

Excerpt

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August 22, 1911

Kallie Mae Bertram picked up the book her brother threw across the room when he came in from school. Whitt's shirt was torn, and a bump under his right eye was turning purple.

"Another fight?" Her words sounded some like a question, but it wasn't. Whitt's knuckles stayed skinned up from fighting.

"I ain't goin' back to school." He glared at Kallie.

She didn't intend to get into that with him right now, but he would go back to school. She'd see to it. He would be twelve come his birthday in December, and Kallie knew that before long her father would say Whitt had education enough. So far Pa had let Kallie handle it, mostly by being silent. But then Pa was never very talkative whenever he was at their cabin up in the hills of Rowan County.

She figured he knew better than to go against Kallie's say for the boy since she'd been the one to see to him ever since their mother died birthing Emmie when Kallie was thirteen and Whitt was five.

Six years now. Sometimes that seemed like forever. Sometimes hardly any time at all. But Emmie was going on seven. She ought to be in school too, but Kallie was letting her wait out a year. Give her time to get a little tougher before she had to put up with how the other kids might pester her over that mark on her face.

Wasn't nothing but a birthmark. No devil's mark, the way some folks whispered like as how Kallie didn't have ears to hear. Or Emmie. But the kids at school wouldn't whisper. Kids could be that way. Mean often as not. If Whitt was fighting now, he'd be fighting more after Emmie started school. He'd take up for his little sister even if he did tease her some at home. Not about the mark on her face. He was used to that.

When Emmie was a baby, he liked to trace around the mark to make her giggle. Wasn't much to giggle about then for Whitt and Kallie with how they were missing Ma, but Emmie hadn't known anything about the fresh grave up on the hill.

Aunt Sudie, their closest neighbor—other than the Spencers, who had been feuding with the Bertrams since the North and South were fighting—said they ought to find the baby a wet nurse. She thought they could find a willing woman down among the houses along the river some miles away. They would have to leave Emmie with whoever that was until she was weaning age.

Pa wouldn't think on doing that. Said he wasn't about to give his child away. Not after losing his woman. He claimed little Emmie's life was in the Lord's hands the same as anybody else's in the hills, or anywhere else for that matter. If Emmie weren't meant to live, she wouldn't live down in some house on the river either. Aunt Sudie talked till she was blue in the face, but there was no changing his thinking on that.

As it turned out, Kallie's hands were where he had put the baby. Sweet Emmie. Even now, these years later, Kallie's throat tightened at the memory of those first few weeks after her mother died when she had held Emmie practically day and night. Pa had brought home a goat for milking, and Aunt Sudie had shown her how to boil its milk with some sorghum.

Kallie soaked a twisted tip of cloth in the milk for Emmie to suck on and did her best to dribble drops straight into the baby's mouth. Even so, Emmie cried every waking moment. Not squalls like Kallie remembered Whitt doing when he was a baby, but little pitiful cries that seemed to penetrate Kallie's ears like spears.

Aunt Sudie came to the rescue again and brought them a funny-shaped bottle with a small opening at each end. One of them was just right for Emmie to put her lips around after Kallie softened the glass end with a strip of cotton torn from a dish towel. Emmie stopped her mewling cry at least some of the time and after a few weeks smiled whenever Kallie or Whitt talked to her. Pa didn't pay her much mind. He was out walking the hills most of the time when he wasn't at his job at the lumber mill.

Aunt Sudie said, like as not, the man just couldn't stand breathing the air in the cabin now that Nola wasn't breathing it too. Kallie could sort of understand that, even as young as she was then. She had days when she couldn't hardly breathe either as she tried to do this or that the way her ma did, but she couldn't give in to it. Not with how she had to figure a way to keep Emmie breathing so they wouldn't be digging another grave up on the hill.