

Chapter One

A SOFT CUSHION OF snow had fallen over the plains of western Tennessee, and as Joelle Mitchell guided her black gelding over the unbroken carpet of glittering flakes, she studied the landscape that surrounded her. The snow had softened the outlines of the hills that lay to Joelle's left and of the tall pines that stood on her right. The ground itself glittered like millions of tiny diamonds as the afternoon sun caught the brilliance of the landscape. The snow also brought a silence to the flat country, cushioning the sound of the horse's progress.

Glancing over her shoulder, Joelle surveyed the trail broken by her horse, the single sign of human occupancy on the smoothness of the pristine carpet. Obviously no one had been out on the road before her, and since the road to River Bend was seldom traveled in the dead of winter, this came as no surprise.

Leaning forward, Joelle patted the horse's neck, saying in a conversational tone, "Well, Blackie, how do you like the snow?" She laughed as the gelding lifted his head and snorted. "You do, I see. Well, I do too. I read a book once about Europe where the snow comes in drifts ten feet high all the way up to

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the eaves of the house. That would be like being buried alive, wouldn't it now?" Again the gelding blubbered between his lips, and Jo leaned forward and stroked the silky neck. "You wouldn't like it that deep and neither would I. This is just right."

Joelle Lynn Mitchell "was almost seventeen." She always stated her age that way as if that formula would make her. She sat easily in the saddle, her back straight, and her eyes constantly searching the road ahead and the trees on each side.

She was not a beauty in the classic sense of the word; her features had strength rather than prettiness, which dismayed her. She had studied other girls and found her own face too plain, yet her features were attractive. She was a full-figured girl with long auburn hair that reached all the way to her waist when she let it down. Her eyes were deep-set and wide-spaced under long, dark eyelashes. The color was an unusual gray-green that sometimes took the background of whatever clothes she wore. Her face was square-shaped, and her mouth wide. Her chin had a stubborn cast, and she held it up in such a way that seemed to challenge people at times. Her ears were small and set close to her head, and her strong hands were roughened by hard work—cutting wood, plowing, and breaking horses.

Suddenly, Blackie humped his back and gave a sideways lurch, almost taking Joelle off guard. She caught herself, pulled the reins tight, and then laughed. "You'll have to do better than that, Blackie." She leaned forward once again and pulled a burr out of the jet-black mane. "But I like a horse that's got a little meanness in him." She continued to stroke the horse's neck and was tall enough to reach almost to his jaw without leaning forward.

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“You know, Blackie, for a long time I was afraid I wouldn’t have any figure at all. Remember how skinny I was?” Blackie whickered, assuring her that he certainly did remember, and she laughed. A memory slipped into her mind, of a conversation she had had with her mother when she was fourteen. She had been staring at herself in the mirror with displeasure, and her mother had caught her. “What are you frowning about, Jo?”

“I don’t have any more figure than a rake handle,” she had said. Her mother had put her arms around her and held her tight and had whispered, “You’re just late developing. I was the same way. I cried myself to sleep many a night because the other girls got their figures sooner than I did.”

The memory stayed with Joelle along with a tinge of sadness, for her mother’s sickness had brought her down so that she had little of her early beauty left. She kicked Blackie into a run mostly to get rid of the sadness, and delighted in the smooth pace of the gelding. As his hooves threw up snow in a small cloud, she leaned over the pommel.

A memory of her thirteenth birthday flashed into Joelle’s mind. Her father had grinned at her at the breakfast table and said, “Well, it’s your birthday. You expecting a big gift, I suppose?” He had often teased her like that, she remembered, and then he had laughed and pulled her to her feet. “Come along, Punkin. Your present’s out here.” She had followed her father, and she remembered, even as Blackie sped along the cushioned road, how he had led her to the barn and said, “There’s your birthday present, Jo.” Joelle had stared at the black foal, blacker than the blackest thing in nature, with disbelief—and joy. Her throat had filled and grown thick, and she had turned

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and embraced her father, holding him tight. "Thank you, Pa! It's the best present anybody ever had!"

The thought of her father, dead now for three years, was sharp and keen as any knife as it worked along her mind. Her father had taught her how to ride, hunt, and run the farm. Sadness crossed her features, and she shook her head, forcing herself to think of something else—anything else but the loss of the man who had been her father.

Ten minutes later, she entered River Bend, the only town she had ever really known. She had once been to Memphis when she was very small, but all she remembered was that it was a busy place with more people than she knew existed.

River Bend was easy to fathom. It was a small town with no more than two hundred inhabitants. The main businesses, all single-story wooden affairs, occupied the main street—a blacksmith shop, livery stable, and hardware store on one side, and on the other side a bank, a series of shops, and two saloons. As was usual in November, there was little to do for those who farmed or raised cattle, so the hitching racks in front of the saloons were full.

As Joelle guided Blackie down the middle of the street, she passed a few people who gave her a wave and called out. She smiled and returned their greetings. A short, stubby young man in overalls ran up to her. "Hey, Jo, hold up!"

Joelle smiled, for Jerome Thompkins was one of her favorites. They were the same age and had attended school together. He patted Blackie's neck, and his round face beamed as he looked up at her. "You goin' to the dance Saturday night over at Blevins', Jo?"

"I don't think so, Jerome."

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“Aw, you never go anywhere, Jo. You ought to get out more.” Jerome winked lewdly—or so he thought, although the wink was more ludicrous than lewd. “You ought to get yourself a steady feller—like me.”

Joelle leaned down and pulled Jerome’s hat down over his face, laughing at him. “Sadie wouldn’t like that. She’s got you branded like a heifer.”

“She ain’t neither!” Jerome replied indignantly. “But even if I’m took, the country’s full of young fellers.”

“Full of gophers and possums too.” “Well,” Jerome grinned, pushing his hat back up, “if I get tarred of Sadie, I’ll come over and set on your front porch.”

“My stepfather would furnish the reception.” Even as she spoke, a change took place in both their expressions. She knew they were both thinking of how Burl Harper had beaten young Will Conners nearly to a pulp when he had come trying to court her.

“You ought to go to the dance. It’ll be fun. You need to get out more.”

Joelle shook her head and said, “You have a good time. Tell Sadie if she’s not good to you, I’ll take you away from her.”

She kicked Blackie lightly, and he picked up his pace. She dismounted in front of a faded, weather-beaten sign that said “Dr. Phares Raeburn.” She tied Blackie’s lines loosely to the hitching post, leaped onto the board sidewalk, and entered the office. There was no one in the outer room so she opened the back door and called out, “Dr. Raeburn, are you here?”

“Come on in.” Joelle entered to see Raeburn sitting in a worn, cane-bottom rocking chair. A stove beside him held a

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battered, blackened coffeepot, and he said, "Take some of that coffee, girl. It's cold as a well-digger's toes out there today."

"I believe I will." Joelle found a cup among the four on the shelf and noted that none of them had been washed. She rinsed it as best she could, wiped it with her handkerchief, then poured the black liquid in. "It looks like tar," she said.

"If you don't like my coffee, don't drink it," Raeburn snapped. "The worst cup of coffee I ever had in the world was real good," he assured her.

She smiled and tasted the coffee. It not only looked like tar, it more or less tasted like it too.

"Set yourself down there, girl, and gimme some juicy gossip. Since Julie Ann got sick, I ain't been able to keep up with it."

"How is Julie Ann?" Julie Ann Thompson was the woman who served as nurse for River Bend. She had been down with pleurisy lately, and Doc Raeburn missed her. As Joelle sat there, Raeburn, an observant man, studied her face. He had delivered her and had enjoyed watching her grow up from an awkward, long-legged yearling into a shapely, tall young girl on the very brink of mature womanhood. As she sipped her coffee, he leaned back and asked, "How's your mother, Jo?"

"Not too good. I wish you'd come out and see her."

"I'll probably be out that way tomorrow."

"Have you got any medicine I could give her?"

Heaving himself out of the chair, Raeburn walked over to a shelf that contained a variety of bottles of different shapes and colors and carefully removed a small bottle with a brown liquid. "I want you to give her a teaspoon of this five times day. Early in the morning. Late at night especially."

“What is it?”

“It’s medicine. What’d you think?” He spoke with all the force he could, but he saw Joelle watching him and knew that she saw through his words. She got that from her dad—he was that way.

“How much do I owe you, Doc?”

“Nothing. Bake me a pie sometime.”

“What kind?”

“Any kind.”

“I’ll do it. Much obliged for the medicine.” She gave him a brief smile, then left the room. Raeburn stared at the door, and a few minutes later his wife, Bertha, came in.

“Was that Joelle I saw leaving here?”

“Yes, it was.”

“How’s her mother?”

“She’s not going to make it, Bertha.”

Bertha Raeburn put a sack on the table and poured herself a cup of coffee. She held it for a moment without tasting it and said, “That sorry husband of hers hasn’t helped her. If Charles Mitchell had lived, he’d have taken better care of her.”

“You’re right there.”

They both were silent. Then Bertha gave her husband a direct look. “Joelle’s afraid of Burl.”

Instantly Raeburn looked up. “She tell you that?” he demanded.

“No, she didn’t tell me, not with words. But you watch her when he’s around. Watch her eyes. She never takes them off of him. She’s scared to death of him.”

Raeburn began to rock and after a few seconds muttered bitterly, “She’s probably got good reason.”

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AS SOON AS JOELLE entered Thompson's General Store, she took a deep breath. The smells were always good—the sharp, acrid pickles in the barrel by the counter, the onions hanging from a wire along the roof, and the leather harnesses. She walked up to a big, hammer-headed yellow tomcat on the counter who stared at her with round, golden eyes. She stroked his blunt, scarred head.

"You've been fighting again, Jackson." She continued to stroke the big cat and then smiled. "You're too romantic. You need to leave those lady cats alone and stay out of fights."

"He won't do that." Daniel Thompson, the son of Jesse Thompson, the store owner, had appeared from the back-room, carrying a box. He put it on the counter. "Good to see you, Jo."

"How are you, Daniel?"

"Fine as silk. Can I get you something?"

"I need sugar and coffee and some kind of canned fruit."

Daniel quickly assembled the small order, then reached into the glass-covered candy case and scooped hard candy into a small sack. "There. Eat this. It'll make you sweet like me."

The two stood there talking. It was a pleasant moment in Joelle's life. She and Daniel Thompson, along with Jerome, had been good friends all through school. She was not surprised when he said, "How about going to the dance with me Saturday night over at Blevins'? I hear they're going to have some good music there."

"I don't guess so."

"Why not? I'd be proud to take you."

“Harper would never let me go.”

Daniel noticed that she never called her stepfather anything but his last name. His full name was Burl Harper, and Daniel knew she called him Harper to his face too. He reached out and pinched her arm. “Why, you’re getting to be an old maid. You’re almost seventeen. Other girls your age like Betty Summers are already married and have a baby.”

“You saw what Harper did to Will Connors when he tried to court me.”

“Well, I ain’t scared of him,” Daniel said loudly. He was a tall young man but thin. Burl Harper, sliced down the middle, would make two splinters like Daniel.

“You should be.” She hesitated, then said, “I am.”

Daniel stared at her, not knowing what to say, and Jo knew instantly she had said too much. She smiled. “You have a good time at the dance.”

She paid for the items, went outside, and walked down the street. She put her purchases in the saddlebags, mounted in one easy motion, and left town.

As she rode home, Joelle was burdened for her mother and afraid for herself. “I’m worried about Ma, Blackie. She never gets any better, and I’m afraid she’s going to die.” She had long ago started talking to her horse—perhaps because she had so few people to share her thoughts with.

Blackie nodded and glanced back toward her with his dark, liquid eyes. He had learned to recognize the tone of her voice better than most people could. “I don’t know what I’d do—if she dies.”

She didn’t speak to the gelding again, and finally, as she approached the farm, she remembered how much she had loved

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this place when her father was alive. The snow reminded her of his last winter. He had built a monstrous snowman, and she and her mother had helped. Finally they had made snow cream out of snow, vanilla, and sugar, and she had eaten until she had been half-sick. That was the last good memory she had stored of her father, and she, as always, tried to push it out of her mind. For a long time she had courted memories and tried to store them up, but she had discovered they made her sad, and now sometimes they would come uninvited. More than once tears had come to her eyes as she remembered her father . . .

She rode into the stable, stepped down, and unloaded the saddlebags. Then she unsaddled Blackie. She was talking to him as she scooped grain from a sack, put it in the box, and watched him chew noisily. She slapped him on the rump and turned to go but stopped for Burl Harper had appeared. He stood blocking her way, and fear ran along Jo's nerves, as it always did when she found herself alone with her stepfather.

"Where you been?"

"I went to town to get medicine for Ma and some coffee and sugar. We're about out."

Burl Harper was thirty-eight. He had a bold, florid face, hazel eyes, and straw-colored hair. He was a big man, thick and wide. He was a good farmer when he chose to be, but he would rather do other things. He had not been a good husband, and many times Jo had wondered and almost asked her mother why she had married him. Once her mother said, "These are hard times, Jo. We've got to have a man to help us or we'll lose this place." It was not an answer that satisfied Jo Mitchell, but she knew she could never rebuke her mother, for life had been hard after Charles Mitchell had died.

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"You sneaked out is what you done," Harper said.

"I didn't sneak anywhere." She faced him and controlled her fear.

"You're meeting a man, ain't you?"

"No."

"You better not. I won't have it. You mind what I say now."

"I didn't sneak, and I wasn't meeting anybody." She moved to get by him, but he blocked the way.

"It won't do you any good to get medicine for Clara. She's not going to make it. You can see that." He suddenly reached out and took her by the arm, and immediately Jo jerked her arm away. Harper laughed. "I like a girl with spirit. Don't you worry, Joelle. I'll take care of you."

"I can take care of myself, Harper!"

"Why do you always call me that?"

"It's your name, isn't it?"

"Well, you stay away from men. You saw what I done to that one that came courting. I'll do it again if another one comes." He reached out for her, but she quickly stepped away.

"Leave me alone," she said coldly. But she saw the gleam in his eyes and knew that he would not.

Moving across the yard, she entered the house, put the groceries in the kitchen, and went at once to her mother's bedroom. No matter how many times she saw her mother, it was always a slight shock. Her mother had been an attractive woman, well-shaped with a full face, and now her face was shrunken, which made her eyes look abnormally large. "I got some medicine from Dr. Raeburn. You got to take a teaspoon five times a day."

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There was little response in Clara's face. She didn't protest but swallowed the medicine and said, "Where's Harper?"

"He was out at the barn—" She broke off abruptly when she heard a horse crying out and walked over to the window.

Burl Harper was mounted on the big stallion Napoleon. She watched as he whipped the horse with a quirt, and she saw that he was laughing when the stallion reared up. He lashed the horse and left the yard at a dead run. Burl Harper didn't know how to treat a horse, and Jo knew that he was the same with every living thing.

She moved into the kitchen and made some broth. As she waited for it to heat, she looked around the kitchen—the only home she had ever known. Mom is going to die, and I'll have to leave this place. A bleak future seemed to loom before her, and she steeled herself against it. Forcing herself to concentrate on the care of her mother, she took the bowl in and watched her mother eat a few spoonfuls.

Clara said weakly, "I can't eat any more, honey."

"You need to keep your strength up."

Clara suddenly reached out and caught Jo's hand. "Jo," she said, "I'm going to die. When I'm gone"—she hesitated and her lips forced the words reluctantly—"you'll have to leave this place."

Both of them knew she was talking about Burl Harper. Clara had already seen the attention he was paying to her daughter, and once she had challenged him. When she had warned him, he had laughed and pushed her away. "You'll have to leave here," Clara repeated to Joelle.

"I don't have anywhere to go, Ma."

"You need to go to Fort Smith to my sister Rita. She's Rita

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Faye Johnson. They'll take you in."

"All right, Ma." Joelle didn't want to talk about it but knew she wouldn't do it. The thought of asking a stranger to take her in was abhorrent, but she didn't want to argue.

She sat beside her mother and read to her from the Bible. She read well enough, but her mind was not on the words. Her mother had always loved the Bible, and this one was worn and marked on every page, it seemed. As she read on, her mother was listening to the words, but Jo herself was thinking of the day that would come soon enough when she would have to leave River Bend.



MID-DECEMBER CAME, AND THE snow had all disappeared. Joelle spent the days taking care of her mother and staying away from Burl. One day, as she bathed her mother's face, she said, "I'll fix you something to eat."

"Can't eat."

Suddenly, Joelle saw something in her mother's eyes, and she whispered, "What is it, Ma?"

"I had a dream last night."

"What did you dream?"

"A dream that God would—send somebody to look out for you. I saw somebody. He looked like my brother Caleb—you never saw him. He was tall and lean with hair as black as the crow's wing. You've seen his picture."

"Yes, he was a fine-looking man."

"He always took care of me when we were kids. In the dream he said, 'Don't worry about Jo, Sister. Someone will

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take care of her like I took care of you.”

Joelle felt tears come to her eyes. She didn't believe in dreams, but now she said, “That's a good dream, Ma.”

“I believe—it's from the Lord.”

Joelle held her mother's hand as the woman drifted off to sleep. Ten minutes later her eyes opened, and she said, “Something I want you to do.”

“What is it, Ma?”

“Go into the attic. Look in the old chest that was my mama's. Open the bottom drawer and take it out. Behind it there's a metal box. Bring it to me.”

Joelle was surprised, but she was also curious. “I'll be right back, Ma.” She left the bedroom, went up the stairs—glad that Harper was gone. She found the old walnut chest, pulled the bottom drawer out, and there it was—a flat metal box no more than two inches thick and probably eight inches square. She put the drawer back and then, holding the box, ran down the stairs. “Is this it, Ma?” she said as she pulled her chair close.

“Open it.”

Joelle gasped. “Ma, what's this?” She pulled out a pair of diamond earrings and whispered, “Are these real?”

“Yes, they're real.”

Joelle picked up a large ruby ring, a gold necklace and matching bracelets with diamonds in them, and also considerable cash.

“What is this, Ma?”

“My mother gave these to me on my wedding day when I married Charles. Her mother had given them to her.”

“What do I do with these, Ma?”

Clara Harper was quiet, and her eyes fluttered as she strug-

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gled to stay awake. "Don't let Harper know you have this. I made a mistake marrying him, but I've been saving money. Don't forget my dreams." She reached down. Her grip was stronger as she held Jo's hand. "God will send a man to help you. He'll be tall and have dark hair and dark eyes."

Joelle sat there, holding her mother's hand and examining the contents of the box. Her mother had fallen into a fitful sleep, and her breathing was shallow. Joelle fastened the box, loosened her mother's hand, and replaced the box behind the drawer in the chest. As she did, she wondered at her mother's keeping this a secret all these years. Somehow it seemed to be a purposeful thing, and she was glad to know the box was there.

She returned to sit with her mother. Two hours later her mother arched her back, uttered a single soft cry, and said, "Charles." Then life left her.

Joelle held her mother's still hand. She was still there when Burl came in. He opened the door and started to speak, but when he saw Joelle's face, he said, "Is she gone?"

"Yes, she's gone."

"Well, where do you want the grave?"

"Under the big hickory tree beside the river."

CLARA'S FUNERAL WAS WELL attended. She and her first husband had made many friends, and now the neighbors came by. The funeral was held in the church, followed by brief service by the grave. After the pastor read the Scripture, the neighbors greeted Joelle. Edward Campbell, the pastor, came to her.

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"We'll help all we can, Joelle. She was a wonderful woman. A fine Christian."

"Thank you, Pastor."

Campbell turned away and waited until his wife had spoken to Joelle. The two watched as Burl Harper turned and went to the house. "That's a sad story building there," Campbell said.

"Yes, Harper married Clara for her farm, and he's got it now."

"I'm worried about Joelle. She's afraid of Harper. Doc Raeburn told me that we've got to do something about it."

"Can you do anything, Ed?"

"We'll try, but she's not of age. Harper's her legal guardian." Campbell brushed his hand across his face as if to push a thought aside, and the two were silent for a long time. When they turned to leave, Campbell glanced back toward the house. He saw Joelle Mitchell standing on the porch in the cold, looking toward her mother's grave.