

Chapter Two

“Cassie, you better watch yourself, girl,” Big Ma cautioned, putting one rough, large hand against my back to make sure I didn’t fall.

I looked down at my grandmother from midway up one of the wooden poles Papa had set out to mark the length of the cotton field. Big Ma was Papa’s mother, and like him she was tall and strongly built. Her clear, smooth skin was the color of a pecan shell. “Ah, Big Ma, I ain’t gonna fall,” I scoffed, then climbed onto the next strong spike and reached for a fibrous puff at the top of a tall cotton stalk.

“You sho’ better not fall, girl,” grumbled Big Ma. “Sometimes I wish we had more low cotton like down ‘round Vicksburg. I don’t like y’all children climbin’ them things.” She looked around, her hand on her hip. Christopher-John and Little Man farther down the field balanced skillfully on lower spikes of their own poles plucking the last of the cotton, but Stacey, too heavy now to climb the poles, was forced to remain on the ground. Big Ma eyed us all again, then with a burlap bag slung across her right shoulder and dangling at the left side of her waist she moved down the row toward Mama. “Mary, child, I think with what we picked today we oughta have ourselves another bale.”

Mama was stooped over a low cotton branch. She stuffed one last puff into her bag and straightened. She was tawny-colored, thin and sinewy, with delicate features in a strong-jawed face, and though almost as tall as Big Ma, she seemed somewhat dwarfed beside her. “I expect you’re right, Mama,” she said. “Come Monday, we’d better haul it up to the Granger place and have it ginned. Then we can—Cassie, what’s the matter?”

I didn’t answer Mama. I had moved to the very top of my pole and could now see above the field to the road where two figures, one much taller than the other, were walking briskly. As the men rounded a curve in the road, they became more distinct. There was in the easy fluid gait of the shorter man a familiarity that made me gasp. I squinted, shadowing my eyes from the sun, then slipped like lightning down the pole.

► *Why does Big Ma wish she had more low cotton?*

► *In what way do Big Ma and Mama differ in appearance?*

► *Why does Cassie stop picking cotton?*

**Words
For
Everyday
Use**

scoff (skôf) *vi.*, show contempt through disrespectful actions or words

sin • ew • y (sin’yə wē) *adj.*, tough and strong

"Cassie?"

"It's Papa!"

"David?" Mama questioned unbelievably as Christopher-John and Little Man descended eagerly and dashed after Stacey and me toward the barbed-wire fence.

"Don't y'all go through that fence!" Big Ma called after us. But we pretended not to hear. We held the second and third rows of the prickly wire wide for each other to climb through: then all four of us sped down the road toward Papa.

When Papa saw us, he began running swiftly, easily, like the wind. Little Man, the first to reach him, was swept lightly upward in Papa's strong hands as Christopher-John, Stacey, and I crowded around.

"Papa, what you doing home?" asked Little Man.

Putting Little Man down, Papa said, "Just had to come home and see 'bout my babies." He hugged and kissed each of us, then stood back. "Just look at y'all," he said proudly. "Ain't y'all something? Can't hardly call y'all babies no more." He turned. "Mr. Morrison, what you think 'bout these children of mine?"

In our excitement, we had taken no notice of the other man standing quietly at the side of the road. But now, gazing upward at the most formidable-looking being we had ever encountered, we huddled closer to Papa.

The man was a human tree in height, towering high above Papa's six feet two inches. The long trunk of his massive body bulged with muscles, and his skin, of the deepest ebony, was partially scarred upon his face and neck, as if by fire. Deep lifelines were cut into his face and his hair was splotted with gray, but his eyes were clear and penetrating. I glanced at the boys and it was obvious to me that they were wondering the same thing as I: Where had such a being come from?

"Children," said Papa, "meet Mr. L.T. Morrison."

Each of us whispered a faint hello to the giant, then the six of us started up the road toward home. Before we reached the house, Mama and Big Ma met us. When Papa saw Mama, his square, high-cheekboned face opened to a wide smile and, lifting Mama with spirited gusto, he swung her around twice before setting her down and kissing her.

"David, is something the matter?" she asked.

◀ *What does Mr. Morrison look like? What do the children wonder about him?*

**Words
For
Everyday
Use**

for • mid • a • ble (fôr mäd'ă bəl) *adj.*, causing fear or dread; having qualities that discourage approach
eb • o • ny (eb'ă nē) *n.*, black color

► *What two questions does Mama ask?*

Papa laughed. "Something gotta be wrong, woman, for me to come see 'bout you?"

"You got my letter?"

He nodded, then hugged and kissed Big Ma before introducing them both to Mr. Morrison.

When we reached the house we climbed the long, sloping lawn to the porch and went into Mama and Papa's room, which also served as the living area. Mama offered Mr. Morrison Grandpa Logan's chair, a cushioned oak rocker skillfully crafted by Grandpa himself; but Mr. Morrison did not sit down immediately. Instead, he stood gazing at the room.

It was a warm, comfortable room of doors and wood and pictures. From it a person could reach the front or the side porch, the kitchen, and the two other bedrooms. Its walls were made of smooth oak, and on them hung gigantic photographs of Grandpa and Big Ma, Papa and Uncle Hammer when they were boys, Papa's two eldest brothers, who were now dead, and pictures of Mama's family. The furniture, a mixture of Logan-crafted walnut and oak, included a walnut bed whose ornate headboard rose halfway up the wall toward the high ceiling, a grand chiffonier¹ with a floor-length mirror, a large rolltop desk which had once been Grandpa's but now belonged to Mama, and the four oak chairs, two of them rockers, which Grandpa had made for Big Ma as a wedding present.

Mr. Morrison nodded when he had taken it all in, as if he approved, then sat across from Papa in front of the unlit fireplace. The boys and I pulled up straight-backed chairs near Papa as Big Ma asked, "How long you gonna be home, son?"

Papa looked across at her. "Till Sunday evening," he said quietly.

"Sunday?" Mama exclaimed. "Why, today's already Saturday."

"I know, baby," Papa said, taking her hand, "but I gotta get that night train out of Vicksburg so I can get back to work by Monday morning."

Christopher-John, Little Man, and I groaned loudly, and Papa turned to us. "Papa, can't you stay no longer than that? Last time you come home, you stayed a week," I said.

Papa gently pulled one of my pigtails. "Sorry, Cassie girl, but I stay any longer, I might lose my job."

"But, Papa—"

"Listen, all of y'all," he said, looking from me to the boys to Mama and Big Ma, "I come home special so I could bring Mr. Morrison. He's gonna stay with us awhile."

1. **chiffonier.** High, narrow chest of drawers

► *How long is Mr. Logan home for?*

If Mama and Big Ma were surprised by Papa's words, they did not show it, but the boys and I looked with wide eyes at each other, then at the giant.

"Mr. Morrison lost his job on the railroad a while back," Papa continued, "and he ain't been able to find anything else. When I asked him if he wanted to come work here as a hired hand, he said he would. I told him we couldn't afford much—food and shelter and a few dollars in cash when I come home in the winter."

Mama turned to Mr. Morrison, studied him for a moment, and said, "Welcome to our home, Mr. Morrison."

"Miz Logan," said Mr. Morrison in a deep, quiet voice like the roll of low thunder, "I think you oughta know I got fired off my job. Got in a fight with some men . . . beat 'em up pretty bad."

Mama stared into Mr. Morrison's deep eyes. "Whose fault was it?"

Mr. Morrison stared back. "I'd say theirs."

"Did the other men get fired?"

"No, ma'am," answered Mr. Morrison. "They was white."

Mama nodded and stood. "Thank you for telling me, Mr. Morrison. You're lucky no worse happened and we're glad to have you here . . . especially now." Then she turned and went into the kitchen with Big Ma to prepare supper, leaving the boys and me to wonder about her last words.

"Stacey, what you think?" I asked as we milked the cows in the evening. "How come Papa come home and brung Mr. Morrison?"

Stacey shrugged. "Like he said, I guess."

I thought on that a moment. "Papa ain't never brung nobody here before."

Stacey did not reply.

"You think . . . Stacey, you think it's cause of them burnings T.J. was talking 'bout?"

"Burnings?" piped Little Man, who had interrupted his feeding of the chickens to visit with Lady, our golden mare. "What's burnings gotta do with anything?"

"That happened way over by Smellings Creek," said Stacey slowly, ignoring Little Man. "Papa got no need to think . . ." His voice trailed off and he stopped milking.

"Think what?" I asked.

"Nothin'," he muttered, turning back to the cow. "Don't worry 'bout it."

I glared at him. "I ain't worrying. I just wanna know, that's all, and I betcha anything Mr. Morrison come here to do more'n work. Sure wish I knew for sure."

◀ *Why had Mr. Morrison lost his job?*

◀ *Why does Cassie think her father brought Mr. Morrison to stay with them?*

Stacey made no reply, but Christopher-John, his pudgy hands filled with dried corn for the chickens and his lower lip quivering, said, “I—I know what I wish. I wish P-Papa didn’t never have to go’way no more. I wish he could just stay . . . and stay. . . .”

At church the next morning, Mrs. Silas Lanier leaned across me and whispered to Big Ma, “John Henry Berry died last night.” When the announcement was made to the congregation, the deacons² prayed for the soul of John Henry Berry and the recovery of his brother, Beacon, and his uncle, Mr. Samuel Berry. But after church, when some of the members stopped by the house to visit, angry hopeless words were spoken.

“The way I hears it,” said Mr. Lanier, “they been after John Henry ever since he come back from the war and settled on his daddy’s place up by Smellings Creek. Had a nice little place up there too, and was doing pretty well. Left a wife and six children.”

Big Ma shook her head. “Just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

The boys and I sat at our study table pretending not to listen, but listening still.

“Henrietta Toggins,” said Mrs. Lanier, “you know, Clara Davis’s sister that live up there in Strawberry? Well, she’s kin to the Berrys and she was with John Henry and Beacon when the trouble got started. They was gonna drop her off at home—you know John Henry had him one of them old Model-T pickups—but they needed some gas so they stopped by that fillin’ station up there in Strawberry. They was waitin’ there for they gas when some white men come up messin’ with them—been drinkin’, you know. And Henrietta heard ‘em say, ‘That’s the nigger Sallie Ann said was flirtin’ with her.’ And when she heard that, she said to John Henry, ‘Let’s get on outa here.’ He wanted to wait for the gas, but she made him and Beacon get in that car, and them men jus’ watched them drive off and didn’t mess with ‘em right then.

“John Henry, he took her on home then headed back for his own place, but evidently them men caught up with him and Beacon again and starts rammin’ the back of they car—least that’s what Beacon and John Henry told they aunt and uncle when they seed ‘em. John Henry knowed he was run-

► *What had happened to the Berrys?*

2. **deacons.** Lay persons with special duties in the church

Words
For
Everyday
Use

pud • gy (pəˈjē) *adj.*, being short and fat

nin' outa gas and he was 'fraid he couldn't make it to his own place, so he stopped at his uncle's. But them men dragged him and Beacon both outa that house, and when old man Berry tried to stop it, they lit him afire with them boys."

"It's sho' a shame, all right," said T.J.'s father, a frail, sickly man with a hacking cough. "These folks gettin' so bad in here. Heard tell they lynched³ a boy a few days ago at Crosston."

"And ain't a thing gonna be done 'bout it," said Mr. Lanier. "That's what's so terrible! When Henrietta went to the sheriff and told him what she'd seed, he called her a liar and sent her on home. Now I hear tells that some of them men that done it been 'round braggin' 'bout it. Sayin' they'd do it again if some other uppity nigger get out of line."

Mrs. Avery tisked, "Lord have mercy!"

Papa sat very quietly while the Laniers and the Averys talked, studying them with serious eyes. Finally, he took the pipe from his mouth and made a statement that seemed to the boys and me to be totally disconnected with the conversation. "In this family, we don't shop at the Wallace store."

The room became silent. The boys and I stared at the adults wondering why. The Laniers and the Averys looked uneasily about them and when the silence was broken, the subject had changed to the sermon of the day.

After the Laniers and the Averys had left, Papa called us to him. "Your mama tells me that a lot of the older children been going up to that Wallace store after school to dance and buy their bootleg liquor and smoke cigarettes. Now she said she's already told y'all this, but I'm gonna tell y'all again, so listen good. We don't want y'all going to that place. Children going there are gonna get themselves in a whole lot of trouble one day. There's drinking up there and I don't like it—and I don't like them Wallaces either. If I ever find out y'all been up there, for any reason, I'm gonna wear y'all out. Y'all hear me?"

"Yessir, Papa," piped Christopher-John readily. "I ain't never going up there."

The rest of us agreed; Papa always meant what he said—and he swung a mean switch.

◀ *What happened to the men who burned the Berrys?*

◀ *What seemingly unrelated remark does Mr. Logan make?*

◀ *What warning does Mr. Logan give his children?*

3. **lynched.** Put to death, often by hanging, in an unlawful mob action