Bestselling author of *The Outsider*

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Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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To my mother, Olga,
and in memory of her sisters, Evelyn, Margaret, and Bill,
who shared their memories of growing up
during the Depression years and made this story possible.

Something woke Kate Merritt. Her eyes flew open and her heart began to thump in her ears. She couldn't see a thing. Not even a hint of moonlight was filtering through the lace curtains at the bedroom window. The dark night wrapped around her like a thick blanket as she stared up toward her bedroom ceiling and fervently hoped it was nothing but a bad dream shaking her awake.

Next to Kate, Evie's breath was whisper quiet. Her sister obviously hadn't heard whatever it was that had jerked Kate from sleep. Slowly Kate's eyes began adjusting to the darkness, but she didn't need to see to know how Evie's red hair would be spread around her head like a halo. Or that even in sleep she'd have a death grip on the top sheet so Kate couldn't pull it off her. Kate always woke up every day with her pillow on the floor and her hair sticking out in all directions. The total opposite of Evie, who got up with barely a rumple in her nightgown.

Just a couple of mornings ago, their mother had laughed as she smoothed down Kate's tangled dark brown hair. "Don't you worry about not being as ladylike as Evangeline. Your sister's going on seventeen. When you get older, you'll be more like her."

Kate jerked away from her mother. "Like Evie? I don't have to be, do I? That would be awful. Really awful," she said before she thought. Kate was always doing that. Saying things before she thought.

But she didn't want to be like Evie. Ever. Evie wouldn't climb trees or catch frogs down at the creek. She even claimed to prefer reading inside by the oil lamp instead of playing hide-and-seek after dark. The truth was she was scared of her shadow.

Evie wasn't only worried about things in the dark. Day or night she shrieked if anybody so much as mentioned Fern Lindell. True, Fern—who lived down the road—was off her rocker, but Kate wasn't a bit afraid of her. At least not unless she was carrying around her little axe. Then anybody with any sense knew to stay away from her.

One thing sure, Kate had sense. That was because she was the middle sister, and the middle sister had to learn early on to take care of herself. And not only herself. Half the time she had to take care of Evie too, and all the time Tori who turned ten last month.

In the cot across the room, Tori was breathing soft and peaceful. So Tori hadn't been what woke Kate, but something had. Kate raised her head up off her pillow and listened. The middle sister had to make sure everything was all right.

Kate didn't mind. She might be only fourteen, but she knew things. She kept her eyes and ears open and did what had to be done. Of course sometimes it might be better to be like Evie, who had a way of simply ignoring anything that didn't fit into her idea of how things should be, or Tori, who didn't worry about much except whether she could find enough worms to go fishing. Neither of them was holding her

breath waiting to see if the bump in the night might be their father sneaking in after being out drinking.

Victor Merritt learned to drink in France. At least that's what Kate overheard Aunt Hattie telling Mama a few months back. They didn't know she heard them. She was supposed to be at school, but she'd run back home to get the history report she left on the table by the front door. Kate tiptoed across the porch and inched the door open to keep it from creaking. She aimed to grab the paper and be in and out without her mother hearing her. That way she'd only be in hot water at school and not at home too.

They didn't know she was there. Not even Aunt Hattie, who just about always knew everything. After all, she'd delivered nearly every baby who'd been born in Rosey Corner since the turn of the century thirty-six years ago. A lot of folks avoided Aunt Hattie unless a baby was on the way or they needed somebody to do their wash, but not Mama. She said you might not be able to depend on a lot in this world, but you could depend on Aunt Hattie telling you the truth. Like it or not.

That morning last spring when Kate had crept back in the house and heard her mother and Aunt Hattie, it sounded as if Kate's mother wasn't liking a lot of things. She was crying. The sound pierced Kate and pinned her to the floor right inside the door. She hardly dared breathe.

She should have grabbed the paper and gone right back out the door. That was what she should have done, but instead she stood still as a stone and listened. Of course she knew her father drank. Everybody in Rosey Corner knew that. Nothing stayed secret long in their little community. Two churches, one school, two general stores—the one run by Grandfather Merritt had a gasoline pump—and her father's blacksmith shop.

"But why?" Kate's mother said between sobs.

Aunt Hattie didn't sound cross the way she sometimes did when people started crying around her. Instead she sounded like she might be about to cry herself. Kate couldn't remember ever seeing Aunt Hattie cry. Not even when she talked about her son dying in the war over in France.

"Some answers we can't be seein', Nadine. We wasn't over there. But our Victor was. Men right beside him died. He got some whiffs of that poison gas those German devils used. He laid down on the cold hard ground and stared up at the same moon you was starin' up at but without the first idea of whether or not he'd ever be looking at it with you again. He couldn't even be sure he'd see the sun come up."

"No, no, that's not what I meant." Kate's mother swallowed back her tears, and her voice got stronger, more like Kate was used to hearing. "I mean, why now? I grant you he started drinking over there, but when he got home, he didn't drink all that much. Just a nip now and again, but lately he dives into the bottle like he wants to drown in it."

"It ain't got the first thing to do with you, child. He still loves his girls." Now Aunt Hattie's voice was soft and kind, the voice she used when she was talking to some woman about to have a baby.

"The girls perhaps. Me, I'm not so sure anymore." Kate couldn't see her mother, but she knew the look that would be on her face. Her lips would be mashed together like she had just swallowed something that tasted bad.

"You can be sure. I knows our Victor. I's the first person to ever lay eyes on him when he come into the world. And a pitiful sight he was. Barely bigger than my hand.

His mama, Miss Juanita, had trouble carryin' her babies. We lost the two before Victor. You remember Miss Juanita. How she was prone to the vapors. She was sure we would lose Victor even after he made the journey out to daylight and pulled in that first breath, but no how was I gonna let that happen. Raised him right alongside my own boy. Bo was four when our Victor was born."

Kate heard a chair creak as if maybe her mother had shifted to get more comfortable. Everybody knew it wasn't any use trying to stop Aunt Hattie when she started talking about her boy. "My Bo was a sturdy little feller. Stronger and smarter than most. Soon's Victor started walking, Bo took it upon hisself to watch out for him. Miss Juanita paid him some for it once he got older." Aunt Hattie paused as if realizing she'd gone a little far afield. "Anyhows that's how I knows Victor hasn't stopped carin' about you, girl, 'cause I know our Victor. He's just strugglin' some now what with the way things is goin' at his shop. Folks is wantin' to drive those motorcars and puttin' their horses out to pasture. It ain't right, but a pile of things that happen ain't right."

Kate expected Aunt Hattie to start talking about Bo dying in France, but she didn't. Instead she stopped talking altogether, and it was so quiet that Kate was sure they'd hear her breathing. She wanted to step backward, out the door, but she had to wait until somebody said something. The only noise was the slow tick of the clock on the mantel and the soft hiss of water heating on the cooking stove. Nothing that would cover up the sound of her sneaking out of the house.

Kate was up to fifty-five ticks when her mother finally spoke again. "I don't believe in drinking alcohol to hide from your problems."

"No way you could with how your own daddy has been preaching against that very thing since the beginnin' of time. Preacher Reece, he don't cut nobody no slack."

"There are better ways of handling troubles than making more troubles by drinking too much." Mama's voice didn't have the first hint of doubt in it.

"I ain't arguin' with you, Nadine. I's agreein' all the way."

"Then what am I supposed to do, Aunt Hattie?"

"I ain't got no answers. Alls I can do is listen and maybe talk to one who does have the answers."

"I've been praying."

"Course you have, but maybe we can join our prayers together. It says in the Good Book that where two or more agree on something, the Lord pays attention. Me. You. We's two."

"Pray with me right now, Aunt Hattie. For Victor. And the girls." Her mother hesitated before she went on. "Especially Kate. She's picked up some of the load I can't seem to make myself shoulder."

In the front room, Kate pulled in her breath.

"Don't you be worryin' none about that child. She's got some broad shoulders. Here, grab hold of my hands." Aunt Hattie's voice changed, got a little louder as if she wanted to make sure the Lord could hear her plain. "Our holy Father who watches over us up in heaven. May we always honor ever' living day you give us. We praise you for lettin' us have this very day right now. And for sending us trials and tribulations so that we can learn to lean on you."

She fell silent a moment as if considering those tribulations. Then she started praying again. "Help our Victor. You knows what he needs better than me or even your sweet child, Nadine here. Turn him away from the devil's temptations and bring him home to his family. Not just his feet but his heart too. And strengthen that family and watch over them, each and every one. Increase their joy and decrease their sorrow. Especially our Katherine Reece. Put your hand over top her and keep her from wrong."

Kate didn't wait to hear any more. She felt like Aunt Hattie's eyes were seeing right through the walls and poking into her. Seeing her doing wrong right that moment as she stood there eavesdropping on them. Kate snatched her history paper off the table and tiptoed out of the house. Once off the porch she didn't stop running until she was going up the steps into the school.

The prayer hadn't worked yet. At least not the part about her father resisting the devil's temptation to go out drinking. Kate worried that the Lord hadn't answered Aunt Hattie's prayer because Kate had been listening when she shouldn't have been. As if somehow that had made the prayer go sideways instead of up toward heaven the way Aunt Hattie had intended.

Now Kate stayed perfectly still to keep the bedsprings from squeaking as she listened intently for whatever had awakened her. The front screen door rattled against the doorframe. That could have been the wind if any wind had been blowing, but then there was a bump as somebody ran into the table beside the door. Kate let out her breath as she sat up on the side of the bed and felt for a match. After she lit the small kerosene lamp, she didn't bother fishing under the bed for her shoes. The night was hot, and her father had made it through the front door.

"Please don't get sick." She mouthed the words silently as she adjusted the wick to keep the flame low. She hated cleaning up after him when he got sick. From the sour smell of alcohol creeping back into the bedroom toward her, she guessed he might have already been sick before he came inside.

She looked back at Evie as she stood up. Evie looked just as Kate had imagined her moments earlier, but she didn't fool Kate. She was awake. Her eyes were shut too tight, and Kate couldn't be positive in the dim light, but she thought she saw a tear on her cheek. "No sense crying now, Evie. Daddy's home," Kate whispered softly.

Evie kept pretending to be asleep, but tears were definitely sliding out of the corners of her eyes. Kate sighed as she turned away from the bed. "Go on back to sleep, Evie. I'll take care of him."

Kate carried her lamp toward the front room where her father was tripping over the rocking chair. She wondered if her mother was lying in her bed pretending to sleep and if she had tears on her cheeks. She wouldn't get up. Not even if Daddy fell flat on his face in the middle of the floor. She couldn't. Not and keep cooking him breakfast when daylight came. Kate knew that. She didn't know how she knew it, but she did.

Nadine Merritt heard her husband step up on the porch. She'd been staring into the dark waiting for that sound for hours. One minute she would send up impassioned prayers that he'd make it home safely, and the next she would berate herself for not turning over, going to sleep, and leaving him to his just deserts. Victor was a grown man. He made his own choices. She couldn't make them for him. The trouble was, he wasn't the only one who had to live with the choices he made. They all did. Not just Nadine, but the girls too.

Drinking took money, and heaven only knew, there was little of that in their pockets right now. In anybody's pockets, for that matter. The whole country was deep in depression. President Roosevelt had started some work programs, but plenty of people were still hungry. Some of them had moved past being merely hungry to starving out west where the dust storms had blown away even the chance of growing something to eat. At least here in Rosey Corner, Kentucky, anybody with a patch of ground could grow a few vegetables to keep food on the table. Nadine had just spent the whole day canning beans. Stifling heat from the long hours of boiling the jars lingered in the house.

Of course Father Merritt wouldn't let them go hungry. He ran a tab for them and just about everybody else in Rosey Corner at his store. People thought Preston Merritt was a hard man, and Nadine wouldn't argue that he wasn't, but he didn't hold back beans or cornmeal from anybody. And he didn't hold back anything from Victor's family. At the same time he didn't make it easy when Nadine needed a sack of sugar or flour. His eyes would squint and his mouth would twist sideways as he pulled out his ledger book, licked the tip of his pencil lead, and added the price of whatever she laid on the counter to what they already owed.

Then he'd look up at her through his bushy gray eyebrows and say, "Victor should have never let his uncle Jonas talk him into taking over that blacksmith shop. I told the boy shoeing horses wasn't going to make him any money. People need gasoline now, not horseshoes. That's how come I put in that gas pump out front. A man has to keep up with the times. But Victor never did have much head for making sensible choices, now did he?" Sometimes he said the words out loud and sometimes she just heard him thinking them. And she knew she was one of those choices that he was talking about.

There was another store in Rosey Corner. Smaller, but with most grocery stock a person might need. But there was no way she could go buy anything from Bill Baxter instead of going to Father Merritt's store. So she had stopped going to the store at all. Evangeline and Kate fetched whatever she needed. Nadine had pretty much stopped going anywhere except to church.

She might have stopped that too if her father hadn't been the preacher. She wouldn't have stopped believing in the Lord. She would have just stopped going to sit on the church pew and knowing people were whispering about her and Victor. Worse,

sometimes her father preached straight at her. As if she could go back in time and break that first bottle Victor had picked up. Over in France.

At least that's where Aunt Hattie said he'd learned to drink. France. But Nadine wasn't so sure about that. What about Victor's sister? Gertie was all the time swallowing handfuls of aspirin to get through the day. She'd never been in France.

Out in the living room Victor stumbled over the rocking chair and muttered something under his breath. Nadine shut her eyes and whispered the beginning of a prayer. "Dear Lord." Then the boozy smell wafted back to her and her stomach turned over. She put her hand over her nose. Through the door she saw the flicker of an oil lamp and heard Kate talking to Victor.

"It's all right, Daddy. Come on over to the couch and I'll help you take your shoes off." Kate's voice was low, not much more than a whisper, but Nadine heard every word.

"I'm sorry I woke you up, my Kate. I was trying to be extra quiet. I really was." Victor sounded like he might cry.

"I know, Dad."

"I didn't aim to stay out so late, but the boys wanted me to have a little drink with them. I couldn't turn down the boys."

The boys? Who were the boys who were more important than his family? Nadine wanted to scream out at him. But it never did any good to yell at him when he was drunk. He just cried, and then she cried and the girls cried. All but Kate. She hadn't cried over a half-dozen times since she was out of diapers. So it was better to let Kate get him down on the couch. Nadine slid out of bed and crept over to the open window. She needed more air.

"I turn down the boys all the time," Kate was telling Victor.

"What boys?" For a minute Victor sounded almost sober.

"All the ones who want me to marry them, of course." Nadine could hear the smile in Kate's voice.

"You're joshing me, aren't you, Kate? You're way too young to be thinking about marrying. What are you now? Twelve?"

"Fourteen, Daddy. And I know girls who got married at fourteen."

"Big mistake." The couch springs creaked under his weight.

Kate laughed softly. "And not one I'm going to make. Unless I kiss a frog and he turns into a handsome prince."

"You been kissing frogs?" Victor asked her.

"At least one a day if I can catch them. You never know where that handsome prince might turn up. But alas, all I've gotten so far are warts."

Victor laughed. "Oh, my Katherine. You're one for the books. Maybe someday I'll write a story about you. I used to tell my mother stories, you know. She said I was going to grow up and be a famous writer."

"Then why didn't you?"

"She said it. Not me."

"You're always reading. You and Mama both."

"Your sainted mama." The tears were back in Victor's voice now. "Oh, to be the man she deserves. But me, I'm lower than the lowest worm."

Again it was all Nadine could do not to shout out at him that he was the man she deserved and wanted. But not drunk. Never drunk. Nadine leaned closer to the window and pulled in a deep breath. If only she could go back to those early days when they sat together in the evening and read to one another. What had happened?

“Don’t you start caterwauling on me,” Kate said firmly. Nadine heard her set Victor’s shoes down on the floor beside the couch. “Now, not another word. Go to sleep. You have to get up and make horseshoes tomorrow.”

“Horses need shoes. Clip clop. Clip clop down the road.” The tears were gone again as Victor sang the words of a song he’d made up for Victoria when she was a baby. She had giggled every time he said clip clop and bounced her up and down on his knees. “I like horses, Kate. Do you like horses, Kate?”

“Everybody likes horses,” Kate said.

“I wish I had one. I wish you had one. Haven’t you always wanted a horse?”

“I don’t need a horse. I’ve got roller skates. Goodnight, Daddy.”

“Roller skates. Do you think I could make roller skates?”

“I guess you could try. Now hush and go to sleep. It will be morning soon. And no bad dreams. Not one. Do you hear me?”

“Yes sir, Sergeant Kate. Whatever you say, Sergeant Sir. I will not sing. I will not cry. I will not make any noise at all till the morning sun comes up in the sky.” Victor laughed a little. “A poet I am. A poet you will see. Call me Willy and Willy I will be.”

“I don’t want a daddy named Willy. I like Victor,” Kate said.

“Nay, nay. Willy I say. A new day. A new way.”

“All right, Daddy. Be Willy if you want, but that’s enough poetry. You promised not to make any noise till morning. So keep your promise and go to sleep.” Kate picked up the lamp and moved away from the couch. Nadine saw the shadows dancing on the wall above her head.

“Go to sleep. Not a peep. Promises keep.”

“Daddy.” Kate tried to sound stern, but Nadine could hear a giggle in her voice.

“Accidental poetry, my Kate. A danger to the liter-ate.” He stretched out the last word to make it rhyme with Kate.

Kate laughed, and even Nadine staring out her bedroom window into the dark night couldn’t keep her lips from curling up. Victor had always been able to make her smile. Even at the worst of times. He’d left her smiling when he climbed aboard the train to be shipped out to France. He’d made her smile after her father had refused to perform their wedding ceremony. He’d kept her smiling through the long months of carrying Evangeline with the memory of her mother dying in childbirth stalking her every moment.

And now, even now with her heart breaking because he chose the bottle over her, he could still make her smile. At least for a fleeting moment. In the living room, Victor was snoring already. Over the snores, Nadine heard Kate’s bed creak as she settled back beside Evangeline.

Nadine shut her eyes and whispered softly, “May the Lord rock you in his arms and give you sleep so peaceful.” She’d been whispering that same prayer over her girls ever since they were newborn babies. In the words, she heard the echo of her mother’s whispered words over her from years before.

What mother didn't want the Lord's protection over her children? To shield them from hurt and bad things. And yet she hid in her bedroom and offered Kate no help. *Forgive me, Kate.*

She tiptoed to her bedroom door to peer over toward the girls' bedroom. She needed to see with her own eyes that Kate had turned out the oil lamp so there would be no danger of it getting knocked over in the night and catching the curtains or bedclothes on fire.

Nadine feared fires. Had seen houses engulfed in flames. Had heard people speak of parents who didn't wake in time to reach their children before the fire blocked their way. So many reasons to fear. Snakes. Storms. Childbirth. Death. The wrath of God. Victor told her it wasn't the Lord's wrath she feared, but instead the wrath of her father. As a child, Nadine had thought they were one and the same.

She wanted to slip over to the other bedroom and stand over her sleeping children. She wanted to tuck the covers up under Victoria's chin, touch Evangeline's beautiful red hair, and lay her hand on Kate's warm cheek. She wanted to stand over Victor and stroke his head and be glad he was home even with the smell of alcohol on him. But instead she turned back into her room.

Nadine didn't bother lying back down. Even if her mind wasn't swirling with memories, she wouldn't be able to sleep through Victor's snoring. She'd been a light sleeper since the age of twelve, when her mother had died bringing Essie into the world. Her father had been unable to even look upon the baby, so Nadine had taken over her care. For two weeks she fought for the life of her tiny little sister, but she lost the battle. The baby joined her mother in heaven. People said it was for the best.

Now Nadine quietly moved a straight chair over to the window. She sat down and rested her head on the windowsill. Out in the woods beyond the creek, a whippoorwill called. And she remembered falling in love.

The first time Nadine really saw Victor, he was reading from *Evangeline* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. It was a Wednesday in November, with a cold rain hitting the classroom windows as though the drops might be turning to ice. They had no more than sat down at their desks in English class when Miss Opal jumped up on the small platform she kept in front of the chalkboard and shouted, "Poetry day!"

Miss Opal needed the platform because she was shorter than any of her students, but when it came to poetry, every inch of her petite body seemed to vibrate and expand with enthusiasm.

"Poetry is a gift from the good Lord, and it is my calling to see that your young minds are opened to the joys of that wonderful gift," she was fond of saying. Then she would pop her ruler sharply on her desk as she ordered, "So get cracking."

While some of her classmates groaned at the mention of any poem, Nadine loved poetry. At times she hugged the very volumes of verse tight against her chest in an attempt to absorb the words that so stirred her heart while her favorite line from John Keats's *Endymion* sang through her head. *A thing of beauty is a joy forever.*

That was what Victor's reading of Longfellow's *Evangeline* was that day. A thing of beauty. So beautiful that Miss Opal didn't stop him to allow anyone else a turn. She just settled into his empty desk and let him keep reading about *Evangeline* searching for her lost love. Nadine couldn't take her eyes off Victor. It was as if she had never before seen him, although that, of course, wasn't even close to the truth. She had seen Victor. Hundreds of times.

They had both been born in Rosey Corner, had lived there all their lives. They learned their 3 Rs together as children in the same schoolhouse. On top of all that, Victor had been waiting on people at his father's grocery since he was tall enough to see over the counter, and Nadine was the preacher's daughter. Everybody knew the Reverend Reece. He'd been telling people at the Rosey Corner Baptist Church how the Lord wanted them to live since before Nadine was born.

Victor and his family didn't attend her father's church. They went to the Rosey Corner Christian Church across the road, but the churches were always having this or that special service together. Nadine had lived her whole life right alongside Victor Merritt.

But until that day, she had never paid him much attention. Never gave any boy much more than a passing glance, even though she was seventeen. She had her fill of boys at home with her older brother, Orrin Jr., and her little brother, James Robert. She spent half her time nagging after them to chop the wood the right length for the cookstove, to wash their bodies, to not ruin their good clothes, to leave snakes or various other wild creatures outside the house, to go to school, on and on. She had no desire to invite another male person into her life.

Not that a few of the boys her age hadn't done all they could to catch her eye. This or that boy was always trying some foolish stunt to get her to notice him, and Jackson

Perry followed her around like a puppy dog, telling her how pretty she was. She didn't need him to tell her. She had a mirror. She could see that her features lined up nicely and her eyes were an exceptional shade of blue. When she tied her honey brown hair back with a ribbon at the nape of her neck, it curled softly down her back.

Her father lectured her on the dangers of vanity if he caught her looking in a mirror, but he had little reason to worry. She only used the mirror to be sure her face was clean and her hair was neat. If she had extra time after she finished her chores, she certainly didn't waste it staring in a mirror. Not with all the wonderful stories out there waiting to be read.

Another danger, her father warned. Novels encouraged impure thoughts. She should concentrate on the truths in the Bible. She had read the Bible. All the way through once, by reading a couple of chapters every day the year she was sixteen, but her heart ran after the romantic stories and poems her teachers let her carry home from school. Books she wrapped in her bloomers and stuck in the back of her underwear drawer, away from her father's eyes.

She hated the darkest months of winter when her chores took all the daylight hours after school. On those winter evenings, she had no choice but to sit beside her father by the fire or the lamp while he studied his sermons. There in his shadow she could only read her textbooks or Sunday school lessons. Her father said they wouldn't be good stewards of the money the Lord had given them if they wasted it on extra oil for a lamp they didn't need to light. Now and again she smuggled the end of a nearly burnt-down candle into her bedroom. The stories she read by those candles—lit after her father was asleep—were the most exciting of all. She felt blessed when she reached the last line of the story before the candle guttered out.

But reading about romance and love didn't mean she had any plans to seek romance for herself. Certainly not with any of the boys who had presented themselves to her as candidates. And definitely not Jackson Perry, who sometimes came to her house to pitch small rocks at the kitchen roof in a vain attempt to get her to come out and talk to him. He didn't have the nerve to walk up on her front porch and knock on the door. None of the boys did. Not and face the possible ire of the Reverend Reece.

There were times when Nadine thought she might marry the first boy with nerve enough to knock on her front door. Sort of the way fairy-tale princesses married the suitor who accomplished some incredibly courageous feat. As long as it wasn't Jackson Perry. Nothing could make her look upon Jackson Perry with favor. Something she wished she had told him straight out when he first started following her around. But she hadn't, and one thing had led to another until the church people decided they were a couple just because where they saw Nadine they saw Jackson.

One of the church's busybodies had even brought the courtship that was a figment of Jackson's and the church ladies' imaginations to her father's attention last August, after a revival service. All the way across the field back to their house, her father had preached at her until she almost wished she were in love with Jackson Perry so she could elope with him.

Her father had a strong voice, given to him by the Lord when he surrendered to preach at the age of eighteen, and as they walked through the night, Nadine imagined every ear in Rosey Corner tuning in to his words. "I trust you and Jackson Perry have not done anything to bring shame upon your family and your Lord."

Nadine was glad for the velvety darkness of the summer night as she answered, “I have absolutely no interest in Jackson Perry, Father.”

“That’s not what Mrs. Miller tells me.”

“And who should know the truth of this better? Mrs. Miller or me?”

“Don’t be impertinent,” her father said sternly. “Mrs. Miller is a fine woman and a good worker in the church.”

“Yes sir,” Nadine said as she steeled herself to listen silently to whatever he had to say about her and Jackson Perry. She had never been able to win any kind of dispute with her father. He owned the truth, pure and simple.

“I’m not saying Jackson isn’t a fine young man. He is. He’s grown up in the church. I baptized him when he was twelve, and as far as I know he’s never fallen away from his beliefs. He works hard helping his father on their farm. The oldest of ten children. Respectful to his mother.”

Nadine began to worry as the praises went on that her father was going to get in line with all the church ladies and decide Jackson was the perfect match for her. She spoke up. “I’m not ready to entertain suitors. Any suitors.”

“What are you now? Sixteen?” He slowed his walk and turned his head to stare at her.

“I turned seventeen in June,” Nadine said quietly. “But I have another year of school.”

“There are those who think girls have little need for higher learning.” He started walking faster again, and Nadine hurried to keep up.

“Thank goodness you don’t think that way,” Nadine said, praying if she said it quickly enough it would be true. She could not imagine life without school and books. It would just be one endless day of chores after another. That’s how she thought life would be with Jackson Perry, who had quit school after the sixth grade and had not picked up a book other than the Bible since. Or so he claimed. Somewhat proudly.

Her father didn’t say anything for so long that Nadine’s heart started pounding inside her chest. She was sure he was going to say getting her to the high school in Edgeville five miles away would prove to be too much hassle. The last year she’d ridden with Louis Prentice, who took a whole buggy full of girls in to school with him every morning. The other girls paid him a dollar a month, but Louis, who went to their church, didn’t charge Nadine. Louis had graduated last spring and was heading to Lexington to study law at Transylvania College. Nadine had found another ride. One of the girls’ fathers was going to let her drive a buggy to school, but that girl didn’t go to their church and she might expect to be paid. Nadine’s father didn’t part with dollars very easily even when he had them in his pocket.

They reached their yard and her father lifted the latch that held the gate, still silent and deep in thought. Nadine normally wouldn’t have worried one whit about that. Her father often sank into deep silences as he pondered this or that truth from the Bible, but she feared he wasn’t pondering Bible truths now. She feared he was pondering her last year of school. With the silence pounding like a pulse against her ears, she said, “It is all right if I ride with Becky to school next month?”

“What’s that?” Her father turned toward her as if surprised she was still walking beside him.

“School,” Nadine repeated. “I’m supposed to ride with Becky next month.”

“Yes, yes. That was all arranged weeks ago.” His voice sounded impatient. He looked up and around as though surprised to find himself in his own yard. “Where are your brothers?”

“James Robert is on the steps. I told him he could run ahead. Orrin Jr. was planning to walk Arabelle home before he came in.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Did your brother tell you he has asked Arabelle’s father for her hand in marriage?”

“He said he was going to.” Nadine looked over at her father, but could not see his face in the dark. His voice did not sound as if he thought it good news.

“They want me to marry them next month. Orrin Jr. says he sees no need to wait since her father has agreed to let them live in a small house on his farm. The boy will probably make me a grandfather before summer comes again.”

Her father sighed as he pushed open their door and lit the lamp they always left on the table by the door. After he adjusted the wick and replaced the chimney, he turned to stare at Nadine in the soft light of the lamp. After a moment he said, “‘And God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply. And it was so.’”

“Arabelle does love children,” Nadine said.

“I wasn’t thinking of Arabelle.” Her father’s eyes narrowed on her. “Or Orrin Jr., but you.”

“Don’t look so concerned, Father. I’m not going anywhere except to school. I’ll be here to fix your supper and take care of James Robert.”

“But for how long? You do lust after your romantic stories.”

Nadine dropped her eyes down to the floor as she said, “Everyone needs a bit of entertainment, Father. Some joy in one’s life.” She peeked back up at his face to see if she’d said too much.

“I get my joy from the Word of the Lord.” His eyebrows almost met over his dark brown eyes. “‘I will delight myself in thy commandments, which I have loved.’ That’s where we find the proper joy.”

“Yes, Father.” Nadine set her Bible down on the table and carefully lifted the lamp chimney to light a candle as she tried to waylay his lecture on the evils of modern literature. “Would you like some tea and perhaps a piece of the apple pie Mrs. Grant made for us?”

“I would.” James Robert made a beeline for the kitchen. At thirteen James Robert was already six inches taller than Nadine and always ready to eat.

Over the following months, Nadine had often caught her father studying her with a frown settling between his eyes, but he did not mention Jackson Perry to her again. For that she was grateful, even as she took more care to hide her books from his eyes. She could not stop reading, but she didn’t want to have to defy his orders.

Then Miss Opal had poetry day, and the dreary November day melted away as Nadine saw Victor with more than her eyes as he made the words of *Evangeline* come alive. Nadine knew the story. Had read it herself from beginning to end more than once. Had cried over the love lost through no fault of *Evangeline*. Tears swelled up in her eyes as Victor read the end of the poem. Love found and lost again.

Miss Opal was dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief, but Nadine hardly noticed. Nor did Victor, as he looked up from reading the last line. Whether it was by accident or intent, his eyes settled on Nadine. She didn’t know if he was seeing her for the first

time or not, but she did know he was seeing her. All noise in the room faded away, and the air around her held the intense clarity of a moment in time that ever after changes one's life. She looked back at him and knew Victor Merritt was the man she was going to marry.

The sound of Nadine stirring up the fire in the cookstove woke Victor Merritt, but he didn't open his eyes. Too much light was already pushing against his eyelids and making the hammers pound inside his head. He dreaded opening his head up completely to the morning sun. Nadine set the coffeepot and skillet down on the kitchen stove. The clang of metal on metal was like a gong right against his ears.

He needed coffee desperately, but the sizzling sound of bacon frying made his stomach lurch even before the smell reached his nose. If only he could crawl under the smell of the bacon to get the coffee. Then his head might not blow apart.

Of course what he really needed was a drink. And not coffee or water. Alcohol. The evil potion that was pounding hammers against his brain and driving him down the path to destruction. Or so his father-in-law told him, at least once a week. Victor couldn't argue the truth of it, but he didn't know how to stop it.

The drink had hold of him. He could no more free himself from that hold than a spring rabbit could free itself from the jaws of a dog that dug it out of its grassy nest. Preacher Reece told him to give it over to the Lord. To lay it at the Lord's feet. But Victor hadn't been able to find that spot to lay it down. He'd think he had. He'd vow to stop drinking in the morning light, and then the day would grow old and the devil would sneak back in his thoughts.

Just one little drink won't hurt. A little taste to knock out that aching in your shoulder. You can't make horseshoes without swinging your hammer, and you know nothing else can stop the pain in that old war wound. Nobody will know. Not if you only take one little nip. One little taste so you can keep working.

Lately he hadn't been able to take just one little nip. Not if there was more than one nip left in the bottle. Nadine didn't understand. Couldn't understand. He was glad she didn't understand. Glad she didn't have to fight the demons. Glad her sleep wasn't haunted by faces of men dying in the mud in France.

Everybody thought the memories of the terrible things that had happened in the war should be faded away by now. All that had been years ago. They'd won the war, beat down the Germans, and come home. Life went on. The living had to go with it, and for a while he had. He and Nadine had been blessed with babies and had watched them grow into beautiful girls. Life was good, and the war memories stayed locked in a back corner of his mind.

He hadn't intended to ever let them out again, but for some reason the bad memories had started slithering out into his dreams. Then the dreams stayed with him even after he woke up in the morning, until any time he shut his eyes he could see the men on the battlefield calling out for help while their blood turned the ground red around them. He watched them die. His friends. Bo.

He'd never seen Bo in France. He'd looked for him, asked others if they'd seen him, but they never crossed paths in the war. He didn't know Bo had died there in the trenches until he got home. Yet often it was Bo who cried out to him in his dreams. Bo

who reached for him. Bo who needed his help. Bo who was dying while Victor was living.

Bo was his best friend when they were young. He couldn't remember a time when Bo wasn't there watching out for him. Making sure the dangers lying in wait along the path of life didn't win over Victor the way they'd won over his brother, Preston Jr.

Victor's father said a man wasn't your friend if he was paid to watch over you. He said that man was a servant, not a friend. It was true that Victor's mother paid Aunt Hattie and Bo. Victor had always known that. It wasn't a secret. More a matter of pride with Victor's mother. And a necessity. Juanita Gale Merritt never enjoyed good health after her marriage. She said the Kentucky air weakened her, until by the time Victor came along she spent most of her time sitting in her chair by the window doing needlepoint. Aunt Hattie ran the house.

Juanita's family, the Gales, were well-to-do landowners in Virginia and, according to Aunt Hattie, not at all pleased when Juanita was swept off her feet and carried away to the uncivilized west by Preston Merritt. The family had insisted Aunt Hattie go along with Juanita. Aunt Hattie could have refused to go. She wasn't the Gales' slave even if her mother and father had been.

Slavery had ended when Lee surrendered to Grant the year before Aunt Hattie was born. She was a free woman who could go and do as she pleased, but going west to Kentucky seemed a fine way to sever the ties with those who refused to forget the time when people of her color could be bought and sold. Plus she'd grown up with Juanita Gale and had watched over her for years, much as her son, Bo, grew up with Victor and watched over him. Money changed hands, but that didn't keep affection from being exchanged in hearts.

Aunt Hattie was more a member of the family than a servant. At least to Victor. And Bo was more brother to him than Preston Jr. Of course Preston Jr. had died when Victor was ten, and Bo had watched over Victor until Bo was eighteen and Victor was fourteen. Then Bo had joined a Negro league baseball team and traveled all over the country to play ball before the war. Victor had gone with Aunt Hattie to see him play once when Bo's team came to Louisville. He was good. Hit two homers. But then Bo had always been good at everything he did.

It was Victor who could never hit a ball much past second base. It was Victor who tripped over his own feet whenever he tried to run a race. It was Victor who had to have a sheet of paper and a pencil to figure up the right change to give customers at the store. It was Victor who had lived when Preston Jr., a true Merritt who could make any father proud, had died. It was Victor who had lived when Bo, the better, stronger man, had died in the mud in France. Victor who lived while hundreds of better men had died.

And he didn't know why. Sometimes he wondered if it was the good Lord's way of laughing at them all. The Lord pulling a joke on them, letting a puny man like Victor live and taking the others on to heaven. Or maybe the Lord just didn't want Victor.

Nadine got upset whenever he said anything like that out loud. She'd glare at him and tell him in no uncertain words how wrong he was. She could not imagine a God who laughed, and Victor did not want to imagine a God who didn't. It wasn't often he saw her father in Nadine, but when she told Victor how he was approaching

blasphemy talking about the Lord laughing at him, she had Preacher Reece's fire in her eyes. It wasn't a fire he liked seeing there.

He wasn't going to like seeing the disappointment in her eyes whenever he finally pulled himself off the couch and made his way into the kitchen, either. That's what he was. Perhaps had always been. A disappointment. To his father. To his country. To his wife. To his children. To his Lord. A failure at everything he'd tried. The only thing he was good at was making the boys laugh when he was drinking with them. He supposed that was better than making the Lord laugh at his puny plans.

He used to be able to make Nadine laugh, but he didn't think there would be much chance of that this morning. Not from the sound of pans being banged around in the kitchen. He pulled in a slow breath and held it. He still hadn't opened his eyes, but someone was coming across the floor. Quiet little hesitant steps. Not Nadine. Not Kate. Certainly not Evangeline. His oldest daughter wouldn't even look toward him when he'd been drinking.

He eased one eye open a slit. Just as he thought. Victoria Gale. His baby. Already ten years old, but still and always his baby. She looked like his mother. Fair of skin with almost black hair. A few freckles spotted her nose and upper cheeks, and her eyes were the green of a cold winter pond.

None of the girls looked a thing alike. Evangeline took after Nadine's side of the family with red hair like Nadine's mother and beautiful blue eyes like Nadine. And Kate, well, Kate was Kate. Her hair was an ordinary brown, and her eyes sometimes didn't seem to know what color they wanted to be, the way they changed from green to blue to gray according to her mood. But there was nothing ordinary about Kate. She practically exploded with life, had run after it with both hands ever since she was a little thing. It brought her hard knocks and falls sometimes, but that hadn't ever stopped her.

"Daddy?" Victoria's voice wasn't much more than a whisper. "Are you awake, Daddy?"

The hint of fear in her voice pierced Victor. What had he become that his baby was afraid to stand beside him? He pushed open his second eye. "I'm awake, puddin'." His voice came out raspy, but he managed to put a smile in the sound of it. "Are you awake?"

She looked relieved to see that he really was her daddy and not some stinky hobo who had wandered in off the road. "Of course I'm awake," she said with a giggle. "I'm walking around."

"You could be sleepwalking. Wandering around in dreamland looking for a way out. Any two-headed horses in there?" Victor sat up. He managed not to groan, but only barely. He was the one wandering around in a vast wasteland without a way to get back.

"No, Daddy." Victoria rewarded Victor with another giggle. "I've never seen a two-headed horse."

"Oh, but every girl should see a two-headed horse at least once in her life. They are curious beasts." He leaned back against the couch and breathed in and out slowly. He wanted to close his eyes and pull the couch cushions up over his head, but his baby was watching him.

"Are you sick, Daddy?" Victoria's smile changed to a worried frown.