

Chapter 3



School gardens are actually a 19th century concept. The hard labor involved appealed to the Puritan work ethic of the 1800s. Some advocates promoted school gardens in this country by citing Europe's success in using them to advance its agricultural methods. But it was primarily the 19th century views of the benefits of fresh air, physical exertion, and character building, as well as the basic educational aspects of nature study that ignited the school garden movement here in America. Honesty, accountability, thrift, appreciation for public property, cooperation, a sense of pride, and self-respect were hallmarks of the garden experience.

*—Constance Carter, transcript of a film presentation, Journeys,
Library of Congress, July 20, 2010.*

Sallie Parker tossed the special edition of the *Blooming Grove Gazette* onto her bed with a growl. As if Rabb Truitt would refuse to testify against Herman Blackstone. That reporter should be ashamed. If she ever crossed paths with Turner Jones, she'd give him a piece of her mind.

A ridiculous notion, considering she'd not left the house in months. Ever since the fire, she'd stayed in her childhood bedroom to heal from her burns. But as her injuries mended, she longed for

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contact with people outside her family, despite her mother's overprotective objections.

She needed to live again.

Sallie reached for the hand mirror and peered at herself. At first glance, the same golden-blond hair and blue eyes gazed back at her through gold wire-rimmed spectacles. Nothing out of the ordinary about her. But turning her head to the left gave her a close-up view of the dark red, puckered skin running from her ear to her collarbone. The flames had scorched her right side at the waist, hip, and leg, causing the taut skin to slow her gait. But at least those scars weren't visible, covered as they were by her long skirt. Only her future husband would see the damage the fire left.

If she married, that is.

She rubbed her glasses on her sleeve. For years, her imagination concocted scenarios where her gaze connected with her future husband across a crowded room. His features had always been hazy, just like her bedroom furnishings were without her spectacles. But when Rabb Truitt moved to town last summer, the image took on tousled red hair, teasing brown eyes, and golden skin dusted with freckles.

She pushed her glasses on, bringing everything into focus. Rabb never once flirted with her, like he did with countless girls in town. She was a friend, nothing more.

A soft knock sounded on the door. With the knuckle of her forefinger, she blotted the moisture from below her eyes. "Yes?"

The door inched open. "Miss Sallie?"

The words were barely more than a whisper. Sallie smiled at the housekeeper's little girl with dark blue eyes and hair the color of cotton.

"This is a pleasant surprise. Phoebe, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am. Phoebe Simpson. My brother, Hank, is downstairs."

Something about the small, uncertain face melted Sallie's heart. "Do you need something?"

A timid smile teased the girl's lips. "Will you play with me?"

Play? Sallie hid her smile and, with effort, knelt to meet

Phoebe's gaze. "Thank you for inviting me, but it's been a mighty long time since I played games. I might have forgotten how." She winked.

Phoebe frowned. "But you're not old."

"I'm eighteen years old." She stressed each word for emphasis.

The little girl's eyes widened. "Whoa."

Sallie nodded with feigned gravity. "Exactly."

Phoebe's gaze drifted to Sallie's neck. "Aw. I've got an ouchie too." She lifted her left hand. "See?"

Sallie's stomach dropped as she examined the puckered skin at the base of the small palm, tracing a gentle fingertip across the scar. "What happened?"

"I touched the stove."

On impulse, Sallie brought the small hand to her lips. Then, embarrassed, she released it and straightened to stand. "Does it still hurt?"

The child studied her palm, turning it this way and that. "Not anymore, but it did, an awful lot. Does yours?"

If only it didn't. "A bit."

Strange to have this conversation with one so young. Nobody ever wanted to talk about pain.

Phoebe brushed wispy blonde hair from her face. "When I say my prayers at night, I will pray for your ouchie."

Emotion lodged in Sallie's chest. Much more talk like that and she'd weep. "Let's go outside, shall we?"

Downstairs, an older boy clutched the banister. "Phoebe, Ma told you to stay in the kitchen." He turned to Sallie, his gaze not quite meeting hers. "I'm sorry she bothered you, Miss Parker."

This must be Hank. His proprietary manner reminded her of Joe and Clarence, who corralled her in the same way. "No bother at all. We're going outside to visit the garden. Would you like to come along?"

"If you're sure it's okay."

Sallie gestured for them to follow her, and they trailed her through the empty kitchen. At the back door, she pressed her palm

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against the glass and turned to grab a wrap. "It's colder than I expected."

Hank spoke up. "Me and Phoebe don't mind a little cold."

"All right, then. Fetch your coats, and we'll have some fun."

The two children exchanged glances before Hank spoke. "We don't have coats."

Sallie blinked. Although Texas winters weren't extreme, going without a protective warm outer layer in February was unthinkable. "It's too cold. I know, I'll go outside and pick you something from the garden." She wasn't about to let those frail children out in those temperatures.

The February gale whipped Sallie's skirts. She rubbed her hands together and glanced back at the children in the window.

She inhaled the aroma of soil and manure as she hurried to the bed of deep purple pansies and picked enough for a small bouquet. She missed having the opportunity to plunge her hands into the dark soil and plant tiny seeds of hope. In time, she would.

Sallie rushed back inside, nose and ears turned delightfully cold in just a few minutes. "Here you go, pretty pansies from the garden."

"Sallie, you have a visitor." Mama entered the room, ignoring the children's exclamations over their noseays. "It's just Delia."

Sallie murmured apologies to the Simpson children and followed her mother to the front room, where her friend waited.

"There you are." Sallie allowed Delia's gentle embrace, inhaling her fresh floral scent.

Not for the first time, Sallie marveled at her sister-in-law's ability to make a worn dress appear smart and fashionable. The inky blue wool complemented Delia's ivory complexion and inquisitive brown eyes.

"Mother Parker told me you've made remarkable strides this week," Delia said.

Mama hummed in agreement. "I'll leave you two alone, but later, we'll have coffee and pecan pie. I'll send another pie home for my dear son."

She left them alone, and Delia cut her eyes at Sallie. "Just what

Clarence needs, another reminder that his wife is a disaster in the kitchen.”

“Not that he needs reminding.” Sallie winked at her friend.

“I should take offense, but I’ve been waiting for that sharp wit to resurface.” Delia’s smile disappeared as she took Sallie’s hand. “I didn’t only come to check on you. I came to ask a favor.”

“What is it?”

“Rabb’s convinced he should be a cowhand or something ridiculous. You’ve got to talk him out of it, Sallie. He’ll listen to you.”

At the mention of his name, a thrill ran through Sallie. Four months, one week, and three days since laying eyes on him. “He read the news article, didn’t he?”

“He blames himself for that criminal’s release. And now he’s talking about resigning.”

Rabb feeling responsible for the verdict didn’t surprise Sallie. But to allow it to alter his future? “I can’t believe he would quit because of one trial. And he doubtless wouldn’t allow silly gossip to chase him out of Blooming Grove.” She shook her head. “There has to be more to this.”

Delia sat in a chair across from Sallie and leaned forward. “Do you think you can talk to him?”

Sallie doubted she could convince him of anything, let alone something so important. “He needs to talk to a man he respects.”

“He respects you. Thinks you’re the bravest woman in town.”

Because of the fire. Before that night last fall, nobody considered her as anything other than ordinary. “I tried to help my friend, that’s all. I don’t consider that brave.”

Delia’s voice broke. “You saved my life. And now you can save my brother.”

Sallie studied her clasped hands, willing away the wispy memory of that terrible night. Saving Delia—if helping her ward off an attacker could be considered that—was a solitary act, attributable to God’s grace and nothing more. Saving Rabb was beyond her limited power.

Her sister-in-law didn’t seem to notice her silence. “Talk some

sense into that stubborn man. Leaving Blooming Grove and his job as deputy would be a mistake.”

The weight of Delia’s words landed like a boulder. A world without Rabb? Sallie smiled, imagining him wearing a silver star on his chest. He had a tender heart, though few had recognized it, thanks to his mischievous pranks. She chuckled to herself, thinking of his bids on numerous box dinners at the Independence Day celebration, so he could be surrounded by females. But did anyone notice his small acts of compassion, like helping a child clean spilled milk, or sitting with lonely widowers, listening to endless tales? Rabb Truitt was more than a shameless flirt. He was a good man when nobody was watching.

She’d do anything to keep him from leaving. “All right, I’ll talk to him. Just tell me when.”

Delia’s mouth curved up. “I’ve got the perfect plan. There’s a town meeting about Mr. Berry’s will. You can talk to him there.”

“Oh, no. Can you imagine the whispers and stares?” Sallie couldn’t stand that kind of scrutiny. Besides, Mama would never allow her to attend such a public event. And the more she considered it, the more she thought Mama was right to keep her home. At least here, she didn’t fret about gossip.

Delia grasped Sallie’s hands. “Everywhere I go, people ask me how you are recovering. They care about you.”

If the community cared about her, would they whisper about the scars? Would they judge her appearance and turn their backs? Not likely.

“I won’t go to the town meeting, but I will talk to Rabb. In private.”

Today, before she lost her nerve.



Half an hour later, Sallie stood in front of the parlor mirror and pinned her straw boater in place, tucking the flyaway strands of hair behind her ear. The high neckline of her dress gave her hope that no one would notice the red scar running along the side of her neck.

Mama's frowning face appeared in the mirror's reflection. "Why are you dressed?"

Sallie turned to face her. "I thought I would go to town."

"What? You're not ready to go out in public."

Exactly the response she expected. Sallie fisted her hands, nails digging into the flesh. "There's something I have to do."

"No. I won't allow it."

Fear laced the comment. Was there something Sallie hadn't been told? "Why?"

The one-word question caused Mama to falter. "Well, just because ... I haven't prepared you. What kind of mother lets her child go out without preparation? Besides, Dr. Taggart has been very strict. He doesn't want you to take a chance on relapse."

Sallie picked up her gloves, annoyed. "I'm not a child. I'm a grown woman. I don't need any special preparation to take a short trip to town." She hoped.

"People can be cruel." Mama's gaze landed on Sallie's neck before falling away.

Any bravado from seconds before now wavered. "But I've got to face the hard things, don't I?"

Mama's blue-green eyes shimmered with emotion. "Don't you think you've had enough hardship for one lifetime?"

Sallie gentled her tone, the deeper truth behind her mother's fierce protection suddenly plain to see. "I know this has been hard on you." Her oldest brother had been gone almost ten years, but the pain of his loss never disappeared. Especially for Mama. "But I didn't die in that fire. I'm here, and I need to live again."

Seconds ticked by as Mama composed herself. Sallie let her gaze wander to the windows, gauging the time it would take to get to town and back. Not long before the shadows lengthened.

With a final sniff, Mama tucked her handkerchief up her sleeve. "You're a bit naive to believe you can go out in the town as if nothing happened. Mark my words, people will whisper and point." Her face crumpled. "You bear irreparable scars from that night."

Crushing words. "Am I so hideous?"

"Oh, my dear. Your tender heart can't take the stares and

whispers that will follow you. Go back to your room and stay in the comfort and security of your home.”

Sallie stepped away, scouring her mind for a way out of this smothering environment. “I don’t have a choice. I must speak to Rabb before he does something unwise.”

“Rabb Truitt?” Mama’s eyes narrowed, suspicion layering her words. “Is this why Delia came calling this morning?”

Why had she said his name? “He’s thinking about leaving his job and maybe Blooming Grove. Delia says I need to talk to him.”

“And a word from you will change his mind?”

The scorn in her mother’s voice pierced Sallie’s heart. “He brags on me, how I fought that man off.” He didn’t consider her a delicate flower.

“We know our dear Delia can exaggerate. It wouldn’t surprise me a bit if her brother is as headstrong as she is.”

“Why do you say things like that? She’s your daughter-in-law.”

“Everyone knows Delia has a mind of her own—and I say that with the deepest affection. I’m sure the man will come to his senses without your intervention.” Her mother’s tone held finality.

The opportunity was slipping from Sallie’s hands. “I have to catch him in the sheriff’s office before he goes out on rounds. I won’t be long, I promise.”

Mama scoffed. “I taught you better than to go traipsing off to the jail.”

Sallie opened her mouth to object, but Mama interrupted. “Besides, I need your help with supper. Mrs. Simpson left already.”

Clearly, Mama would toss out every objection she could conjure to keep Sallie from leaving the house. If she didn’t leave now, her chance would evaporate. She grabbed her wrap and walked toward the front door. “I’ll only be gone for a bit.”

Mama skittered behind her. “But—how will you get there?”

Hand on the doorknob, Sallie turned to her mother. “Won’t you trust me? I’m capable of more than you think. Please?”

The mantel clock ticked off the seconds. Finally Mama lifted one begrudging shoulder and said, “Looks like my pleas have fallen on deaf ears. But if you feel the slightest bit winded or—”

"I'll come right back, I promise."

Mama left the room, footsteps echoing down the hallway. In Sallie's effort to make a quick exit, she stumbled and fell against the hat stand. She squeezed her eyes shut, sucking air between her teeth until the throbbing on her right side eased. These bolts of pain caught her off guard. A slight brush across her leg had the power to sink her. She inhaled deeply and let her breath out slowly. At least Mama hadn't come running. But her crash against the furniture gave her pause. What if Mama was right, and she wasn't ready for a trip to town?

After months of healing, she was stronger. But as strong as she used to be? Doubtful. Gone were the days when she rode horses, milked cows, and hoed the weeds in the garden. There'd been no chance to test her stamina. She doubted she could hitch the wagon by herself. That first trip to Blooming Grove might be hard.

But this wasn't about her. She needed to speak to Rabb and convince him to stay. She needed him. She blinked. The *town* needed him.

With a glance over her shoulder, Sallie slipped out the front door, gently clicking it shut behind her. With careful footsteps, she made her way to the barn, where the broad door stood open. From the interior, the snuffles and soft whinnies of the farm horses gave proof of their presence.

Grasping the wooden doorjamb, she paused to catch her breath before entering. When had a short walk taken such exertion? Not that she'd walked even this short distance the last several months. She closed her eyes for a moment, breathing in the familiar scents of hay and manure. She longed to stroke her mare's neck. It'd been so long since she'd ridden Sprinkle.

She opened her eyes and headed to the tack room. Footsteps behind her made the hair on the back of her neck raise.

"Can I help you, Miss Sallie?"

She whirled. "Oh, Dale. You gave me a start."

Her father's hired hand, a middle-aged man whose manner was gentle to horses and humans alike, smiled at her. "Sure is good to see you out here. Sprinkle's been missing you."

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Sallie smiled. "I've missed her too. Is she here? I need to hitch her to the little cart so I can go to town."

His eyes widened. "You don't mean now?"

She nodded. He drew a weathered hand over his whiskered face. "Well, now, it's kinda late in the afternoon for a jog to town. Reckon you can go tomorrow?"

"How about now?"

He sucked in air. "Miss Sallie, I don't mean no disrespect, but you ain't hardy enough to drive yourself anywhere. But I tell you what." He cast a glance over his shoulder before lowering his voice. "I gots to run some errands in town early. I'd be glad to take you."

A mixture of emotions filled her. If she waited, it might be too late. But if she couldn't walk from the house to the barn without panting, she couldn't hitch the wagon or drive herself.

"All right, tomorrow. Thank you, Dale."