Chapter Eleven

Roll of thunder
hear my cry
Over the water
bye and bye
Ole man comin’
down the line
Whip in hand to
beat me down
But I ain’t
gonna let him
Turn me ‘round

The night whispered of distant thunder. It was muggy, hot, a miserable night for sleeping. Twice I had awakened hoping that it was time to be up, but each time the night had been total blackness with no hint of a graying dawn. On the front porch Mr. Morrison sat singing soft and low into the long night, chanting to the approaching thunder. He had been there since the house had darkened after church, watching and waiting as he had done every night since Papa had been injured. No one had ever explained why he watched and waited, but I knew. It had to do with the Wallaces.

Mr. Morrison’s song faded and I guessed he was on his way to the rear of the house. He would stay there for a while, walking on cat’s feet through the quiet yard, then eventually return to the front porch again. Unable to sleep, I resigned myself to await his return by counting states. Miss Crocker had had a big thing about states, and I sometimes found that if I pretended that she was naming them off I could fall asleep. I decided to count the states geographically rather than alphabetically; that was more of a challenge. I had gotten as far west as the Dakotas when my silent recitation was disturbed by a tapping on the porch. I lay very still. Mr. Morrison never made sounds like that.

There it was again.

Cautiously, I climbed from the bed, careful not to awaken Big Ma, who was still snoring soundly, and crept to the door. I pressed my ear against the door and listened, then slipped the latch furiously and darted outside. “Boy, what you doing here?” I hissed.

“Hey, Cassie, wouldja keep it down?” whispered T.J., invisible in the darkness. Then he tapped lightly on the boys’
door again, calling softly, “Hey, Stacey, come on and wake up, will ya? Let me in.”


“That ain’t nothing new,” I remarked.

“What you coming here for?” whispered Stacey icily. “Go get R.W. and Melvin to get you out of it.”

In the darkness there was a low sob and T.J., hardly sounding like T.J., mumbled, “They the ones got me in it. Where’s the bed? I gotta sit down.”

In the darkness he groped for the bed, his feet dragging as if he could hardly lift them. “I ain’t no bed!” I exclaimed as his hands fell on me.

There was a deep sigh. Stacey clicked on the flashlight and T.J. found the bed, sitting down slowly and holding his stomach as if he were hurt.

“What’s the matter?” Stacey asked, his voice wary.

“R.W. and Melvin,” whispered T.J., “they hurt me bad.” He looked up, expecting sympathy. But our faces, grim behind the light Stacey held, showed no compassion. T.J.’s eyes dimmed, then, undoing the buttons to his shirt, he pulled the shirt open and stared down at his stomach.


T.J. did not answer at first, staring in horror at the deep blue-black swelling of his stomach and chest. “I think something’s busted,” he gasped finally. “I hurt something awful.”

“Why’d they do it?” asked Stacey.

T.J. looked up into the bright light. “Help me, Stacey. Help me get home. . . . I can’t make it by myself.”

“Tell me how come they did this to you.”

“Cause . . . ’cause I said I was gonna tell what happened.”

Stacey and I looked at each other, then together leaned closer to T.J. “Tell what?” we asked.

T.J. gulped and leaned over, his head between his legs.

“I . . . I’m sick, Stacey. I gotta get home ‘fore my daddy wake up. . . . He say I stay ’way from that house one more night, he gonna put me out, and he mean it, too. He put me out, I got no place to go. You gotta help me.”

“Tell us what happened.”

T.J. began to cry. “But they said they’d do worse than this if I ever told!”
“Well, I ain’t about to go nowhere unless I know what happened,” said Stacey with finality.

T.J. searched Stacey’s face in the rim of ghostly light cast by the flashlight. Then he told his story.

After he and the Simmses left Great Faith, they went directly into Strawberry to get the pearl-handled pistol, but when they arrived the mercantile was already closed. The Simmses said that there was no sense in coming back for the pistol; they would simply go in and take it. T.J. was frightened at the thought, but the Simmses assured him that there was no danger. If they were caught, they would simply say that they needed the pistol that night but intended to pay for it on Monday.

In the storage room at the back of the store was a small open window through which a child or a person as thin as T.J. could wiggle. After waiting almost an hour after the lights had gone out in the Barnett’s living quarters on the second floor, T.J. slipped through the window and opened the door, and the Simmses entered, their faces masked with stockings and their hands gloved. T.J., now afraid that they had something else in mind, wanted to leave without the pistol, but R.W. had insisted that he have it. R.W. broke the lock of the gun case with an axe and gave T.J. the much-longed-for gun.

Then R.W. and Melvin went over to a wall cabinet and tried to break off the brass lock. After several unsuccessful minutes, R.W. swung the axe sharply against the lock and it gave. But as Melvin reached for the metal box inside, Mr. Barnett appeared on the stairs, a flashlight in his hand, his wife behind him.

For a long moment no one moved or said a word as Mr. Barnett shone the light directly on T.J., then on R.W. and Melvin, their faces darkened by the stockings. But when Mr. Barnett saw the cabinet lock busted, he flew into frenzied action, hopping madly down the stairs and trying to grab the metal box from Melvin. They struggled, with Mr. Barnett getting the better of Melvin, until R.W. whopped Mr. Barnett solidly on the head from behind with the flat of the axe, and Mr. Barnett slumped into a heap upon the floor as if dead.

When Mrs. Barnett saw her husband fall, she dashed across the room and flailed into R.W., crying “You niggers
done killed Jim Lee! You done killed him!” R.W., trying to escape her grasp, slapped at her and she fell back, hitting her head against one of the stoves, and did not move.

Once they were outside T.J. wanted to come straight home, but the Simmses said they had business to take care of and told him to wait in the back of the truck. When T.J. objected and said that he was going to tell everybody it was R.W. and Melvin who had hurt the Barnettsts unless they took him home, the two of them lit into him, beating him with savage blows until he could not stand, then flung him into the back of the truck and went down the street to the pool hall. T.J. lay there for what he thought must have been an hour before crawling from the truck and starting home. About a mile outside of town, he got a ride with a farmer headed for Smellings Creek by way of Soldiers Road. Not wanting to walk past the Simmses’ place for fear R.W. and Melvin had taken the Jackson Road home, he did not get out at the Jefferson Davis School Road intersection, but instead crossed Soldiers Bridge with the farmer and got out at the intersection beyond the bridge and walked around, coming from the west to our house.

“T.J., was . . . was them Barnettsts dead?” asked Stacey when T.J. grew quiet.

T.J. shook his head. “I dunno. They sure looked dead. Stacey, anybody find out, you know what they’d do to me?” He stood up, his face grimacing with pain. “Stacey, help me get home,” he pleaded. “I’m afraid to go there by myself. . . . R.W. and Melvin might be waitin’ . . . .”

“You sure you ain’t lying, T.J.?” I asked suspiciously.

“I swear everything I told y’all is the truth. I . . . I admit I lied ‘bout tellin’ on your mama, but I ain’t lyin’ now, I ain’t!”

Stacey thought a moment. “Why don’t you stay here tonight? Papa’ll tell your daddy what happened and he won’t put—”

“No!” cried T.J., his eyes big with terror. “Can’t tell nobody! I gotta go!” He headed for the door, holding his side. But before he could reach it, his legs gave way and Stacey caught him and guided him back to the bed.

I studied T.J. closely under the light, sure that he was pulling another fast one. But then he coughed and blood
spurted from his mouth; his eyes glazed, his face paled, and I knew that this time T.J. was not faking.

"You're bad hurt," Stacey said. "Let me get Big Ma—she'll know what to do."

T.J. shook his head weakly. "My mama . . . I'll just tell her them white boys beat me for no reason and she'll believe it . . . she'll take care of me. But you go wakin' your grand-mama and your daddy'll be in it. Stacey, please! You my only friend . . . ain't never really had no true friend but you . . . ."

"Stacey?" I whispered, afraid of what he might do. As far back as I could remember, Stacey had felt a responsibility for T.J. I had never really understood why. Perhaps he felt that even a person as despicable as T.J. needed someone he could call "friend," or perhaps he sensed T.J.'s vulnerability better than T.J. did himself. "Stacey, you ain't going, are you?"

Stacey wet his lips, thinking. Then he looked at me. "You go on back to bed, Cassie. I'll be all right."

"Yeah, I know you gonna be all right 'cause I'm gonna tell Papa!" I cried, turning to dash for the other room. But Stacey reached into the darkness and caught me. "Look, Cassie, it won't take me but twenty-five or thirty minutes to run down there and back. Really, it's all right."

"You as big a fool as he is then," I accused frantically. "You don't owe him nothin', 'specially after what he done to Mama."

Stacey released me. "He's hurt bad, Cassie. I gotta get him home." He turned away from me and grabbed his pants.

I stared after him; then I said, "Well, you ain't going without me." If Stacey was going to be a fool and go running out into the night to take an even bigger fool home, the least I could do was make sure he got back in one piece.

"Cassie, you can't go—"

"Go where?" piped Little Man, sitting up. Christopher-John sat up too, yawning sleepily. "Is it morning? What y'all doing up?" Little Man questioned. He blinked into the light and rubbed his eyes. "T.J., that you? What you doing here? Where y'all going?"

"Nowhere. I'm just gonna walk T.J. home," Stacey said. "Now go on back to sleep."

Little Man jumped out of bed and pulled his clothes from

Why does Cassie decide to go with Stacey?
the hanger where he had neatly hung them. “I'm going too,” he squealed.

“Not me,” said Christopher-John, lying back down again.

While Stacey attempted to put Little Man back to bed, I checked the porch to make sure that Mr. Morrison wasn’t around, then slipped back to my own room to change. When I emerged again, the boys were on the porch and Christopher-John, his pants over his arm, was murmuring a strong protest against this middle-of-the-night stroll. Stacey attempted to persuade both him and Little Man back inside, but Little Man would not budge and Christopher-John, as much as he protested, would not be left behind. Finally Stacey gave up and with T.J. leaning heavily against him hurried across the lawn. The rest of us followed.

Once on the road, Christopher-John struggled into his pants and we became part of the night. Quiet, frightened, and wishing just to dump T.J. on his front porch and get back to the safety of our own beds, we hastened along the invisible road, brightened only by the round of the flashlight.

The thunder was creeping closer now, rolling angrily over the forest depths and bringing the lightning with it, as we emerged from the path into the deserted Avery yard. “W-wait till I get inside, will ya?” requested T.J.

“Ain’t nobody here,” I said sourly. “What you need us to wait for?”

“Go on, T.J.,” said Stacey. “We’ll wait.”

“Th-thanks, y’all,” T.J. said, then he limped to the side of the house and slipped awkwardly into his room through an open window.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” said Stacey, herding us back to the path. But as we neared the forest, Little Man turned. “Hey, y’all, look over yonder! What’s that?”

Beyond the Avery house bright lights appeared far away on the road near the Granger mansion. For a breathless second they lingered there, then plunged suddenly downward toward the Averys’. The first set of lights was followed by a second, then a third, until there were half a dozen sets of headlights beaming over the trail.


For what seemed an interminable wait, we stood watching those lights drawing nearer and nearer before Stacey clicked off the flashlight and ordered us into the forest. Silently, we slipped into the brush and fell flat to the ground. Two pick-ups and four cars rattled into the yard, their lights focused like spotlights on the Avery front porch. Noisy, angry men leaped from the cars and surrounded the house.
Kaleb Wallace and his brother Thurston, his left arm hanging akimbo at his side, pounded the front door with their rifle butts. “Y’all come on outa there!” called Kaleb. “We want that thieving, murdering nigger of y’all’s.”

“St-Stacey,” I stammered, feeling the same nauseous fear I had felt when the night men had passed and when Papa had come home shot and broken, “wh-what they gonna do?”

“I—I dunno,” Stacey whispered as two more men joined the Wallaces at the door.

“Why, ain’t . . . ain’t that R.W. and Melvin?” I exclaimed. “What the devil they doing—”

Stacey quickly muffled me with the palm of his hand as Melvin thrust himself against the door in an attempt to break it open and R.W. smashed a window with his gun. At the side of the house, several men were climbing through the same window T.J. had entered only a few minutes before. Soon, the front door was flung open from the inside and Mr. and Mrs. Avery were dragged savagely by their feet from the house. The Avery girls were thrown through the open windows. The older girls, attempting to gather the younger children to them, were slapped back and spat upon. Then quiet, gentle Claude was hauled out, knocked to the ground and kicked.

“C-Claude!” whimpered Christopher-John, trying to rise. But Stacey hushed him and held him down.

“W-we gotta get help,” Stacey rasped, but none of us could move. I watched the world from outside myself.

Then T.J. emerged, dragged from the house on his knees. His face was bloody and when he tried to speak he cried with pain, mumbling his words as if his jaw were broken. Mr. Avery tried to rise to get to him, but was knocked back.

“Look what we got here!” one of the men said, holding up a gun. “That pearl-handled pistol from Jim Lee’s store.”

“Oh, Lord,” Stacey groaned. “Why didn’t he get rid of that thing?”

T.J. mumbled something we could not hear and Kaleb Wallace thundered, “Stop lyin’, boy, ’cause you in a whole lot of trouble. You was in there—Miz Barnett, when she come to and got help, said three black boys robbed their store and knocked out her and her husband. And R.W. and Melvin Simms seen you and them two other boys running from behind that store when they come in town to shoot some pool—”

“But it was R.W. and Melvin—” I started before Stacey clapped his hand over my mouth again.

“—Now who was them other two and where’s that money y’all took?”

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

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To what two events does Cassie compare this one?

What do the men do to the Averys?

What story have R.W. and Melvin told?
Whatever T.J.’s reply, it obviously was not what Kaleb Wallace wanted to hear, for he pulled his leg back and kicked T.J.’s swollen stomach with such force that T.J. emitted a cry of awful pain and fell prone upon the ground.

“Lord Jesus! Lord Jesus!” cried Mrs. Avery, wrenching herself free from the men who held her and rushing toward her son. “Don’t let ’em hurt my baby no more! Kill me, Lord, but not my child!” But before she could reach T.J., she was caught by the arm and flung so ferociously against the house that she fell, dazed, and Mr. Avery, struggling to reach her, was helpless to save either her or T.J.

Christopher-John was sobbing distinctly now. “Cassie,” Stacey whispered, “you take Little Man and Christopher-John and y’all—”

The headlights of two more cars appeared in the distance and Stacey immediately hushed. One of the cars halted on the Granger Road, its lights beaming aimlessly into the blackness of the cotton fields, but the lead car came crazy and fast along the rutted trail toward the Avery house, and before it had rolled to a complete stop Mr. Jamison leaped out. But once out of the car, he stood very still surveying the scene; then he stared at each of the men as if preparing to charge them in the courtroom and said softly, “Y’all decide to hold court out here tonight?”

There was an embarrassed silence. Then Kaleb Wallace spoke up. “Now look here, Mr. Jamison, don’t you come messin’ in this thing.”

“You do,” warned Thurston hotly, “we just likely to take care of ourselves a nigger lover too tonight.”

An electric tenseness filled the air, but Mr. Jamison’s placid face was unchanged by the threat. “Jim Lee Barnett and his wife are still alive. Y’all let the sheriff and me take the boy. Let the law decide whether or not he’s guilty.”

“Where’s Hank?” someone asked. “I don’t see no law.”

“That’s him up at Harlan Granger’s,” Mr. Jamison said with a wave of his hand over his shoulder. “He’ll be down in a minute. Now leave the boy be.”

“For my money, I say let’s do it now,” a voice cried. “Ain’t no need to waste good time and money tryin’ no thievin’ nigger!”

A crescendo of ugly hate rose from the men as the second
car approached. They grew momentarily quiet as the sheriff stepped out. The sheriff looked uneasily at the crowd as if he would rather not be here at all, then at Mr. Jamison.

“Where’s Harlan?” asked Mr. Jamison.

The sheriff turned from Mr. Jamison to the crowd without answering him. Then he spoke to the men: “Mr. Granger sent word by me that he ain’t gonna stand for no hanging on his place. He say y’all touch one hair on that boy’s head while he on this land, he’s gonna hold every man here responsible.”

The men took the news in grim silence.

Then Kaleb Wallace cried: “Then why don’t we go somewhere else? I say what we oughta do is take him on down the road and take care of that big black giant of a nigger at the same time!”

“And why not that boy he working for too?” yelled Thurston.

“Stacey!” I gasped.

“Hush!”

A welling affirmation rose from the men. “I got me three new ropes!” exclaimed Kaleb.


“Big as that one nigger is, an old one might break!”

There was chilling laughter and the men moved toward their cars, dragging T.J. with them.

“No!” cried Mr. Jamison, rushing to shield T.J. with his own body.

“Cassie,” Stacey whispered hoarsely, “Cassie, you gotta get Papa now. Tell him what happened. I don’t think Mr. Jamison can hold them—”

“You come too.”

“No, I’ll wait here.”

“I ain’t going without you!” I declared, afraid that he would do something stupid like trying to rescue T.J. alone.

“Look, Cassie, go on, will ya please? Papa’ll know what to do. Somebody’s gotta stay here case they take T.J. off into the woods somewhere. I’ll be all right.”

“Well . . .”

“Please, Cassie? Trust me, will ya?”

**Words For Everyday Use**

*well* • *ing* (welˈiŋ) *adj.*, rising to the surface
I hesitated. “Y-you promise you won’t go down there by yourself?”

“Yeah, I promise. Just get Papa and Mr. Morrison ’fore they—’fore they hurt them some more.” He placed the unlit flashlight in my hand and pushed me up. Clutching Little Man’s hand, I told him to grab Christopher-John’s, and together the three of us picked our way along the black path, afraid to turn on the flashlight for fear of its light being seen.

Thunder crashed against the corners of the world and lightning split the sky as we reached the road, but we did not stop. We dared not. We had to reach Papa.