

Hornswoggled

An Alafair Tucker Mystery

Donis Casey

Poisoned Pen Press



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This book is dedicated to two pillars of the house:
My mother-in-law, Mabel Koozer, whom I never knew,
and my sister, Carol DeWelt, who lived it with me.

*Her children arise up and call her blessed:
her husband also, and he praiseth her.*

Prov. 31: 28

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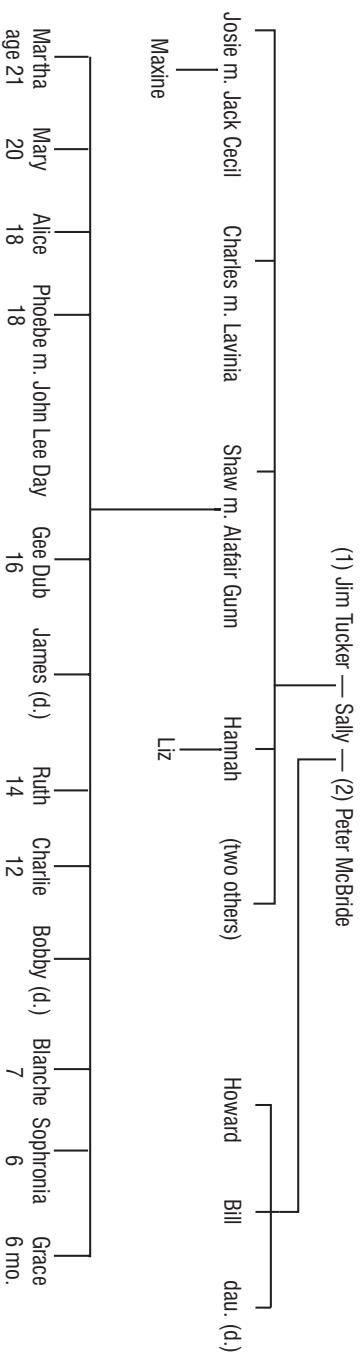
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As always, my love and thanks to my beloved family and friends, my bedrock support crew. And to Max, who stands alone.

The Family Tree

March 1913



Chapter One

Something bad was bound to happen. It was just that kind of hot, humid, Oklahoma July day, with a gritty wind that blew everything awry. Fifteen-year-old George Washington Tucker, known as Gee Dub, hunkered on the grassy, overgrown banks of Cane Creek, grimly hanging on to his fishing pole, trying to ignore the sweltering heat and the clouds of gnats, mosquitos, and various other disgusting critters who were trying to fly up his nose and into his eyes and drink the salt off of his sweat-slick skin. The hot wind was maddening, the way it blew first out of the north, then out of the southwest, then died and dropped his damp, black curls into his eyes. At least when it picked up again, it blew the gnats away for a few seconds. And it wasn't even quite noon, that was the sad thing.

Normally Gee Dub loved fishing, since he was a contemplative boy. He loved thinking about what his mother was going to do with the little perch or crappie, or occasional catfish, that he would catch. Oh, how good they would taste, rolled in cornmeal and fried quickly in bacon grease until the tender white flesh was encased in a golden crust. Having to eat the fish slowly, so slowly, and chew so carefully to avoid swallowing one of the hundreds of tiny bones only enhanced the dining experience.

But today, the joy of fishing was ruined not just by the worrisome weather, but by Gee Dub's eleven-year-old brother, Charlie, and Charlie's ever-present canine companion, Charlie-dog.

Charlie-boy had insisted on going swimming. Gee Dub had sent him and his dog as far downstream as he could and still keep an eye on them, but it was no good. All his splashing and jumping and hollering had spooked the fish, and there would be no fried fish for dinner. Gee Dub was bereft.

He could hear Charlie yelling at him, "Look at me, Gee, look at me!" But Gee Dub didn't look. He didn't want to encourage the boy. Charlie was climbing up into a young cottonwood, crawling out onto a wayward branch that hung over the creek, and dropping himself off into the middle of the water with a whoop. He must have done it ten times, with the dog running up and down, barking the whole time, and Gee Dub had just about had enough. The weather was getting hotter, the fishing was bad, and Charlie was driving him right 'round the bend. He pulled in his line.

Suddenly there was a crack of noise as loud as a rifle shot, and a splash, and Gee Dub leaped where he sat. He looked downstream, wide eyed. Charlie was nowhere to be seen. The yellow shepherd was leaping and barking frantically on the bank. Gee Dub jumped to his feet and scanned the creek bank anxiously. No skinny, naked little boy. Just a fairly large cottonwood branch floating away from him in the middle of the water. Gee Dub's heart fell into his stomach, and he started running toward the broken tree, hollering for Charlie.

He was already barefoot, so he didn't have to worry about taking off his shoes when he dove headlong into the murky water near the last place he had seen his brother. The water wasn't very deep, but it was impossible to see anything, so he groped along the slimy bottom with his hands, until he couldn't stay under anymore and exploded to the surface with a gasp. He flung his dark hair out of his eyes with a toss of his head and scanned the bank again. No boy, but the dog had joined him in the water and was dog paddling around in a circle close to a tangle of cottonwood roots. Gee Dub struck out toward the dog.

"Charlie!" he yelled.

Out from under the cottonwood roots, next to the bank, a boy's voice responded, "Here, Gee Dub."

Gee Dub's arm paused in mid-stroke, and he grew faint with relief right there in the water. Just as he reached the undercut bank, Charlie's blond head popped up from under the root tangle, practically in Gee Dub's face. Gee Dub was so glad that the child was alive that, for a second, he forgot to be angry and reached out to hug him. When his hands touched Charlie's bare shoulders, he shook him instead.

"What in the turkey feet do you think you're doing..."

"Gee Dub," Charlie gasped, "there's somebody dead down there."

"You're lucky it ain't you, you punkin-head," Gee Dub spat, too angry to listen. He climbed onto the bank and tried to heave the boy up after him, but Charlie resisted.

"No, no," Charlie sputtered, as he crawled out of the water on his own. "Listen to me. I'm telling you there's a drowned woman stuck up there under them branches. I was on the tree and the limb broke and I fell down there and I felt her long hair and her face!"

Gee Dub hesitated. By this time Charlie was out of the creek and dancing with excitement on the grass. Gee Dub, sitting on the ground with his feet still in the water, wiped his hair out of his face. "You're just imagining things."

"I ain't, I ain't, I ain't," Charlie exclaimed hysterically. "Go down and see! I swear it's true. Go down and see for yourself, Gee."

Charlie's manic certainty gave Gee Dub pause, and he grabbed the boy's arm to settle him down. "All right," he soothed. "I'll dive under there just to hush you up, even though it's probably just a old dead goat and I'll get the pox or something and it'll be all your fault."

"Gee Dub!" Charlie wailed.

"All right! Mercy! You stay right here and don't twitch a toe. I mean it, now." He looked back over his shoulder at the shepherd. "Dog," he ordered imperiously, "you watch this here boy."

Gee Dub slipped back into the water, took a deep breath, and ducked under the roof of cottonwood roots. He could see nothing, of course. The water was a grey-green swirl of dappled

light and shade, cooler under the branches. The slimy mud squished between his bare toes. It was just the kind of sheltered place in which a big old catfish would love to lurk, or a nest of water moccasins, and Gee Dub shuddered in spite of himself. He swung his arms tentatively through the water a couple of times, hitting a branch or two and the muddy bank. Then his fingers passed through what he at first thought was floating vegetation. Fine floating weeds. He swung his hand back, and his fingers tangled. Hair. He resisted an urge to gasp, just releasing a couple of bubbles. He brought his fingers to his face, close enough to confirm that they were entangled in what looked like long, dark hair. Please, Jesus, let it be some old mule tail, he prayed, even though he knew it wasn't. Nervously, he let his hand follow the hair through the dark water, until it lighted on a smooth, cool dome. His heart was thumping so hard that it hurt. He felt a forehead, eyebrows, ears, a nose.

Gee Dub backed himself out from under the roots as fast as he could move and flung himself up to the surface. He took a couple of gulps of air to calm himself. "Charlie," he said evenly, "run home as fast as you can and get Daddy."

"I was right," Charlie declared. He was breathless with excitement.

"I think so," Gee Dub admitted. "Now, run! Run!"

But Charlie was already ten yards across the field, with the dog at his heels.



An hour later, Gee Dub was standing in the creek up to his chest beside the cottonwood roots, waiting for his father and the sheriff to come to the surface and either confirm or deny his find. On the bank, Gee Dub could see Charlie, wrapped in such a big blanket that he was nothing but a tousled head and dirty splayed feet, watching eagerly. Standing close behind Charlie was their mother, Alafair. Gee Dub couldn't see her face well, since it was shaded by a blue poke bonnet, but she was standing stiffly with one hand on Charlie's shoulder and one hand

on her hip. The front of her calico apron was bulging with Gee Dub's latest sibling.

The three watchers stirred when Shaw Tucker surfaced calmly, followed by his cousin, Sheriff Scott Tucker. Shaw wiped his hair back with both hands and used two fingers to flick the water out of his drooping black mustache. He turned toward the bank.

"Charlie, Martha is coming up the path now with a couple of mules. You run to meet her and ride back to the house and bring me a length of rope."

"Is it a body, Daddy?" Charlie said.

"Looks like it."

Charlie turned to run, but Alafair caught his arm. "Put your britches on first," she instructed. "I don't think the neighbor ladies would appreciate seeing the same naked little jay bird that come running up to the house just lately."

Charlie sputtered, then laughed a little with embarrassment and rushed off into the bushes to retrieve his overalls.

"Ain't Martha bringing rope?" Gee Dub asked his father.

"She is." Shaw kept his voice low. "But I want him away when we bring up the body."

"Is it bad?" Gee Dub wondered with dread.

"Don't know, Gee," the sheriff told him. "Bad enough."

After Charlie was off and Gee Dub's oldest sister, twenty-year-old Martha, had arrived riding on the extra mule with the equipment, the two men struggled for several minutes to free the tightly wedged body from its prison of roots. Finally, after hacking away some of the growth with an ax, the men managed to pull the poor soul free and manhandle her sodden form up onto the bank. Alafair, unwilling to expose her coming baby to a shock, turned her back and refused to look.

"Is it bad, like Gee Dub wondered?" she asked Martha, who was standing next to her mother and watching with an expression that was a mixture of interest and repulsion.

"Like Scott said, it's bad enough, Ma. Her hands... Well, it looks like the fish were beginning to nibble on her fingers a little bit, but her face is all of a piece, still. She's puffy-faced, real

white skin, purple marks on her face. I can't tell if she's bruised or if the purpling is from the water. She's a big woman. Hard to say how old she is. She does have lots of long brown hair all loose around her shoulders. She's dressed kind of nice, in a blue shirtwaist with a dark pattern on the front, and some kind of big white button."

"Can you tell who she is?"

There was a moment's silence while Martha studied the bloated face. Then Alafair felt her straighten. "Why, Ma," Martha exclaimed, "it's Miz Kelley!"

In spite of herself, Alafair glanced back over her shoulder. "Miz Kelley? The barber's wife? Miz Kelley has drowned in Cane Creek?"

Scott and Shaw were bending over the body in a cursory examination, and Scott sat back on his heels when he overheard Alafair's question. "This woman didn't drown, Alafair," he observed. "This dark pattern Martha mentioned is a bloodstain, and the white button is a knife with a carved bone handle, sticking right out of her chest. Looks like she's been stabbed in the heart."

Chapter Two

Mr. Ulises Bellows, pastor of the Christian Church of Boynton, Oklahoma, stepped up to the graveside, and the mourners fell silent. “Brothers and Sisters,” Mr. Bellows began, “we’re here today, the ninth day of July, in the year of the Lord, 1912, to mourn the passing of our sister in Christ, Louise, wife of Walter Kelley. Sister Louise’s short life came to a sad end, but we cannot judge her heart. Only God can do that. We may question why our sister was taken from us in such a way, but we rest assured that even this is part of God’s plan, and on the day of Glory, all things shall be revealed.”

Alafair Tucker stood in the back of the small group with two of her daughters and surveyed the congregation while Mr. Bellows spoke of death and the hope of resurrection for Louise Kelley. Alafair hadn’t known Mrs. Kelley all that well, but since the poor woman’s body was found on their property, she felt honor bound to attend the funeral. Shaw and the boys, who had actually done the finding, were standing closer to the front, nearer Louise’s family.

On the near side of the grave, Alafair could see the back of the widower’s head. When he turned to look at a well-wisher and Alafair could see his face, she thought he looked stunned. It must have been quite a shock for him to be called home from a trip to Kansas City because of the brutal murder of his wife. The Kelleys had been in Boynton for about five years. All Alafair

knew of them was that they had moved to the area from Kansas City because Louise's sister lived on a farm west of town, and Louise had wanted to be near her.

On the far side of the grave, this very sister, Nellie Tolland, stood almost collapsed with grief, weeping profusely on her husband's shoulder. The husband had been weeping, too, judging from his eyes. He gazed morosely into the grave where Louise's coffin lay.

Alafair recognized a number of the people who had attended the funeral; there was Mrs. Bellows, and two or three people that Alafair knew to be neighbors of the Kelleys, besides many of Mr. Kelley's barbershop regulars. Standing far in the back was Sheriff Scott Tucker, eyeing the crowd, looking for a murderer, Alafair expected. After the short graveside service was over, and the mourners were filing slowly forward to have a word with the bereaved, Alafair turned to walk back to the Masonic Hall where their wagon was parked.

"I'll be along directly, Mama," her daughter Alice said to her. "I want to offer my condolences to Mr. Kelley."

Mildly surprised, Alafair paused and looked up at the tall eighteen-year-old from under the brim of her best hat with the cherries on the band. She understood why Martha had come to the funeral with her, but Alice hadn't known the Kelleys at all. None of Alafair's other daughters had shown any interest in coming. "Go ahead, then," she said to Alice. "Try to round up your daddy and the boys directly. I'm getting tired of standing. Martha and me will be back at the Hall."

"Yes, Mama," Alice said, and hurried off as Alafair and Martha turned to leave the cemetery. As they passed out of the gate, they walked by a young woman standing close by the fence. She was engrossed in the proceedings going on inside the cemetery, and paid Alafair and Martha little mind as they walked by her. Alafair, however, eyed the girl closely, from her mess of nondescript colored hair to her bare brown feet. She was sure she had never seen this young woman before and considered speaking to her, but before she could approach, the girl slid her a shy glance and moved around behind a slim elm, obviously in no mood for

conversation. Alafair suddenly changed her mind about leaving the funeral. Something about the sight of that girl who didn't want to be spoken to set Alafair's senses to quivering. "Let's go back in," she said to Martha.

Martha paused when her mother did and gave her a quizzical look. "I thought you were tired."

Alafair walked back inside the cemetery grounds with Martha at her heels. "I'll just sit here a spell," she said, parking herself on a little bench which was situated beside the path just inside the gate. "You can go on back to the church hall if you've a mind."

Martha sat down beside her, intrigued but not surprised by her mother's reversal. "No, I'll stay here with you."

Alafair patted Martha's knee and turned her attention back to the service, which was finally breaking up. Walter Kelley was now standing off to one side, surrounded by well-wishers. He was a popular man in town, the busiest barber, the owner of two or three town buildings, as well as the proud owner of one of the town's growing number of automobiles—a shiny black Ford touring car. He also had electric lights and indoor plumbing in his white house on Elm Street, and a telephone in his barber shop that he would let anyone use, free for local calls, though the town was small enough that it was probably easier to holler out the window. For long distance calls, most people paid the barber a nickel. He was a young man to be so well-off, Alafair thought. Late twenties or early thirties, tall and good-looking. But he worked hard, Alafair admitted to herself, even if he was too glib and a bit "hail-fellow-well-met" for her taste. He looked ill-at-ease and at odds with himself now, though, with all the people crowding around him, like he'd rather be anywhere in the world but here.

Alafair had lost sight of the other bereaved party, Louise's sister Nellie, and she cast a glance around the crowd. She finally saw the woman, still supported by her husband, walking down the path toward her. Like other local farm people, the Tollands were known around town, but that was all. They bought their supplies at the Boynton Mercantile. They had taken out a loan at

the First National Bank. They went to the Baptist Church, which Alafair did not, so she knew them only slightly. As far as she knew, they paid their debts and got by. When they passed her on their way out of the cemetery, Alafair nodded at them. Mrs. Tolland didn't seem to notice her, but Ned Tolland nodded back.

Nellie suddenly stopped in her tracks, and her husband, unprepared, stumbled. Alafair followed the woman's gaze and was not surprised to see it riveted on the half-hidden girl outside the fence. There was a long moment of silence as Nellie stared at the girl and the girl stared back, and Alafair stared at them both. Finally, Nellie Tolland's face screwed up with distaste and she spat on the ground. Without a word, she and her husband turned around and left the cemetery another way. The girl didn't move.

Martha made a little sound of surprise, but Alafair's attention was already back on the barber, who had extricated himself from his knot of well-wishers and was trudging their way with his eyes on the ground and his hands in his pockets. He touched his hat brim as he passed the two women on the bench.

"Miz Tucker," he said softly. "Miz Martha."

"Our prayers are with you, Mr. Kelley," Alafair said to him.

"Thank you," he responded. He took one more step, then froze as he caught sight of the girl. His right hand came out of his pocket and unconsciously covered his heart, as though the surprise was just too much. He turned toward the east exit, but paused when he saw Ned and Nellie Tolland's retreating backs. He looked desperate for a moment, trapped, but he recovered quickly and smiled at Alafair and Martha. "I'm glad y'all come," he said, then turned around and walked back toward the grave site. Alafair looked back over the fence, but the girl was gone.

"Well, that's strange," Martha observed. "Who do you suspect she was, to cause the family such distress?"

"That's a good question, honey," Alafair replied.



Shaw listened to the tale of the mysterious woman with interest as he steered the team of mules down the road toward their

farm. He cast a glance at his dark-haired wife sitting in the buckboard seat next to him, and smiled when she finished her story. He knew that no one was more sensitive to disturbances of the heart than Alafair. "And just what do you make of all these goings-on, darlin'?"

"I don't know, Shaw," she admitted. "But there's a story here that we don't know nothing about, that's for sure. Could that gal have anything to do with Miz Kelley's murder?"

"Scott told me that as far as he's been able to find out to now, Miz Kelley was last seen alive in the company of a young fellow, the day before she turned up in Cane Creek. He didn't mention anything about a girl."

"Do you suppose Scott saw her standing there by the fence?"

"Scott don't miss much," Shaw assured her.

"Maybe we should mention it to him just in case."

Shaw laughed in spite of himself. "Don't get yourself all fretted, honey," he admonished. "I'll say something to Scott next time I see him, but I'll bet you he will have already asked Kelley and the Tollands about her."

"I just don't want that poor woman's murderer to get away."

"He won't," Shaw reassured.

As Shaw spoke, one of the mules sidestepped and the left front wagon wheel ran over something with a noisy bump. Charlie jumped up from where he was seated in the back of the wagon next to Martha, Alice, and Gee Dub. He leaned over the side behind his father's back to scan the road. "It's a shoe, Daddy!" he exclaimed.

"A shoe?" Alafair repeated.

"Stop the wagon, Daddy," Charlie begged. "I'll fetch it."

Shaw obliged, and Charlie leaped out of the wagon onto the road as the rest of the kids stood up for a better look. The Tuckers' dogs had been following the wagon, and as soon as Charlie hit the ground, all three dashed to his side for a sniff and a better look. Charlie ran around behind the wagon and scooped up the object, then darted over to the side of the road a few feet back. "Here's the other one," he called. "Hey, maybe

the dogs can track them back to whoever lost them! Come here, dogs.” Crook and Buttercup, the hunting hounds, and Charlie-dog, the kids’ pet, pressed around the boy and snuffled eagerly at the shoe. Charlie-dog had never been much of a tracker, so was more interested in trying to get Charlie-boy to play. But the two hunting dogs knew their business and set about immediately to pick up a scent.

The people in the wagon watched with interest for a few moments as the dogs methodically swept back and forth across the road, noses to the ground, running a few yards afield, then back to the road.

“Them dogs can’t find a scent,” Gee Dub said, as they circled back and forth.

Charlie shook his head impatiently. “Wait a minute.”

“No, Charlie,” Alafair admonished. “Come on back up here. There’s no trail for the dogs to find, and we have to get home.”

Resigned, Charlie whistled sharply, then trotted back to the wagon with the dogs wagging and panting around him. He handed the shoes up to his father. Shaw passed them over to Alafair before he hauled the boy back up into the wagon by one arm, then picked up the reins.

Charlie thrust himself between his parents on the wagon seat. “Whose shoes are they, Mama?” he asked.

“Don’t know, son,” Alafair told him. “Well, look here, Shaw. It’s a perfectly good pair of men’s dress shoes. And right out in the middle of the road! Look almost new, except that this run-over one has been chewed on by some critter.”

“One was in the road, Mama,” Charlie corrected her. “The other was way up under a bush to the side of the road.”

“Somebody must have lost them out of a wagon,” Shaw speculated. “They look expensive. Somebody is mighty sorry he lost those.”

“Can I have them, Daddy?” Charlie asked.

“You’d have to grow a bunch to be able to wear those,” Shaw told him with a laugh.

“How about me, Daddy?” Gee Dub asked from the back.

“They look to be too big for you, too, son. Even too big for me, I think.”

“We’re just going to hold them for whoever lost them,” Alafair assured them firmly. “I’ll ask Hattie at the Mercantile to post a notice.”

“What if nobody claims them?” Charlie wondered.

“Well, they’re too good to waste,” Alafair admitted. “One of you boys will have to get down to growing big feet.” She placed the shoes on the floor of the buckboard and Charlie fell back into his place beside his brother. Alafair shook her head. “Mysteries by the bushel,” she observed to herself. She looked over at Shaw. “You know, this has been a strange couple of days. I got a funny feeling about it all.”

Shaw looked at her askance. “Uh-oh,” he teased. “Sounds like you think God is trying to tell you something again.”

Alafair took the jibe good naturedly. “Oh, don’t worry. There’s not a thing that’s happened in this last week that has anything to do with me or mine.”

“I hope it stays that way,” Shaw said.

“So do I,” Alafair seconded, in all sincerity.

Chapter Three

Kelley's Barber Shop was doing a booming business on this Saturday before Easter in the year 1913. Besides the need to get the top trimmed and the sides shaved for the holiday, the men from town and the surrounding farms had plenty to discuss. Cotton futures looked to be unchanged. The price of crude oil was up. You could count on that. March had been cooler than normal, thus far. The new president had just been in office less than a month, not long enough to judge him rightly. He was, after all, a Democrat, and that couldn't be good. However, he did preach against big business, so he wasn't all bad. Then there was this business in Mexico. Should we really have sent troops? And Governor Cruce! What a disgrace. The man should be impeached.

Walter Kelley was holding forth with the best of them. It had been eight months since his wife had been found in Cane Creek, murdered, and folks were finally beginning to treat him like they had before the tragedy. Walter was a gregarious man, and having people tiptoe around him, afraid to laugh and gossip for fear of upsetting him, had been torture. His business had suffered, too, at first, until the sheriff had satisfied himself that Walter could not possibly have killed his wife himself. He had been in Kansas City at the time, and numerous witnesses had testified to that fact. Which was a good thing, too, because he had originally planned to be home the very day Louise was found in the creek. If his uncle hadn't dropped in unexpectedly and

caused him to extend his trip, he'd have probably been home in time to be the prime suspect.

Walter had been in a fog for several weeks, after the sheriff had wired him to come home because Louise had been stabbed. He was just beginning to feel normal again. He didn't miss Louise, but he was sorry that she had died that way. Everyone knew that they hadn't been particularly happy together. Walter had an eye for the ladies, and he liked to have fun. He hadn't meant to hurt Louise. He just was who he was.

And Louise was not blameless, to Walter's way of thinking. First, she had threatened to leave him, or at least to start stepping out on him. He had suspected for quite awhile before she had met her unfortunate end that she had a lover, since she would disappear at the oddest times. But then she had gotten religion so bad that it was annoying. She had kept praying at him to change his ways.

For weeks after the funeral, all the ladies of the Christian Church had kept him fed like a king. Every single night one lady or another would stop by the barber shop at closing time, toting a casserole, or a roast, or some fried chicken. When business was slow and he went outside to sit on the bench in front of the shop, every woman who passed by would pause and offer her sympathy. During the last couple of weeks, he began to notice that some of the ladies were stopping by with their marriageable daughters in tow. He was, after all, quite well to do, and a good catch, if he did say so himself.

Today, Shaw Tucker was in the shop with his two sons, which made Walter happy. He liked the voluble Shaw and both the boys, and he liked the fact that when Shaw was in town with the family, it was likely that Walter would get to pass a few words with some of Shaw's vivacious daughters. All the Tucker girls were sharp and friendly, but the elder two, Martha and Mary, didn't seem to appreciate his banter as much as the next two, fraternal twins Alice and Phoebe. Phoebe had married their neighbor boy, John Lee Day, last winter, which was all right with Walter. Phoebe was sweet and pretty, but he had eyes for Alice.

It had taken him a long time after Louise's death to realize that he was free to court a nice girl, and Alice Tucker suited him right down to the ground. She was tall, blond, blue-eyed, and flirtatious. She had a tongue like a razor and an iron will, which daunted most men, but Walter felt he was easily her match. Walter hadn't broached the subject with Alice, or tested the waters with Shaw. He had just become aware himself of his interest in the girl. He thought, too, that she might be interested in him, since she had taken the time to talk to him at Louise's funeral. One problem he did foresee, however, was Alice's mother, Alafair. He really didn't think she liked him.

"So, Mr. Tucker," Walter found himself saying to the man in his chair, "how's Miz Tucker lately? I ain't seen her around town in a bit."

"She's doing fine, Walter," Shaw assured him. "The new baby keeps her close to home nowadays. The little gal is getting up big enough, though, that I expect Alafair will begin ranging farther from home before long."

"How many girls is that for you, Mr. Tucker?"

Shaw laughed before he answered. "That's eight girls, and a prettier bunch of butterflies you'll not find. And I'll tell you, little Grace is one lucky imp. She's got seven mothers besides her own. You never saw such a doted-on baby."

"What do you boys think about another sister?" Walter asked the two youngsters, who were sitting in bentwood chairs, waiting their turn.

"We're used to being outnumbered," Gee Dub told him. "And she is mighty cute."

"She's funny," Charlie admitted, "but you got to watch her every minute. I swear she'll eat anything. Mama caught her about to chomp down on a big green caterpillar the other day. I'd have liked to see that. Grandpapa said it would have made her bonny. Grandma and Grandpapa come over a lot since she got born."

"He thinks his Grandpapa hung the moon," Shaw informed the barber.

Charlie looked over at his father. “Are Grandma and Grandpapa coming over for Easter, Daddy?”

“No, we’re going over to their place, son,” Shaw told him, “along with all your aunts and uncles and cousins.” Shaw dropped his head forward onto his chest to afford Walter access to the back of his neck. “What are you doing for Easter, Walter?”

Walter shrugged in the midst of his clipping. “Go to church and then home, I reckon. I have lots of family back in Missouri, but none of them live out here.”

“What about your late wife’s family?”

“Oh, I think they’d just as soon shoot me as look at me,” Walter told him mildly.

Shaw paused, then let the comment pass. “Why don’t you come out to my folks’ farm for dinner after church on Sunday,” he invited. “Don’t seem right to be alone on Easter.”

Walter paused, pretending to consider the offer. He didn’t tell Shaw that he’d already had three invitations to dinner. “Why, I’d be right pleased, Mr. Tucker, if you think it would be all right with your mother,” he finally answered. His heart perked up a little at the thought of having dinner with Alice.



“Walter Kelley!” Alafair exclaimed. “You invited Walter Kelley to Easter dinner?”

Shaw was taken aback at her tone. Alafair was usually the first one to claim the lonely, and comfort the bereaved. “Well, yes, seeing as he didn’t have nowhere else to go, and there will like to be so many people at Ma’s tomorrow that no one will even notice one more. Don’t you like Walter?”

They were sitting in their bedroom after dinner while the kids cleaned up the kitchen and Alafair nursed six-month-old Grace. Shaw was sitting on the bed, and Alafair was in her rocking chair with a baby blanket thrown casually over her shoulder and the baby’s head for modesty. Her dark eyes gazed at Shaw accusingly. Alafair huffed at his question, but her expression softened. “Truth is, I don’t know him but to speak to him,” she

admitted. "I don't like what I hear about the way he treated his poor murdered wife. Her sister Nellie Tolland hates him like the devil for making her so unhappy. According to Miz Fluke, over at the post office, Nellie isn't convinced at all that some passing tramp done Louise in, like Scott thinks. She thinks Walter was involved in some way."

"I'm surprised at you, Alafair," Shaw scolded gently, "listening to gossip and all. Nobody but the ones involved knows what goes on in a marriage. I wasn't acquainted with the late Miz Kelley, but I've known Walter for years, and a better natured person I never did meet, always smiling and laughing. I'm thinking that the wife was the discontented one. What was she doing while her husband was out of town that got her knifed and dumped in a creek, anyway?"

Alafair shifted in her chair to ease the leaden weight of the baby on her arm. "Well, maybe you're right," she conceded. "Louise Kelley did seem like kind of a sour woman to me. Of course, maybe she had reason to be. I do know that Walter is just a big flirt."

"So's my papa," Shaw pointed out. His mustache twitched ironically.

Alafair laughed. "Yes, but as far as I know, your papa never did anything but flirt."

"And you know that Walter Kelley did?"

"Well, no, not for sure," she admitted.

Shaw stood up and grabbed the baby's toe, and was rewarded by a coo from under the blanket. "You always take the woman's side," he teased Alafair, "even when there's no earthly reason to."

She reached up and smoothed back his newly trimmed and oiled hair. "We poor put-upon creatures have to stick together," she informed him. "But you're right, I guess. I don't really know the man, and I trust your judgment. So bring him along and any other poor bereft soul you come across."

Shaw brushed her forehead with his lips. "Good. You'll see he's a nice fellow, and it's always good to be neighborly."

“I expect,” she said to his back as he left the room. She pulled the blanket off her shoulder and looked down at Grace, who had finished lunch and was lying with the nipple in her mouth and a look of utter contentment on her face. Her enormous black button eyes popped open and gazed at her mother with interest. May I help you, her expression said? Alafair stifled a laugh and her heart melted in her chest and ran right down into her shoes. Grace was the twelfth little baby to gaze up at her like that, with eyes full of mischief, or fear, contentment, rage, or adoration. Two had died and ten had lived, and Alafair loved every one of them with a love so big that it was a miracle her body could contain it. She tapped the baby’s nose with her finger and sang to her softly.

*“Oh, you beautiful bumble bee.
Don’t you bumble yourself at me.
There’s no honey inside my head.
Won’t you bumble the flowers instead?
Oh, you beautiful bumble bee,
Beautiful bumble bee.”*

Grace gave her a toothless grin and struggled to sit up. Alafair buttoned herself up and arranged Grace on her lap. “Yes, indeed, Grace,” she said as she wiped the baby’s milky mouth with the corner of the blanket, “it’s always good to be neighborly, and it’s always good for your mama to trust the little voice in her head.”



When the sun began to rise a little after 6:30 on Easter morning, Alafair left the hullabaloo of her family preparing for church and went out on the porch. For the past many years, she had made a ritual of going outside by herself early in the morning to walk into the copse of woods behind the house and feed the wild turkeys. It was a chilly, clear morning, and the sky was pinking up nicely in the east. The canny birds, normally impossible to see in the woods, seemed to sense that Alafair meant them no harm when she appeared in the mornings with her pan of

bread crumbs, and clustered around her feet like chickens. On this Easter morning, Alafair sank into a meditative state as she scattered the crumbs, seeing herself back in the Holy Land on that first Easter so long ago, trying to imagine the despair of the disciples turning to wonder when it began to dawn on them what had happened at the tomb. The thought filled her with the deep religious awe of the true believer.

Her moment of reverence was short-lived, however, as were all solitary moments for any mother of ten. As she walked back up the porch steps with the empty pan in her hand, two of her youngest, seven-year-old Blanche and impish Sophronia, aged six, banged out the front door with brushes and ribbons and hairpins in their hands.

“Mama,” Blanche complained, “Martha and Mary are busy with packing up the food and Alice says we have to wait until she gets done doing Ruth’s hair before she can do us.”

Sophronia threw her arms around her mother’s waist in an excess of affection. “Daddy said he’d braid our hair for us, Mama, but when he gets done there’s always one way up here and one all skewed around here.” She demonstrated with her hands flying about her head.

“Besides, Daddy always pulls our hair,” Blanche added, holding the brush out toward Alafair.

Alafair took the brush from Blanche and sat down on the porch swing. “Well, come here, then,” she said, arranging Blanche between her knees while Sophronia climbed up into the swing beside her.

She began brushing the dark brown hair briskly. Blanche had the most beautiful wavy hair, Alafair thought, and enough of it for two little girls. “You girls look mighty pretty in your new dresses,” she observed, prompting Sophronia to leap off the swing and pirouette around the porch a few times before flinging herself back up beside her mother.

“Do me some French braids, Ma,” Blanche begged. “I want fancy hair to go with my fancy dress.”

"I aim to," Alafair assured her with a laugh. She dropped the brush into her lap and divided the hair into two bunches on either side of the girl's head. She twisted one side up and pinned it to keep it out of the way, then began to braid the other side high up on Blanche's crown.

"Can I help?" Sophronia asked.

"Don't let her, Ma," Blanche protested. "She's messy."

Alafair gently pushed away Sophronia's little hand while managing not to drop any of the three hanks of Blanche's hair that were precariously threaded through her fingers. "Sit down, Fronie," she ordered. "Wait until I get down to the bottom here and I'll let you twist a couple of times."

"Can I tie the ribbon?"

"Mama!" Blanche wailed.

"Don't be bothering me, now, Fronie," Alafair said to the bouncing child. "Blanche wants to look especially pretty today. Don't you? Now sit down."

Sophronia sat down with as much grace as she could muster while her mother expertly finished off one of Blanche's braids and most of the other. When Alafair paused and looked over at her, Sophronia gleefully climbed into her mother's lap.

"Stick out your hands, here," Alafair instructed. "Now take these two hanks here in this hand and this one here, and go slow. This one over, and over, and over, and that's good. Now hold it tight while I tie the ribbon. There, that's good. And it looks real neat, Blanche. Thank you, Fronie. You were a big help. Blanche, go in the house and admire yourself in the mirror, then go see if you can help in the kitchen."

Blanche bounded into the house and Alafair swung Sophronia off the seat and set her between her knees. Before she could begin braiding Sophronia's auburn curls, her oldest daughter, Martha, appeared at the front door, holding the baby.

"Grace is ready for her breakfast, Mama," Martha said.

Alafair made a noise of confirmation and stood. "Is she changed?"

“Yes, Ma.” Martha handed Alafair the fussy baby. “Mary’s washing out last night’s diapers right now. I’ve yet to pack the baby’s things to take with us to Grandma’s.”

“Thank you, sweetie, but I’ve already done it. The bag is in my bedroom. Would you do Fronie’s hair for her?”

Alafair and Grace disappeared into the house and Martha took her mother’s place on the porch swing with Sophronia standing before her. “You want French braids like Blanche?” she asked as she began to brush.

Sophronia had reached the limit of her ability to remain still. “Naw, just braid them regular, Martha. The other takes too long.”

Martha had just finished the second braid and was tying it with a ribbon, when Sophronia leaped forward out of her grasp and ran down the steps into the yard. “Martha, Mama!” she yelled. “Here comes Phoebe and John Lee.” She skipped through the gate to greet her sister and new brother-in-law with a dimpled smile as they came up the path from their adjoining farm. They were carrying a big picnic basket between them. Martha, Sophronia, and the newlyweds converged at the gate just as Mary and Alice came out the front door lugging their own huge baskets of food, and their father pulled up to the house with the buckboard, all neatly swept out and covered with clean quilts to protect all the pretty dresses and pressed suits. Shaw’s two hunting dogs, Crook and Buttercup, were bounding around the wagon, excited at the prospect of a trip. Shaw spoke to them sharply and, chastened, the dogs retreated under the porch.

“Let’s go, let’s go, boys and girls,” Shaw called. “We’ve got to drop all these vittles off at Grandma’s before we go to church, and the sun’s already up, now.”

More children poured out the door, and they all arranged themselves on the quilts in the bed of the wagon with much chatter and laughter. Alafair was the last out of the house, with the baby on her hip. She climbed onto the seat next to Shaw, who turned to inspect the load of offspring he was carrying: Martha and Mary, Alice and Phoebe, his boys Gee Dub and

Charlie and his young girls Ruth, Blanche and Sophronia, his son-in-law John Lee, and perched next to him, his wife Alafair and baby Grace.

“Looks like I’m toting a wagonload of flowers,” Shaw observed, and was answered with a chorus of giggles.

“Do I look like a flower, Daddy?” Charlie demanded, affronted.

“Charlie-boy,” Shaw answered him with a big white grin, “you look like a bright red apple, all polished and ready to eat. Now settle, you kids, and let’s get to Grandma’s.” He picked up the reins and clucked at the mules.



An hour later, in the red brick Masonic Hall, where met the congregation of the First Christian Church of Boynton, the family was sitting with Shaw’s mother and stepfather, his three sisters and their families, his two brothers and their families, and his two younger half brothers. The Tucker-McBride amalgamation took up nearly a third of the hall. Because of the baby, Shaw and Alafair sat in the back, at the end of the row, and Alafair was afforded a fine view of the rest of the congregation. Since it was Easter, the hall was packed, all the aisles filled with overflow worshipers in cane-bottomed chairs. Alafair waved at Shaw’s cousin’s wife Hattie Tucker, sitting near the front with Scott and their four nearly grown boys. Two rows up and directly across the aisle from Alice, Alafair caught sight of Walter Kelley, scanning the crowd with bright brown eyes and waving and calling to everyone he knew. His gaze crossed Alafair’s and he gave her a cheerful nod. She responded with a tight smile. His gaze slid onward and lit on Alice. He leaned across the aisle to speak to her, and Alice leaned in to hear him. Her blonde hair fell off her shoulder and she casually tucked it behind her ear. She gave the barber a languorous smile.

Alafair straightened. The young people were close enough that she could hear their conversation clearly over the chatter of the congregation, and she eavesdropped unabashedly.

“I reckon I’ll be taking Easter dinner with you and your family after church,” Walter opened.

“I heard. The family will be mighty glad to have you.”

“Will you be glad to have me there, as well?” Walter teased, grinning.

Alice grinned back. “Why, yes, I will. In fact, my grandfolks have the best apple orchard in the Creek Nation, so they tell me. I’d be pleased to give you a tour after dinner. It’s just blooming like glory this year.”

“I would love to see it, young Miss Alice,” Walter assured her.

There was no time for more conversation, since the new minister, Mr. Bellows, stepped up to the pulpit and a hush fell over the crowd.

Alice! Alafair thought, as the minister greeted the congregation. He called her Alice, just like that, so fresh, and Alice flirted back at him as brash as you please. Don’t fret yourself, her inner voice admonished. I’m pretty sure they don’t even know one another. You just don’t like the fellow, and there’s no good reason not to like him. It’s just his personality, too flip for you, and that big old grin that’s way too friendly, and that sly look that sets your teeth on edge. It doesn’t mean he’s a bad person.

A bad person. Alafair anxiously called to mind his murdered wife. If anybody would be drawn to a flip personality, it was her darling Alice. If only Shaw hadn’t invited him to dinner, she thought. She had a sudden fear that she was looking at the first meeting of fire and tinder.