



All for a Song  
A NOVEL

ALLISON  
PITTMAN

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*That which is crooked cannot be made straight:  
and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.*

**ECCLESIASTES 1:15**

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BREATH OF ANGELS NURSING HOME  
OCTOBER 13, 2010—11:56 P.M.

Ma always called it cheating to stay up past midnight.

“Tomorrow don’t come with the dawn,” she’d said. “When that big hand sweeps across the top, it’s past midnight. End of one day, start of the next. It’s like stealing two for the price of the one God gave you.”

In the dark, of course, she can’t see the sweeping hands. But she hears them. Steady, rhythmic ticks coming from the same round-faced clock that once graced the big stone mantel in her parents’ home. One of the only possessions she has from that place. In just a few minutes, she’ll close her eyes and transport herself back there, but for now, she directs stubborn, sleepy attention to the harsh, glaring red numbers on the table next to her pillow.

11:57.

Three more minutes until this day passes into the next.

It’s part of her rhythm, dozing through the evening only to wake up in time to witness the changing of the day. Or at least the first few minutes of it. Cheating not God, but death, living a little longer than anybody imagined possible. As a child, it had been a challenge, sneaking out of bed to gaze at the clock face by the waning light of the fire. These days, it’s less of a game, given how few days must be left.

11:58.

A tune enters her head, filling in the spaces between the ticking of the

clock. The fingers of her right hand, thin and curled in upon themselves, move in listless strumming of silent strings as her left hand contorts to create chords on the neck of an invisible guitar.

*I know not why God's wondrous grace to me he hath made known . . .*

She hears a million voices joining in, her own, clear and strong, above them. Somewhere at the edge of hearing, a less familiar sound pierces the darkness. Tuneless, wordless. The only kind she's made since that blinding light took her voice away.

A soft knock on the door—a mere formality, really. She turns her head.

"Miss Linnie? Everything okay in here?"

She hates that her singing could somehow be mistaken for a cry for help. So she stops and nods, bringing her fingers to stillness at her sides. She looks back at the clock.

11:59.

She hasn't missed it.

"You ought to be asleep by now."

Now soft shoes bring the even softer body of Patricia Betten, RN, to the bedside. She hears every swish of the woman's barrel-like thighs.

"Let me tuck you in, make you a little more comfortable."

She surrenders to Nurse Betten's ministrations, keeping her arms still as those pudgy, purposeful hands smooth the thin sheet and blanket. Yet another blanket is dropped over her feet, anchoring her to the bed with its warmth.

"There, there," the nurse prattles on, obviously quite pleased with her efforts. "Rest up. You've got a big day tomorrow."

12:01.

Nurse Betten's wrong.

The big day's today.

## ❧ CHAPTER ONE ❧

*LATE. Late. Late.*

She could feel both moss and mud caught up between her toes as she ran across the soft carpet of the forest floor. With one hand she clutched her cardboard-covered journal to her heart. The other gripped the neck of the guitar slung across her back. Every few steps, the strings would brush against her swiftly moving hip and elicit an odd, disjointed chord.

It was too dark for shadows, meaning Ma would have supper on the table. Maybe even eaten and taken off again. Bad enough Dorothy Lynn hadn't been home in time to help with the fixing, but to be late to the eating—well, there was no excuse.

The dark outline of her family home stood off in the distance, soft light coming through the windows. And then through the front door, when the familiar silhouette of her mother came forth in shapely shadow.

Dorothy Lynn slowed her steps. Ma always said a lady shouldn't run unless a bear was on her tail. Now, to Dorothy Lynn's surprise, Ma actually came down off the porch and, with quick, striding steps, met her at the edge of the stone footpath that ran from the main road to their front door.



“Dorothy Lynn Dunbar, I promise you are goin’ to make me into an old woman.”

Even in this new darkness, Dorothy Lynn could tell that her mother was far from old—at least by all outward appearances. Her face was smooth like cream, and her hair, the color of butter-scotch, absent even a single strand of gray. She wore it coiled into a swirling bun that nestled in a soft pouf.

“I’m so sorry—”

“Not that you’ve ever been a great deal of use in such things, but even an extra hand to peel potatoes would be nice.”

“So, is he here?”

“Been here for nearly an hour. He’s been entertained, looking through some of your pa’s books, but he’s here to have supper with you, not your mother.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me if he was just here for the books. They served Pa well all his years behind the pulpit.”

Three wide steps led to her home’s front porch. Ma hesitated at the first step and dropped her voice to a whisper. “From the way he talks about you, your pa’s books are the last thing on his mind.” Ma’s face was bathed in light from the eight-pane glass window, her smile as sly as any fox.

Dorothy Lynn brought her face nearly nose-to-nose with her mother’s. “I think you’re crazy. Could be he thinks I’m just a silly girl.”

“A silly, pretty girl. Or one who *would be* pretty, if her hair weren’t scattered out wild as wheat stalks after a windstorm. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he’d be askin’ Pa for your hand most any day. Guess he’ll have to settle for askin’ me.”

Dorothy Lynn clutched her pages tighter, willing herself to match Ma’s excitement. “Well, I’d think if he was going to ask anyone, it’d be me.”

Ma looked instantly intrigued. “Has he?”

Dorothy Lynn lured her closer. “There’s hardly any time between the kissing.”

Shocked but clearly amused, Ma turned and resumed her ascension, her old-fashioned skirts swaying with authority. At the top, she looked back over her shoulder and said, “Leave that,” indicating the guitar.

Without question, Dorothy Lynn wriggled out from the strap and placed the guitar gently on the swing, knowing she’d bring it in before the night was through. Then, as her mother held the screen-covered door wide, she walked inside to take the first step on the smooth, varnished floor.

“So, has our wood sprite returned?”

Brent Logan, looking entirely too comfortable in Pa’s leather chair, glanced up from the thick green tome open on his lap. *A Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. Pa’s favorite.

“She has.” Ma’s voice was at least ten degrees cooler than the temperature outside.

Brent stood, and the minute he did so, all thoughts of Pa sidestepped behind the commanding presence of a man who seemed perfectly at ease in another’s home. He had broad shoulders and thick, strong arms, testifying to a life of good, honest labor. He might have been taken for a local farm boy, but there was a softness to him too. His hair—free of any slick pomade—tufted just above his brows, which at this minute arched in amusement at her disheveled appearance. Were her mother not standing here, Dorothy Lynn knew she would be wrapped in those strong arms—swept up, maybe—and he’d kiss away each smudge. The thought of it made her blush in a way she never would if they were alone.

“Sorry I kept supper waiting,” she said, rather proud of the

flirtatious air she was able to give her words, despite her ragged appearance.

Ma caught her arm, turning her none too gently in the direction of her room. “Why don’t you go wash up, honey-cub, while I get supper on the table?”

Any womanly charm Dorothy Lynn might have been able to muster came crashing down around her at her mother’s singsong tone and that detestable nickname.

“Honestly, Ma,” she said, rolling her eyes straight to Brent, who had the grace to avert his gaze. Instead, he’d wandered over to the fireplace to look at the pictures on the mantel. The largest, in the center, was her brother, Donny, looking more like a boy playing dress-up than a man in uniform, ready to go to war. On each side of Donny were wedding photos: Ma and Pa’s, in which Ma—standing—was only a head or so taller than Pa, who sat tall in a straight-backed chair, and her sister Darlene’s, which featured the same wedding dress worn by the bride, whose new husband stood by her side.

Those in the photographs were long gone. Darlene’s husband was an automobile salesman in St. Louis, and though the battles had ended, Donny had yet to come home after the Great War. *The world is to big*, he’d once written in purposeful, albeit misspelled, block letters on the back of a New York City postcard. *I aim to see what I can.*

On the far end of the mantel, Dorothy Lynn’s high school graduation photo showed her in half profile, gazing into an unknown future.

Brent took her picture off the mantel. “This was last year?”

“Two years ago,” Dorothy Lynn said.

“Do you have any idea what you were thinking about?”

“Not really.” But she did. The photographer had told her to

look just beyond his shoulder and to imagine her future—all the adventures life would hold for a young woman born into this new century—and she'd thought about that single road leading out of Heron's Nest, the one that took her brother and sister off to such exciting lives. Every time she looked at that photograph, she saw that road—except tonight, when she saw her future cradled in Brent Logan's hands.

"It's beautiful," he said, and though he was looking straight at the picture, Dorothy Lynn felt his words wash right over her, straight through the dirt and grime.

"Give me five minutes," she said, eager to be some semblance of that beautiful girl again.



Despite the lateness of the hour, Ma showed no inclination of bringing the evening to an end, and Brent seemed even less eager to leave. The night had turned too cool to sit on the front porch, so the threesome gathered in the front room, where Dorothy Lynn placed a tray laden with dessert and coffee on the table in the center. No sooner had Brent taken a seat on the sofa than Ma stretched and let out an enormous yawn.

"Why, look at the time. Is it nearly nine o'clock already?" She handed a large serving of cobbler to Brent and one half the size to Dorothy Lynn. "Honest folks ought to be in bed by this hour."

"I don't see how time can have any kind of a hold on a person's character," Dorothy Lynn said.

"I think your mother's saying that there's a natural rhythm to life and days."

"That's right," Ma said, shooting him an unabashedly maternal gaze. "The good Lord has them numbered and allotted, and

we ought to rest easy within the hours he gives. I never knew your pa to be up five minutes past ten.”

At the mention of Paul Dunbar, every touch of a fork took on a deafening clamor.

“Three months ago today,” Ma said, marking the anniversary of the day Pa left this world after a short battle with a vicious cancer. She returned her plate to the tray and stood.

“You’re not having any, Ma?”

“Why, I don’t know that I could keep my eyes open long enough to eat a bite. Not that I eat with my eyes.” She laughed—rather nervously. When Dorothy Lynn took her hand, she squeezed it. “No, I think I need to trundle myself off to bed. But don’t let this old lady interfere with your evening. You young folks go on and enjoy yourselves.”

Ma’s voice had climbed into a falsetto rarely heard outside of the Sunday choir, and while any other person might think she was trying to escape into her grief, Dorothy Lynn knew her mother better.

“She misses your father.”

“True, but she has other issues on her mind, like creating an excuse to leave the two of us alone.”

“Subtle.”

“Like a club to the side of your head.”

“Well, then . . .” Brent grinned with enough devilish appeal to shock his congregation and patted the empty sofa cushion next to him. “Seems wrong to let an opportunity like this go to waste.”

“This is not an *opportunity*, Reverend Logan.” She remained perched on the arm of the sofa—not quite out of his reach—and used her fork to toy with the sugary mass on her plate.

“It’s delicious.” He was down to one remaining bite.

“I know. I’ve eaten it all my life.”

“Are you as good a cook as your ma?”

She speared a thin slice of soft, spicy apple and nibbled it before answering. “Nowhere near. But that’s because Ma don’t hardly let me near the stove.”

“You never wanted to learn?”

“I know plenty.” She held her hand out for his empty plate, dropped it along with hers on the tray, and headed for the kitchen.

He followed, as she knew he would.

Ma had left the basin full of soapy water. Dorothy Lynn scraped the uneaten portions into Ma’s blue glass baking dish, then handed the empty plates to Brent, who, having rolled up his sleeves, began washing. Dorothy Lynn leaned back against the table, sipped the flavorful black coffee, and watched.

Theirs had been a proper courtship, fitting for a new, young minister and his predecessor’s daughter. He’d come to Heron’s Nest at the prompting of one of his professors—a lifelong friend of Pastor Dunbar who knew of the older man’s illness long before any of the congregation did. Soon after Brent’s arrival, he and Dorothy Lynn were sitting together at church suppers, walking the path between the church and her home, and taking long Sunday drives in his battered Ford. It was, he said, the only chance he had to drive, given the twisting, narrow roads of Heron’s Nest, but she’d learned the true purpose of such outings when he parked the car in a shady grove ten miles outside of town. Nothing sinful—just some harmless necking—but enough to have set every small-town tongue on fire with gossip had anybody thought to follow them.

Now, watching him in her kitchen, some of those same feelings stirred within her, like so many blossoms set loose in a spring breeze. And yet there was an anchoring deep within, like a root growing straight through her body into the kitchen floor. She’d

never known any home other than this, never seen any man in this room other than her father and her brother. Suddenly, here was Brent, looking completely at ease, like he'd been here all along. Like he'd be here forever. And the thought of both felt inexplicably frightening.

"I don't think I ever saw my pa do dishes." She hoped the introduction of her father would push away some of the thoughts that would have undoubtedly brought about his displeasure.

"He must not have lived many years as a bachelor."

"Guess not."

She drained her coffee and handed him the empty cup as the clock in the front room let out a single quarter-hour chime.

"It's late." Brent dried his hands with the tea towel draped over a thin rod beneath the sink.

"Just think, if I hadn't been so late for supper, you'd already be safe and snug in your own home."

"Well then, I'm glad. Gives us more time together."

He was leaning against the countertop with both hands in his pockets. A lock of hair had dropped below one eye. She stared down at the familiar blue-and-white-checked cloth that covered the kitchen table and worked her finger around one of the squares. "Had some extra time with my ma, too."

"I did."

The ticking of the clock carried clear into the kitchen, the silence between them thick as pudding. She felt his eyes on her but kept her own downcast, even when she knew he'd come around the table—close enough that she could feel his sleeve brush against her arm.

She looked up. "What did you talk about?" As if she didn't know, as if Ma hadn't been corralling the two of them toward

each other since the first Sunday Reverend Brent Logan came before the church board last winter.

He smiled. “Ecclesiastes. I’m drafting a sermon series. Wisdom for These Wicked Times.”

“Do you really think these times are wicked?”

“No more than they ever have been, I guess.” He’d come closer. Had the little lamp burned like the sun, she’d be consumed in his shadow. “But your ma has some pretty clear ideas about how to avoid the pit of certain temptations.”

“Does she? Well then, I’m surprised she left us here alone.”

“And I, for one, am glad she did.”

He hooked his finger under her chin and tilted her face for a kiss. “You know I care for you.”

“I know you do.”

He kissed her, long and deep—such a thing to happen right there in her mother’s kitchen. The strength of it wobbled her, and she reached down to the table to steady herself. Her hand brushed against the cobbler dish as she tasted the spiced sweetness on his lips.

“I probably shouldn’t take such liberties,” Brent said, drawing away.

“Then you prob’ly should be headin’ home.”

Before either could have a change of heart, she took his hand. “We’d best go out through the kitchen door, lest Ma get a splinter in her ear from listenin’ so close. I’ll walk with you to the path.”

He looked down. “You don’t have your shoes on.”

His grin broke the tension, and she lifted one foot, arranging her toes in a way that, to her, seemed provocative. “Are you scandalized?”

“Merely impressed.”

He led the way, holding the door open to the damp spring



night and touching the small of her back as she walked past. Once they were off the narrow set of steps, she felt her hand encased in his. The warmth of it centered her. Together they walked around to the front of the house, her steps instinctively taking them to the worn stone path that connected their home to the main road.

“Cold?” he asked.

“A bit.” She tucked herself closer to him.

“Can I ask you a question?”

There was little walking left to do, and he seemed to be slowing their pace to allow for conversation.

“Of course.”

“Where were you today? What kept you so late into the evening? I mean, when you came home, you looked positively—”

“Wild?”

“For lack of a better word, I guess.”

She looked up past him, to the velvet sky dotted with diamond stars. The tips of the trees looked like a bric-a-brac border.

“There’s a grove in yonder.” She pointed vaguely up the road. “Like a fairy clearin’ in the middle of the forest. Been goin’ since I was a little girl. And when I have myself a mostly empty day—” she shrugged—“I go.”

“And summon the fairies?”

“No.” She traced her toe along a ragged edge of stone. “I write.”

“Stories?”

Nothing in his face or voice mocked her, and if whatever she felt for him was ever going to turn to pure love, it would begin at this moment.

“Not so much. More like poems, I guess. Or even prayers. Whatever the Lord brings to my mind. And sometimes I have my guitar—”

“Guitar?”

They were at the end of the path, fully stopped. Dorothy Lynn tossed a wistful glance toward the darkened porch.

“Ma hates it. Says it’s not fit for a lady. It was my brother’s. He left it to me when he went off to the war, so I play it. At first just to help me feel closer to him. These days, I guess, just for me. And then sometimes what I write, well, it gets to be a song.”

She waited for him to protest. Or laugh. Or, worse, give her the equivalent of a pat on the head and proclaim her hobby as something delightful.

“I’d love to hear one of your songs sometime.”

Dorothy Lynn let out her breath. “No one’s ever asked that of me before. Fact is, I never told nobody. Sometimes in the evenin’ I used to play for the family, just singin’ hymns and all. But never my own songs. I don’t think Pa would have taken to such vanity.”

“I’m not your pa. But I wish he were here. I’d like to talk to him. As it is, I’ve gone to the Lord, praying for guidance, for him to show me—” He broke off and took a step back, holding Dorothy Lynn at arm’s length. “Dorothy Lynn Dunbar, I’ve loved you since the moment I laid eyes on you. Do you remember that day?”

Even after nearly a year, she remembered it perfectly.

“You and Pa were workin’ on the baptistery—”

“And you brought us a bucket lunch from home. You were wearing a white dress with a pink sash.”

She remembered how Ma had practically pushed her out the door to run the errand. Always there had been this inextricable link between them—Brent under Pa’s guidance, Brent the object of Ma’s insistence.

“Sometimes I worry that I’ll get this all mixed up,” she said,

“you comin’ along so soon after Pa took sick. Havin’ you here at night, in his chair, readin’ his books. It warms me, but—”

He interrupted her with what started as a quick kiss, probably just to stop her from her rambling, but she drew him close before he could pull away. There in the night he became a man different from any she had known as he lifted her clear off her feet, weightless as the mist.