

UNTIL
the
HARVEST

SARAH LOUDIN
THOMAS



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To Mom and Dad,
thanks for loving me—
always.





Let both grow together until the harvest.

Matthew 13:24–30



WISE, WEST VIRGINIA
NEW YEAR'S EVE 1975

HENRY PHILLIPS SLICED INTO THE VENISON STEAK on his plate and savored the rich meatiness of it. Mom always cooked his favorites when he came home from college, and this Christmas break was no different. He'd been enjoying being home so much he almost decided against broaching the subject of his music for fear Mom and Dad would launch into their usual speech about his education coming first, but he was itching to share the latest news.

"Mort Jeffries asked me to come play at the Screen Door down on High Street. Guess I must've sounded pretty good."

His father raised one reddish eyebrow shot through with gray and chewed a bite of potato. "Oh?"

That was all the encouragement Henry needed. "Yeah, he heard me fooling around with my fiddle on campus one afternoon and said I should come sit in with the band. Guess he thought I was good enough to play a night or two. Even got some tip money out of it. Man, those guys can play." He put down his fork and used his hands to illustrate. "Mort gets that

guitar going, and Benny plays the mandolin like he was born with it in his hands—almost as good as you. Sure wish you could come hear us.”

His mother smiled and gave his father an inscrutable look.

“Son, you know we don’t want you to let music distract you from your studies.” His dad buttered a roll and took a bite. “You’re talented in more ways than one, and getting an education should be your priority right now.”

Henry tried not to roll his eyes. “I guessed you might say that, but somehow I thought—maybe this time—you’d see it’s not just dreaming. I actually made some money. And Mort said if I’d commit to playing with them regular, he might be able to work out something steady.”

Dad sighed. “We’ve been over this before—”

“Yeah, I know, and it’s always the same. School, school, school. Maybe you don’t think I’m good enough.”

Mom reached over and squeezed his arm. Henry wanted to jerk away but knew it wouldn’t help his case.

“I thought you were enjoying school.” Dad leaned back in his chair and studied Henry. He had a way of looking at him that made Henry feel like he was reading his very soul.

“Yeah, I do like it. It’s just . . .” He spread his hands wide, as though reaching for something. “I feel so connected when I play. It’s almost spiritual or something, and the music flies out all around me, and . . . and I feel great.”

Dad smiled. “I guess I know what you mean. Might be I should dust off my mandolin and see if we can’t make some music together after supper.” He glanced at Mom. “I know your mother would enjoy that.”

“Does that mean it’s okay if I play more regular? I know I can do it and keep up with classes.” Henry tried not to sound too eager.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying I know how you

feel, and I know how hard it will be to put this dream on hold until you finish your degree.” Dad folded his napkin and laid it beside his plate. “Music is one of the purest things this world has to offer, but I’ve never let it get in the way of my responsibilities. I know you won’t, either.”

Henry swallowed hard and pushed away his half-eaten steak. If his dad really understood, he’d know it was possible to get an education and play the fiddle at night. But he respected him too much to argue any more.

“Yeah, I understand.”

Dad smiled. “Good, now go get your fiddle, and let’s serenade your mother.”

“Maybe tomorrow. It’s New Year’s Eve, and I promised the guys I’d go out with them tonight.”

His mother frowned. “Which guys?”

“Oh, just some fellows from high school. Most of ’em are home from college like me.”

“You be careful. Some of those boys drink.”

“Mom, you know I don’t drink.”

His dad caught his eye and winked at him. “Our son’s a good man, Perla. We can trust him.”

She looked from her husband to her son as she smiled and stood to begin gathering dishes. “Casewell, you always did have a knack for thinking the best of folks, especially the ones you love.”

He caught her wrist and tugged her closer, wrapping an arm around her waist. “Not always, my love, but I learned my lesson.” He kissed her elbow and released her.

Henry was sometimes embarrassed at how affectionate his parents were, but he guessed it might be worse. Some of his buddies’ parents were divorced, and some didn’t even talk to each other. He stood to go find the keys to his dad’s old truck. Yeah, his parents weren’t perfect, but it sure could be worse.

And maybe they didn't have to know about it every time he played at the Screen Door.



Henry woke the next morning with an abruptness that frightened him. Was that a sound? Had someone spoken? He shivered, even though he was snug under two layers of quilts. The sun had begun to color the sky outside his window. He shoved up on one elbow and listened. The house was quiet—too quiet. And too cold. He shivered again, but this time it was the chill air slipping around his shoulders. Dad should be making noise by now, turning up the furnace from its nighttime setting, chatting with his mother while she started breakfast. Maybe they were sleeping in.

Henry swung his bare legs over the side of the bed and pulled on a pair of dungarees, shaking in the cold. He tried to credit his uneasiness to the late night ringing in the New Year—it was 1976 now—and the nip or two of moonshine he'd sampled. He didn't much like alcohol, but it would have been unsociable to abstain completely.

He grabbed a sweatshirt with the name of his school emblazoned across it—West Virginia University. He'd need to head back in the next day or two. He'd begin the second half of his junior year on the seventh, but he had until the final day of break to turn in his paper on Soil Genesis and Classification. Man, who wouldn't prefer playing the fiddle to that? Just thinking about it made him want to crawl back under the covers, but the silence of the house was too much. He finished dressing and headed for the kitchen.

Mom sat at the table, her robe wrapped around her, bare feet tucked under her chair. Her feet looked almost blue. Confused, Henry laid a hand on her shoulder. She jumped up, sending her chair clattering to the floor. For a moment, Henry thought she was going to hit him.

“I’ve already called Al Tomlyn. He’ll send someone shortly. I knew I should wake you, but I didn’t know . . .” She glanced down at her tightly cinched robe. “I’d better put some clothes on.” She shot a look at the bedroom door, and her face crumpled.

“Mom, what’s going on?” His stomach churned, and it felt like his heart was trying to keep up with his speeding thoughts. “Why did you call the funeral home? Who died?” As the last word fell from his lips, the earlier feeling of disorientation closed over Henry like jumping into the swimming hole on a hot day. And he thought he might drown.

Turning toward the door to his parents’ room, Henry took a tentative step. His mother grabbed his arm. “I can’t go in there,” she said.

“Can I?” Henry wasn’t sure if he was asking his mother or himself. He took another step, and Mom released his arm. She tightened the belt to her robe, as though tying a tourniquet to stop—what? The pain?

Henry pushed open the bedroom door. His father lay in the bed, blankets tucked beneath his arms, hands folded neatly on his chest. For a moment, Henry breathed again, and then the wrongness of the scene penetrated his thick brain. His father would never sleep like that. Dad would never stay in bed past six in the morning. Henry glanced at the clock on the bedside table, and his shoulders sagged when he saw it was twenty after six. As if everything would be all right if it were only five fifty-five.

“Dad?” Henry’s voice squeaked. He cleared his throat. “Dad, time to get up.” He moved the last few feet to the bed and gently shook his father’s shoulder. The icy dread that roiled his stomach earlier gripped his heart. He laid two fingers on his father’s throat and felt his own pulse slow, as though trying to match what he was feeling—nothing. Nothing at all.

Mom stood in the doorway, watching dry-eyed. “Son, the men from Tomlyn’s are here. Can you . . . ?”



Margaret Hoffman bustled around Emily’s house, tidying things and making sure every surface gleamed. It wasn’t only to please her sweet employer; it was because every woman in the community—including Margaret’s own mother—would traipse through here just hoping to catch a speck of dust, an unmade bed, or a dirty dishrag. Emily was easy to please. It was the rest of the world that gave Margaret a hard time.

She sighed and put the last of the breakfast dishes away. News traveled fast, especially when it was as sad as Casewell Phillips dying in his sleep. And as soon as the ladies of Wise could throw together a casserole or a cake, they’d be knocking on the door with their condolences. Poor Emily. Margaret couldn’t think of anything harder than losing a child, no matter if he was six or fifty-six. She squared her shoulders. Well, she’d been working for Emily since she was sixteen—five years now—and if there was anything she could do to be a comfort, she would be more than glad.

“Margaret?” Emily walked into the kitchen, bracing herself against the backs of chairs like an old woman. She was nearly eighty, but she’d always behaved as though she were much younger.

“Yes, ma’am? Do you need something?”

“I do. Somehow I’m not sure how to dress for . . . this.” She waved a hand vaguely in the air. “People will start coming any minute. Won’t they?” She turned wet eyes on Margaret, as though she had the power to change things.

“Yes, ma’am, I expect they will. The house is about as ready as I can make it. Now, let’s see about getting you dressed in something nice.”

Margaret hooked her arm through Emily's and led her to the bedroom. She sifted through Emily's closet, finally pulling out a plaid skirt and a simple blouse. "I think this will be about right. You can wear one of your sweaters over it. I don't think it's supposed to warm up much today."

"Oh, thank you, sweetheart. I'm not normally at sixes and sevens like this. But you know that. Don't you?"

"Oh yes. It's not like you to be unsure of yourself." And it wasn't, thought Margaret, but losing a child so suddenly would set anyone off. They didn't even know when Casewell died exactly. Was it in 1975? Or 1976? What would they put on the tombstone?

A knock on the back door, followed by the squawk of worn hinges, interrupted her musing. She'd been meaning to oil that door.

"Must be family," Margaret said. "I'll go tend to it while you finish dressing."

Emily nodded and rummaged through the drawer where she kept her underthings. For a slip, Margaret hoped. Emily would be mortified if she forgot a slip in her present state of mind. But she'd likely be even more mortified if Margaret hovered over her like a child.

Closing the bedroom door, Margaret walked into the family room and found Henry standing with his head down and shoulders slumped. She'd heard he was in from college but hadn't seen him. Normally, she wouldn't be seeing him now. Emily always insisted on doing for herself over holidays so Margaret could be with her family. Not that she much enjoyed being with her family, except, of course, with Mayfair. Her sweet little sister was always a bright spot.

"Hey, uh, Margaret? Right?" Henry straightened up a bit.

Margaret nodded. "Your grandmother is getting dressed. She's a little fuddled this morning."

"We all are," Henry said, and for just a moment Margaret

caught a glimpse of anguish, but then his face shuttered closed again. “Mom thought I should bring Grandma over to the house. Make it easier on everyone.”

“That’s sensible,” Margaret said. She wondered if she should go on home but felt a surge of desire to be a help to the Phillipses’ family. “I could stay here and send anyone who stops by on over to your place.”

Henry’s brown eyes warmed, and he almost smiled. “That’d be great. Thank you.”

They stood staring at each other, and Margaret became aware of how she must look. She’d thrown on a worn blouse over green polyester slacks when Emily called early that morning. She knew she’d need to tidy the house so selected something shabby. Now she almost wished . . . But why? To impress a college boy who had been a year behind her in school? He wasn’t likely to notice her even on a good day, at least not for the right reasons. She had a round face absolutely covered in freckles, and a figure her father indelicately referred to as “good for childbearing.” Plus, her hair tended to frizz. None of which would impress the tall man in front of her with his wavy chestnut hair and broad shoulders. He scuffed one foot on the rag rug, and Margaret jumped.

“I’ll go check on Emily.”

Henry nodded and focused on a picture of his family that was sitting on the mantel. Margaret followed his gaze. The photo showed his parents with Henry and his sister Sadie on either side. Casewell looked like he’d been pleased with the world on that particular day. Margaret hoped he’d felt the same right up until he went to sleep the night before.



After the funeral, Margaret tried to get her parents to take Mayfair home instead of subjecting her to the crush of mourners at the Phillipses’ house, but they wouldn’t hear of it.

“She needs to be exposed to crowds like this,” Margaret’s mother said.

Her father nodded as his lips tugged down. “She’s twelve now. We can’t treat her like a child forever.”

Margaret sighed. No wonder it was hard for her to think of these people as Mom and Dad. Wallace and Lenore Hoffman were typically more concerned about appearances than they were the well-being of their children. Mayfair would retreat into her books for a week after being forced into a social situation like this. She could manage sitting in church between her mother and older sister, but circulating in a house full of people would be too much. Why couldn’t her parents see that?

Mayfair’s shoulder touched Margaret’s as they got out of the car and walked toward the house. An impromptu parking lot had been created in a nearby pasture, and Lenore picked her way through the grass like she expected to encounter cow manure at any moment. Wallace tried to take his wife’s elbow, but she shot him a look and jerked her chin in the air. Margaret wondered what they were fighting about now.

“There are too many people,” Mayfair whispered.

“I know, sweetie.” Margaret tucked her sister’s hand into her own and pulled her tight against her side. “Maybe we can find a quiet spot for you to read. Did you bring a book?”

Mayfair reached into the patch pocket of her skirt and pulled out a well-worn copy of *Anne of Green Gables*.

“Good for you, coming prepared.” Margaret’s praise raised a timid smile. “Just remember, the angels are holding hands all around you. Nothing can hurt you while they’re here.”

Mayfair gave a jerky nod and turned her head so she could watch the people entering the house through her peripheral vision. Margaret ached for her sister, wishing she could make life easier for her. Who knew? Maybe there really were angels, although she doubted it. She reached into her purse and felt

for the handful of hard candies she always carried. If Mayfair's sugar dropped too low, she'd need something fast, and Margaret prided herself on always being prepared.



Henry ducked his head and aimed for the front door. He'd had enough of hearing about what a wonderful man his father was, how he was with Jesus now, and how he'd had a weak heart ever since he was born and was lucky to have lived this long. If anyone knew how great Casewell Phillips was, it was Henry. Someone even commented to his mother that it had been a blessing for Dad to die in his sleep. That was when Henry's hands balled into fists, and his heart began to beat a drum in his head. It was leave or hit someone, and he didn't want to disgrace his mother. Although he was getting closer and closer to not caring.

Bursting through the screen door, Henry nearly collided with two women scrunched together there. He started to push past them and then recognized Margaret, the girl who worked for his grandmother.

"I suppose you've come to spout platitudes like everybody else," he said. "Well, save it."

Margaret's cheeks turned scarlet, and she put an arm around the shoulders of someone he realized was little more than a girl. "That's pretty fancy vocabulary for somebody without any manners. Guess you learn big words like that in college."

He stopped short. There had been no call for his outburst, but he was too ashamed to back down. Instead, he continued the attack. "You have to be pretty smart to get into college in the first place. Let's see, which school did you go to?"

Margaret leaned in so her heavily freckled nose was inches away. "I'm going to assume that grief is making you act out of character. Now, you can either go on, or you can help me

find a safe place for Mayfair while I check to see if your family needs anything.”

Henry opened his mouth to tell her where she could go when his eyes met the girl’s. They were more gold than brown and something about them stopped up his words. He felt a sudden deep longing, though he wasn’t sure for what—his father, he supposed. Dad would never treat guests like this. Tears pricked his eyes and the beating of his angry heart slowed, as though matching some rhythm outside him. And all at once he wanted—more than anything—to make this girl happy.

“What do you mean, ‘a safe place’?”

“Mayfair’s kind of shy around people. I was hoping I could tuck her somewhere out of the way until it’s time to go home.”

“Dad’s workshop.” Henry spoke without thinking. He hadn’t been in the shop since the last time he was home at Thanksgiving. He didn’t really want to go there now, the memories would be too close, but the desire to help Mayfair outweighed his misgivings.

He led the two girls to the shop and pushed open the door. It was heavy, but the hinges were well-oiled. Dad would never leave it any other way. He wondered what would happen to the tools and supplies now that his father was gone but quickly shifted his thoughts back to Margaret and Mayfair.

A small potbellied stove sat in the center of the room with two chairs pulled up to it. Dad always said it was practical to use the waste from his labors to heat his workshop. Henry opened the little door and found a fire already laid. By his father, no doubt. He choked on sorrow, not sure he could do this. Not sure he could set fire to something his father had touched only a few days ago.

Mayfair brushed his hand, and he felt the warmth from her fingers. “I’m not cold.” Her voice was quiet but had a clarity that was almost musical. He wondered if she could sing.

He leaned toward her and smiled. “Dad would have my hide if I didn’t make his workshop comfortable for guests.” He looked back into the grate. “He laid that fire for you. The least you can do is enjoy it.”

His hand shook as he lit a long match and held it to the crumpled paper under the kindling. Mayfair touched his elbow, and the shaking stopped. Flames started to consume the paper and wood. He reached into a box and added some larger pieces of scrap lumber.

“You’ll be fine here,” he said. “I don’t think anyone will bother you.”

Mayfair smiled and slid onto one of the wooden chairs. She pulled a book from her pocket and was immediately absorbed. He saw Margaret tuck a piece of candy into her sister’s palm.

“Only if you need it,” she said.

Henry walked Margaret back toward the house.

“I thought you were leaving,” Margaret said in a way that made him think she was still stinging from his earlier greeting.

“I was, but I’m over it now. I guess people mean well.” He looked toward the house and the steady stream of people coming and going. “Dad would expect me to stay.”

“Parents expect a lot of their children,” Margaret said, her lip curling back.

“Do your parents expect a lot of you or Mayfair?”

Margaret shot him a look that he couldn’t read. “Both, I guess.”

“I like your sister.”

Margaret finally relaxed and shoved her hands in the pockets of her jacket. “So do I.”

Henry noticed she was wearing a skirt with knee-high socks and brown shoes. He wondered if her legs were cold. He opened the front door for Margaret and earned a small smile. Man, she even had freckles on her lips.