

SCENT  
*of*  
LILACS

*a novel*

ANN H. GABHART



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*To my mother,  
who has always believed.*





Some days David Brooke didn't know whether to count his blessings or to hide from them.

He'd come home early from the newspaper office, since June was settling into the summer of 1964 like an old hen spreading out her wings and plopping down in a puddle of dust for a good rest. The Hollyhill schools were out till September, so there weren't any PTA open houses or 4-H Club award meetings to cover. The biggest story he'd been able to dig up for this week's issue was Omer Carlton's Holstein cow having twins, and he'd already been out to take pictures of Omer's little girl Cindy bottle-feeding the black-and-white calves. He'd told Wes to blow up the picture and put it on the front page. Baby animals and a freckle-faced kid ought to move a few dozen extra papers off the store counters this week.

Sometimes it might be nice, or at least interesting, to have some real news to fill up the pages of the *Hollyhill Banner*, but real news often as not meant something bad happening. So dull and peaceful could be a blessing. For one thing, not having to

put in a full Saturday at the newspaper gave him extra time to work on his sermon for Sunday. And he needed to have a good one tomorrow for the Mt. Pleasant Church if he had any hope of them voting him in as interim pastor.

After all, preaching was his first calling. The paper was just a sideline to put meat on the table. He didn't have to worry about the vegetables this time of the year, when everybody and his brother was anxious to give away beans, zucchini, and cabbage, much to Jocie's distress.

"Why can't they have an overabundance of strawberries or raspberries?" she'd asked last night when faced with yet another bowl of stewed cabbage.

"In everything give thanks," Aunt Love had told Jocie. "Some children don't have enough to eat."

David had held his breath waiting for the explosion, but Jocie had just mumbled, "I could be just as thankful for strawberries."

Jocie was thirteen, barely out of babyhood to David but almost grown to Jocie. Aunt Love was seventy-eight, one foot in the grave to Jocie and of an age to demand respect to David. Jocie and Aunt Love coexisted under a David-negotiated truce most of the time. It didn't help matters that Aunt Love had been misplacing more and more of her mind lately, but she never had any problem pulling out appropriate Bible verses to attempt to whip Jocie into line.

It hadn't changed Jocie's behavior much, but it had improved her Bible study, since she kept trying to prove Aunt Love was making up some of the verses. So far Jocie hadn't caught Aunt Love in anything worse than "Cleanliness is next to godliness," and Aunt Love said she'd never claimed that was in the Bible but that plenty of folks might agree it should be.

But now from the shouts—or, dear God, surely that wasn't howls—beating their way over the sound of the oscillating fan ruffling the papers on the desk in the corner of his bedroom, it sounded as if the truce had ended and active warfare had

broken out. David read one more verse from his Bible just in case it might offer a bit of inspirational help before he pushed back from his desk. “Happy is the man that findeth wisdom.” Even King Solomon couldn’t make Jocie and Aunt Love see eye to eye.

By the time David got to the bottom of the stairs, the war had escalated. Aunt Love was quoting Scripture in a string. Her cat, Sugar, was screeching. Jocie was shouting over the sound of barking. Great, tremendous barks barreled through the screen door and bounced off the wall behind David.

David’s spirits sank lower. They didn’t have a dog. Jocie had been throwing in a “Please, Lord, send me a dog” when she said grace before supper, but David had been hoping the Lord would just hear the “Thank you for our food” and skip over the dog part.

Not because he minded having a dog around the place. He liked dogs, but he could still see Jocie’s face after their last dog had run out in front of a car. Jocie had stopped eating, stopped talking, stopped smiling for way too long. David knew it wasn’t just Stumpy getting killed that had pierced her heart. The dog had died just over a month after Adrienne had taken Tabitha and disappeared into the night.

How long ago was that now? It always amazed him that he had to think about it. Surely he’d know to the day, hour, and minute how long ago his wife had driven away from Hollyhill and him. He shouldn’t have been surprised. She’d warned him plenty of times. But he had been surprised. Worse than surprised. Shocked. Devastated. Lost. Injured. All that and more. Some things couldn’t be described with words. Those kinds of things clunked you right in the heart and sent you reeling.

And worse, she’d taken Tabitha. Tabitha, who had still been sleeping with a teddy bear by night and begging him to wear lipstick by day. He still didn’t know why Adrienne had taken her. A parting shot perhaps. A way to make sure the wound of

her destroying their family had no chance of healing. A man might get over losing a wife but never losing a daughter.

How long? Tabitha had been thirteen, and Jocie was thirteen now. Seven years. Tabitha would be turning twenty on her birthday next month. He wondered if she would have a cake. Tabitha used to love to blow out the candles and make wishes. She always said why just one wish? Why not as many wishes as candles? He should have gone after her so he could make sure she had cakes.

David shoved the memories aside and stepped out on the porch. “What in the name of Methuselah is going on out here?”





Jocie found the dog over in Johnson Woods. The woods had been owned by Jocie's grandparents before her grandfather died, and Jocie figured that ought to give her walking-on privileges without having to ask anybody's permission. She just hid her bike behind some yellowwood bushes and disappeared into the trees. She'd walked there so much that she felt as if the woods were hers, something her grandfather had passed down to her, even if he had died before she was born.

It was a great place. Huge maple and oak and hickory trees. Ferns and wildflowers. Tarzan grapevines. Devil's puffballs. Wild raspberries and blackberries. Birds and squirrels. She kept a journal of the things she found there. But she'd never found a dog until today.

Or she supposed it was more accurate—and her father said it was always good to strive for accuracy in any story—to say the dog found her. He just appeared behind her as she was heading back to the road to get her bike. She'd heard rustling noises among the trees while she'd been walking, but there were always

birds in the bushes or rabbits and chipmunks scurrying for cover. And once she'd scared up a deer. The first one she'd ever seen. Her father had said she should have been carrying her camera, that a picture of a real live deer in Holly County would have been front page news. Even without the picture, he'd published an article about how the wildlife agencies were bringing in deer from out west in an attempt to repopulate the area.

She stopped. The dog stopped. She looked at the dog. The dog sat down and looked at her. He didn't wag his tail. He pulled his tongue in, closed his mouth, and cocked his head to the side as if he needed to listen closely to what she might have to say.

"You need to go on home, dog." She didn't say it real loud, but she did say it. She even shooed him away with her hands. "Now, go on. Get on home."

The dog stood up and walked right up to her. He was some kind of shepherd beagle mix. Not a particularly good combination. One ear poked up straight and the other drooped over. His nose was too long, and his coat was the gray-purple color of watercolor-paint water with a few darker splotches here and there that could be dirt. She smiled at the way just the tip of his tail clicked back and forth in a cocky little wag. He didn't care if he was ugly. He was a dog, and a dog needed a person. His brown-black eyes said Jocie was it.

"I told you to go on home," Jocie said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The dog picked up a paw and held it out toward her. Jocie had been told a thousand times not to pet strange dogs. She had a couple of scars to prove it was good advice, and her Aunt Love was always going on about rabies. But this dog didn't have any foam around his mouth. He just wanted to shake hands.

The hair on his head was spiky and rough, but his ears were silky soft. The rest of his tail joined in with the tip as it flapped back and forth when she scratched him under the chin. "What's your name, dog?" Jocie asked.

The dog didn't have a collar and no sign he'd ever worn a collar. His ribs were poking out on both sides as if it had been a while since his last meal. Maybe he didn't have a home, and hadn't she been praying for a dog for about a year now? Aunt Love was always saying God answered prayers in his own time. Did she dare hope this was God's time? That he'd plucked her dog prayer out of the great sea of prayers offered up to him every day as the one to answer? That thought made Jocie feel a little guilty, since she knew a lot of those prayers were for sick people getting well or lost people getting saved. Still, she'd never read anything in the Bible that said you couldn't pray for a dog.

"It was nice meeting you, dog," Jocie said, determined to make the dog do the deciding about following her home. "But now I've got to go home, and you've got to go home, okay?"

The dog sat down and swept the grass behind him with his tail. He stared straight at her, pulled his tongue inside his mouth, and bared his teeth in a doggy grin.

Jocie couldn't keep from laughing. "You are without a doubt the ugliest dog I've ever seen, but I didn't tell God I wanted a pretty dog or even a cute dog. Just a dog, and you are a dog." Jocie stared at him. "I think."

The dog stood up and trotted ahead of her. For a minute Jocie was afraid he'd just remembered where home was, but then he stopped and sat down beside her bike as if to say, "Let's get on with it. It's going on supper time."

Jocie didn't try to chase him off after that. She didn't try to get him to follow her either. She had that line practiced out for her father. She got on her bike and started pedaling. She didn't look back even once to see if the dog was following. It was a test. Like Gideon and the wool with dew on it or not on it to prove God really was talking to him in the Bible. She decided if she got to the barn this side of the house and looked back and the dog was still there, then he was hers. She really wanted to look back when she passed by the Wilsons' house, but she

kept her eyes on the road in front of her. It would be cheating to look back before she got to the barn.

Just in case the dog was still chasing after her bike, she began making up reasons they needed a dog. He could be a watchdog to let them know when people were coming. Maybe in time to lock the gate if the people were carrying sacks of zucchini or cabbage. Her dad could try out his sermons on the dog instead of on Jocie. Taking care of a dog would teach her responsibility, since she'd have to feed him and brush him and stuff. That should please even Aunt Love—the more responsible part. The dog could be somebody she could talk to who wouldn't come up with Bible verses for answers. Aunt Love had to have the whole Bible memorized. No wonder she couldn't remember to turn off the soup anymore. All the Scripture she had stored up there in her head didn't leave any room for anything else.

Jocie didn't come up with a name for the dog until she slid off her bike in front of the porch and the dog started barking at Jezebel. Great tremendous barks. Thunderous barks. Zebedee.

“Zebedee,” she yelled. The dog quit barking long enough to look over at her and give her that stupid doggy grin again. More reasons she could add to why they had to keep him. He had a name. And how could you not keep a dog who kept grinning at you?

Jezebel jumped up on the porch railing and yowled. Aunt Love came outside and grabbed the broom they kept by the door to sweep stray leaves off the porch. She waved it menacingly at Zebedee. “Get that mangy excuse for a dog away from Sugar.”

Aunt Love called Jezebel Sugar, but in spite of the fact that Jezebel's fur was white like sugar, there was nothing sweet about her. Her cat heart was black. Definitely a Jezebel. She lived to pounce out of the shadows at Jocie's ankles at the top of the stairs. Her bed of choice was Jocie's favorite navy blue shirt. She threw up hairballs in the middle of Jocie's bed. Worst of all, if Jocie ever had a weak moment and tried to make friends, Jizzie would

pretend to want Jocie to rub her before swiping at Jocie's hand as soon as it was close enough. The cat never pulled in her claws.

So when Jocie yelled at Zebedee again, it wasn't to save the cat. It was to save the dog. But it was too late. Still barking, Zebedee put his front paws on the railing under the cat and got too close. Jezebel landed a quick swipe across the dog's nose. Beads of blood popped out.

Jocie winced and grabbed for the dog at the same moment that Aunt Love swung the broom. Jocie got a face full of broom straw and landed in the striped grass beside the steps. She tried to pull the dog with her, but Zebedee wriggled free and ran back over to the railing under the cat, who was swishing her tail and licking her paws in victory.

The front door opened, and Jocie's dad stepped out on the porch to join in the fray. He yelled something, and Aunt Love quit swinging the broom and leaned on its handle as she clutched her chest. Jocie wasn't worried. Aunt Love clutched her chest a lot.

Jocie scrambled out of the striped grass and went after Zebedee again. The dog had quit barking. Instead, he was studying Jezebel with the same assessing look he'd given Jocie out in the woods, but his tail was as still as a stone. When Jocie started to grab for the dog, Zebedee turned his bloody nose toward her and slid his lips back in another grin as if to say, "Let me take care of this."

Jocie froze in midgrab.

The dog turned back to the cat, let out one thunderous bark that made the porch windows rattle, leaped straight up like a kangaroo, and popped Jezebel with his nose. Jezebel went flying off the rail and barely had time to get her feet under her before she splattered on the wooden porch.

Aunt Love turned loose of her chest and threw the broom at the dog. The dog jumped nimbly out of the way, then sniffed the broom before he trotted over to Jocie. Jezebel, her belly brushing the porch, slunk to the door, where Aunt Love scooped her up

and disappeared inside with a muttered, “That mongrel digs up the first flower, I’ll shoot him myself.”

Jocie pulled Zebedee out of the flower bed next to the porch and stared him straight in the eye. “Bad dog,” she said.

“Try not smiling while you say it,” her father said as he sank down on the porch steps. He looked up a moment as if he were checking the sky for some kind of message from God. Then he looked back at the dog and said, “Okay, let’s hear it.”

“His name’s Zebedee.”

“He told you that, I guess.”

“No, of course not. He can’t talk. At least he hasn’t yet, but you heard him barking. Definitely thunderous. You know, your sermon about James and John last month.”

“Ah, sons of thunder.”

“Zebedee. Zeb for short.”

“Hold on. Let’s not get carried away,” her father said as he stared at the dog, who sat in front of him politely listening to every word. “He may belong to somebody else.”

Jocie stroked the dog’s head. “Does he look like he belongs to anybody?”

“No, he looks like the kind of dog nobody would want.”

“He’ll look better after I give him a bath and some food.” At the word *food*, Zeb wagged his tail. “He may not be very pretty, but he’s real smart. You saw how he handled Jezebel.”

“The cat’s name is Sugar,” her father said.

“You call her what you want to, and I’ll call her what she is,” Jocie said. “I mean, Jezzie’s pretty, but who cares about pretty? Smart’s better.”

Her father laughed, and Jocie knew she had him. But just to be sure, she threw out some of her practiced reasons to keep the dog. Zebedee used some of his brains and held his paw out to her father.

“You’re always saying the Bible says to ask, and I’ve been asking. So maybe God sent him to me,” Jocie said.



That night at supper, David tried to summon up a thankful heart to add to Jocie's as she said grace. The Bible taught to be thankful in all things, and he supposed that could apply to what was surely the ugliest stray dog in the county, maybe the state. The dog had latched onto Jocie as if she'd raised him from a pup instead of just finding him in the woods a few hours ago. Even now he had his nose up against the screen on the back door, his eyes locked on Jocie and his ears cocked almost as if he knew what she was saying. David wouldn't have been surprised to hear an amen woof.

Jocie asked the usual blessings on the food before saying, "Thank you, Lord, for Zebedee. I'd begun to worry you didn't mean for me to have a dog, but Aunt Love says the Bible says to keep asking, so that's what I did. And I thank you that you let Zebedee find me."

David heard Aunt Love pull in a little puff of breath and knew her heart wasn't feeling a bit thankful. She'd hardly been able

to put supper on the table for worrying about her cat. After the confrontation on the porch, Sugar had ensconced herself on the top shelf of the bookcase in the living room and had snarled at anyone who came close, even Aunt Love.

Jocie was still praying. "I promise to take good care of him. And, Lord, please give Daddy a good message for the people at Mt. Pleasant in the morning, and watch over Tabitha wherever she is. Amen."

"Amen," David repeated after her.

Aunt Love unfolded her napkin and spread it across her lap. No amen passed her lips. Aunt Love had been living with them ever since his mother had died four years ago—another time Jocie had been on the front lines for heartbreak. One late fall day he'd come home from the paper to find Jocie sitting beside his mother's body in the freshly dug tulip bed. Tears were making dirty tracks down Jocie's cheeks and dropping on her grandmother's hands.

David had dropped down beside them in the dirt and cried like a baby. That had scared Jocie more than finding her grandmother dead among the tulip bulbs, but he couldn't help it. He'd felt as if God had reached down and poked him right in the nose to see if he could get up off the ground one more time. And he'd wanted to stay down.

Jocie had hugged and patted him, but that had made him wail louder. Finally she'd jumped on her bike and pedaled the two miles to town to get Wes out of the pressroom. Wes, who had never darkened the door of a Hollyhill church in the ten years he'd known him, had gotten David back on his feet that night before darkness fell over the farm and his soul.

Wes had listened to his story and then said, "It ain't God knocking you down, son. It's life. God's right here beside us, taking hold of your hand to pull you up." Wes had leaned down close to his face and almost whispered, "You take a look at this child here and tell me that ain't so."



David had listened to Wes, because if anybody knew about life knocking a person flat, it was Wes. David had let Wes and Jocie pull him up and had gone about doing what had to be done. By the time the funeral was over three days later, he'd even been able to tell Jocie God must have needed help with the tulip planting in heaven.

But they'd needed help too. At the time, he'd thought Aunt Love would be able to step in where his mother had stepped out and help him make a home for Jocie. But Aunt Love had never had children, never been married. Sometimes he wondered if she could even remember being a child. She could cook, or at least she had been able to when she first came to live with them. Now she tended to let things burn or to forget whether she'd already added salt to the stew. Still, he didn't regret giving her a home. She'd needed a place, and they'd needed family.

Aunt Love smoothed down the lace collar on her dark purple dress and passed David the new potatoes boiled in their skins, a gift from Matt McDermott, one of the deacons at Mt. Pleasant. He figured he had the McDermott family's vote on the interim job even before they heard his sermon in the morning. Last week they had brought him cabbage and broccoli. He wondered when their tomatoes would start getting ripe. Even Jocie liked tomatoes.

"What are you preaching on tomorrow morning?" Aunt Love asked him.

"The Lord hasn't laid a sure message on my heart as yet."

"Well, don't you think it's high time he did? The vote's tomorrow night."

"I'm not worrying about the vote." David felt guilty as the lie passed his lips, so he added, "Well, not overly much anyway. If the Lord wants me to serve there, he'll give me the vote."

"If they had any sense, they'd offer you the job full-time," Aunt Love said.

Jocie looked up from her potatoes. "Why don't they call you as their regular pastor, Daddy? I hear them telling you they like

your sermon on the way out every week. That must mean they like you.”

David put his fork down. “Church people think they have to say that to preachers. Even when they sleep through the sermon. But even if they really do like my sermons, there’s more to leading a church than preaching, Jocie.”

“You mean visiting the sick and keeping folks from fussing? You do all that too.” Jocie spooned three or four potatoes out on her plate. “Except, of course, at Brown’s Chapel, and nobody could have made those people happy.”

“That’s God’s own truth,” Aunt Love muttered. “Those people would fight over what color the pulpit Bible should be.”

“They had some issues to deal with,” David said with a smile.

“When anybody with any sense knows it should be black,” Aunt Love went on. “But why don’t you tell the child the truth? The reason they won’t ask you full-time is because of Adrienne.”

“Mother?” Jocie said. “What’s she got to do with Dad preaching? She’s been gone forever.”

“Baptists like their preachers to be married,” Aunt Love said. “Catholics won’t let their men of the cloth marry, but Baptists figure they need a preacher’s wife to cook for church dinners, teach Sunday school, call people, whatever needs doing that the preacher can’t get done.”

David stared at the potatoes in the middle of a little pool of butter on his plate. He wished Aunt Love hadn’t brought up Adrienne, but that was another thing about Aunt Love. She never sugarcoated anything. He decided to be as honest. “Not having a wife isn’t exactly the problem. Once having a wife and then not having her anymore is. I’m lucky any of the churches in the county ever let me stand behind their pulpits.”

“Luck has nothing to do with it,” Aunt Love said. “You’re a fine preacher. The best I ever heard, and I’ve heard plenty.”

“And how many would that be?” David asked, trying to shift the talk away from wives, or the lack of them.

“Way more than I could put a name to.”

“I’ll bet you could count the Sundays you’ve missed church on one hand.” David began eating his potatoes.

“Actually, it would take quite a few hands,” Aunt Love said. “When I was a child, we generally had to share a preacher with another congregation, so sometimes we didn’t have services every Sunday, unless my father, who was strong on church attendance, led the services when the preacher couldn’t be there.” Aunt Love frowned a little as she added, “He was a very religious man.”

“Mother always said he should have been a preacher. That maybe that’s where I got my calling.”

“Nonsense,” Aunt Love said sharply. “Your calling came from God. Father never had any kind of calling. He just liked to expound on the Scriptures.”

“He knew the Bible well.”

“So do I, but that doesn’t make me a preacher,” Aunt Love said.

*Clear*

Jocie’s head came up at that remark, but her father gave her a look that made her clamp her lips shut. She couldn’t take a chance on getting in trouble until Zeb was a permanent member of the family. Besides, she wasn’t all that interested in how much Aunt Love had gone to church anyway. It was obvious she’d gone way too much. And here Jocie was following right in her footsteps, but most of the time she didn’t mind.

Church wasn’t so bad. The pews got hard sometimes, but she liked the singing and the Bible stories. Miss McMurtry, who taught the intermediate Sunday school class at Mt. Pleasant, was nice enough. She was always giving them chewing gum to give their mouths something to do besides yawn.

Of course, going off to church tomorrow might be hard, what with having to leave Zeb and not being sure if he’d still be on

the porch when they finally got to come home after the night service. They always went to somebody's house for Sunday dinner after the morning service. Jocie hoped they had something besides cabbage ready in their garden. Even peas might taste good after all the cabbage.

Then her father would have to go work the church field in the afternoon. Pastors, even the fill-in kind, had to pray over sick church members. It was expected. She wouldn't have a chance of talking her dad out of doing the visits this week. Not with the vote looming. Maybe she could pretend to be sick in the morning, but she'd have to be really throwing up before Aunt Love would fall for that. Maybe she could lock Zeb in the garage while they were gone.

Jocie dipped a couple more potatoes out of the bowl and wondered if she could smuggle them out to Zeb. Aunt Love would never notice. She was still wandering around in the past as she said, "But I can't claim to having gone to church every time the doors were open. Fact is, there was a time I fell away completely, thought I might never pass through a church door again."

"That's hard to believe," David said. "Are you telling us you were a rebellious teenager?"

"I was well past my teen years." Aunt Love pushed her still full plate of food away from her. "A lot of bad things were happening. The First World War. Mother was sick and then passed on. It was a dry year, and the crops just withered in the field. Our old workhorse went lame. Other things. Just didn't have the heart to go to church."

"Did Grandfather quit going too?" David asked.

"Oh, no. Father went." Aunt Love got up from the table and went into the living room to stand at the shelves full of pictures and books. This time the cat gingerly climbed down low enough for Aunt Love to scoop her up. Aunt Love carried the cat down the hall into her room and shut the door.

Jocie looked at her father. “You think she’s still that upset about something that happened fifty years ago?”

“It appears so.”

“Then she’ll never get over Zeb punching Jezzie.”

“I don’t think Zeb and Jez—I mean Sugar—fighting can compare to the times she’s remembering. Your Mama Mae told me one of their brothers died in World War I. That may have been what she was thinking about.”

“I guess people never get over losing somebody in their family.” Jocie’s eyes strayed to a picture of her mother and Tabitha on top of the old upright piano in the living room, but she didn’t let her gaze linger there. She felt disloyal to her father when she let herself think about her mother, so she quickly said, “I still miss Mama Mae.”

“Of course you do.” David’s eyes were steady on Jocie. “The same as you miss your mother and Tabitha.”

“But they wanted to leave. That’s different than Mama Mae. She would have asked God to let her stay with us a few more years like he did Hezekiah in the Bible if she’d had the chance.”

“You could be right,” David said.

“She probably would even know how to cheer up Aunt Love.”

“You might be able to do that yourself.”

“Me?” Jocie said. And then she grinned. “Well, I could let Zeb in so she could yell at me and think up some Bible verses. Do you think there’s anything in there about dogs? Oh no.” Jocie’s eyes got big. “What if she remembers about God telling Jezebel the dogs would lick up her blood?”

David laughed. “I think you’re safe there. Her cat’s name is Sugar. Something it might be well for you to remember for a few weeks so that particular passage won’t come to mind.”

“You don’t think God will want you to preach on that tomorrow, do you?”

“No. I’m leaning toward Jesus feeding the five thousand.”

“Oh, that’s good. That should be a vote getter.”

“I’m not running for preacher, Jocie.”

“Same thing as. You have to get the votes.”

“Well, we can hope for divine guidance rather than politics when the votes are cast.”

“I don’t get to vote, do I?”

“Of course not. You’re not a member of Mt. Pleasant Church.”

“But I am a member of the church, and if they call you there, we’ll be changing our memberships, won’t we? I could change it tomorrow morning and slip in under the wire in time to vote.”

“You don’t get to vote.” David took hold of Jocie’s arm as she began gathering up the plates to carry to the sink. “You don’t even get to say anything. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Dad. I know. Nobody wants to hear what a kid thinks.”

Jocie had gotten into trouble at one of the churches where her father had filled in for the regular pastor who’d had the flu. They’d had this meeting and were discussing ways to get young people interested in church. All she’d done was suggest having a dance. And then after the chairman of the deacons had turned beet red and begun sputtering, you’d have thought she’d thrown gasoline on the flames when she pointed out that King David had danced all the way to Jerusalem in front of the ark of the covenant.

Her father pulled her closer and kissed her cheek. “Well, not exactly nobody. I do. You can tell me what you think anytime. If it’s good enough I might even put it in the paper. Or who knows? In a sermon.”

Jocie leaned her head on her father’s shoulder. “How old is Tabitha now, Daddy?”

“She was thirteen when she left.”

“My age.”

“That’s right. Your age. That means she’d be nineteen now. Twenty on her birthday in July.”

“Wouldn’t it be fun if she came home for her birthday this year?”

Her father's arm tightened around her waist as he said, "Maybe we could have a party for her whether she's here or not, and then you could write her about it. I'll bet she'd like that."

"What was her favorite kind of cake?"

"Chocolate. Your grandmother always made her a chocolate cake with chocolate icing and pink and white candles."

"Uh-oh. The last time I made a chocolate cake it turned out like rubber."

"Practice makes perfect."

"We'd better buy a mix," Jocie said. "Maybe you could write to her and tell her about the party. Maybe send her some money. I mean, when you get this preaching job at Mt. Pleasant, we'll have some extra coming in, and we won't have to buy hardly any groceries all summer with the way the people out there like to grow vegetables. She sometimes asks you for money to come home to visit when she writes, doesn't she?"

"But she never comes," her father pointed out. "I think it's just their way of getting a little extra money."

"But you always send the money just in case." Jocie watched her father nod his head. "Has she written lately?"

"Not for months. My last letter came back, so they must have moved again."

"Where was she?"

"Los Angeles the last time she wrote. She had a boyfriend."

"Like Mama."

"I don't want to talk about your mother's boyfriend."

"Sorry." Jocie straightened up and began to stack the dishes again. "What's it like in California? Were you ever there?"

"Once, when I was in the navy headed toward the Philippines. It rained the whole time I was there, but it was warm. They said it was really sunny and nice to the south. The whole place was sort of crazy then with the war and everything. Everybody was in a frenzy thinking the Japanese might invade any day. It was a lot different from here."

“Did you wish you could stay?”

“Never. From the day I went into the navy all I wanted was to get back home. I joined the navy to see the world, but I never saw a place I liked better than here. Of course, most of the time I was down below in a submarine and not seeing much of anything.”

“Do you think Tabitha likes it out there?”

“She said she did when she wrote last time.”

“Wes says it’s still sort of crazy out there. With hippies and everything. Do you think Tabitha’s a hippie?”

“I hope not.”

Her father frowned, and Jocie remembered Wes saying no father would want his daughter to be a hippie. “Still, no matter if she did like it there, she might come for a visit.” Jocie scraped the leftovers out into an old pan. She could see Zeb at the door, his tongue hanging out at the smell of the food. “I mean, I’ve been praying about Tabitha coming home even longer than I’ve been praying for a dog, and the Lord sent Zebedee.”

“We’re not all that sure that Zebedee doesn’t belong to somebody else.”

“I’m sure,” Jocie said. “Do you think I should put him in the garage when we go to church tomorrow?”

“No. If he’s going to be your dog, he’ll stay.”

“But what if he doesn’t?”

“Then we’ll find you another dog if you want one so bad.”

“I don’t want any dog now. I want Zebedee.”

“Then maybe he’ll stay. He’s been sitting at the door waiting for you to get through with supper for about an hour now. Go on and take him for a walk or something.” Her father gave her a little push. “You can wash the dishes later.”