

WHEN LOIS LANE SINGS

By Trecia R. Greene

Chapter Two

Excerpt

JD and I would leave the apartment after supper with the sound of Wally playing the piano and Monday's young tenor voice wafting behind us in rehearsal for church or something. We walked through twilight to our own sanctuary of plank tables and nail keg seats where I was allowed to watch JD and his cronies play Pitch, a game of limp cards and wagered matchsticks. JD was proud of my concentration, and when we played at home, he didn't have to let me win.

Although Monday was older, JD's first born and third in a growing line of JDs, I was the one who went with JD on Sunday afternoons through the quiet streets of downtown to a closed furniture store where JD brought me to challenge the owner to a game of checkers. I sat in a circle of men with my back to the plate glass window with hand painted letters proclaiming the old man as owner of the store. We played checkers, the old man and I. I was good, but the old man was better. He always won, but JD beamed in defeat, while the old man frowned victoriously. Small victories did not impress the old man. We were finally a nation at war, and there were more important things to be done, like selling war bonds in the local movie house.

The floor sloping away in front of us, JD and I emerged from under the balcony, where I was never allowed to sit, and followed the red flowered carpet spotlighted by tiny lights on the aisle seats. Townspeople donated enticing items for auction, and the money went to buy war bonds. JD and I were the highest bidders for a black cocker Spaniel puppy we

named Troubles. We didn't keep him long because he kept bringing home the neighbor's chickens. One of the local businessmen was an amateur magician; and when he asked for volunteers, Monday went right up on stage to be hypnotized, squirming and scratching when the magician suggested fleas. The audience roared with laughter, but I watched Monday's face, his eyes closed, and I saw his mouth forming that crooked little smile he always smiled when he was conning somebody.

During the war bond auctions held once a month, the movie house was crowded and noisy and lighted, and I didn't like it that way. It was not at all the same as the times I spent there in the dark eating popcorn sprinkled with Spanish peanuts from the candy counter in JD's dime store. The movies were always comfortably the same. Musicals on Sundays and Mondays. Horror films and serials on Tuesdays. Dramas on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Mysteries and westerns on Fridays and Saturdays. Mountain City got all the movies. We got them late, but we got them. When *Gone with the Wind* finally came to town, the whole school turned out to see the burning of Atlanta. JD said he didn't approve of movie-going as a school activity, and he wouldn't even discuss that famous film. He never became enamored of Miss Scarlet; never saw the final scene where Rhett Butler walks out on her — although JD could have written Rhett's famous last line. JD did try several times to sit all the way through that movie; but every time Sherman marched through Georgia, JD got up and left.

But JD never walked out on FDR. Meticulously, JD prepared himself for every fireside chat by gathering his cigarettes and his brass ashtray stand around our old cathedral radio and shushing all talk. Then he squatted on a low footstool resting his elbows on his

knees, and, intently, he watched the immobile box as he inclined his head toward the emerging voice. I lay at his feet on the living room floor in front of the radio, smelling the scent of carpet and listening to the sound of hero talk. FDR was JD's hero, and he came to JD by radio. My hero was The Lone Ranger, and he actually came to town.

The Lone Ranger actually came to Mountain City, Kentucky, population two thousand eight hundred thirty-four, and he signed autographs in the lobby of the only hotel in town, the very one where Wally sang in red taffeta, the very one which Wally would later lease and manage in her own heroic efforts after JD got sick. But JD was healthy and strong that day, so he just walked home from the dime store, took me by the hand, and walked back with me to stand in the tiny hotel lobby in the middle of a big crowd of people waiting to see a real radio and moving picture hero. I held JD's hand and looked up at that masked man standing on the stairs. I watched him lift his hand from the polished railing and wave slightly. I heard him deliver his famous lines, and I mouthed the words right along with him.

"Hi-ho, Silver! Away!"

I didn't see him, or five hundred others like him, in other strange towns, trudging wearily up hotel stairs to a lumpy bed not his own. I didn't hear him sigh as he lay on the bed without even removing his mail order boots. I didn't know he wasn't the real Lone Ranger, and JD didn't tell me any different. I guess JD figured the Lone Ranger made about as much sense as Ashley Wilkes or Rhett Butler and especially that General Sherman guy.

With the war in full swing, I learned in Sunday school that the war was about some people called Jews, like Jesus, and a man called Hitler, who didn't like Jews, as some people hadn't liked Jesus; but I didn't hear any biblical explanation for where the Japanese fit in. Mostly, what I knew about war I learned from the newsreels and comic books. I sat on the steel penny scales in JD's dime store and read every comic book that came out each month. Customers moved around me like shadows in the Bat cave, creating a muffled haven. I read comic books and ate candy from the candy counter and checked out the new toys JD ordered out of St. Louis and arranged in bins on the toy counter. I examined the Revlon lipstick and the Evening in Paris cologne in cosmetics. I hefted the hammers and pliers and screwdrivers in the hardware section. I picked out the stationery and matching envelopes I would buy if I were writing letters, and I agonized over which ink pen I would use. But mostly I read the comic books.

JD had every comic book possible in the racks in his dime store, and I read them all. I never questioned the likelihood of kryptonite taking away superpowers or a batman having a secret bat cave or an ordinary woman twirling around fast enough to turn into a wonder woman. I just read and believed. In one issue of Superman, Lois Lane caught a cold and developed a husky, sultry singing voice. For two months with that husky voice, she was on the verge of becoming a famous recording star. Then she got well and didn't. I had this notion, all mixed up with war and comic book heroes, that when Lois Lane sings and my mother wears leg dye, the Long Ranger comes to town and we win. Maybe next time, Lois Lane, maybe next time.

The superheroes and the cartoon characters seemed believable enough, but I did wonder about the people

in True Romance comics who always fell in love and the people in Detective comics who robbed banks and shot people. Bonnie and Clyde and Pretty Boy Floyd and Ma Barker and her boys seemed as real to me as a lot of people I saw in the dime store. I think now there should be a fan club for people like me who used to read comic books without collecting them. We could get together and shake our heads and feel sorry for ourselves that we didn't hang on to all those nickel and dime comics. I calculated once what all those comic books I read on the penny scales in JD's dime store would have been worth if I'd kept them. I figured I could have sent Lili Rose and Dan to college with the money I made and had something left over.

At the end of each month, JD gathered together all of the last month's unsold comics, tore off the top portion of the front cover of each one, and sent them back to the distributor with a hand written notice of how many had sold and how many had not. Once a month I watched JD go through that mysterious ritual of preparing the comics for return, and I listened intently as he talked war talk. "MacArthur said he would return, and he will," JD told me, as he ripped off cover after cover.

I didn't know if MacArthur would return or not — I didn't even know where he'd been or where he'd gone — but I knew the Percy boy who lived on South Main Street wouldn't return. He'd been killed in the war, and his mother had hung a gold star in her front window. I looked for it every time we passed the Percy house riding in someone else's car. I thought the star was pretty. I even wished for one and wondered where we'd hang it if we had one. Our front window was in the bedroom I shared with Monday, and for a while the bedroom taken over, one at a time, by my reluctant grandfathers.

Grandpa Walt I liked a lot. I didn't know him very long or very well, and I can't remember ever hearing him speak, although stories about him were always about something he said. Funny things he said and stories he told became famous family quotes and anecdotes. But I don't remember ever actually hearing him speak. About Grandfather Harp I remember only the Christmas he spent with us when he gave me some bedroom slippers that were too small. He didn't talk much either, and that Christmas morning he just smiled apologetically.

I never knew either one of my grandmothers. They both died before I was born. JD's mother just sort of withered away in Georgia. Wally's mother died giving birth to her fourth child. Everyone loved Wally's mother, and the entire congregation wept openly. The funeral was loud, Wally said, because her older sister Bea had braced her black patent leather shoes and gloved hands against the door frame of the small wooden church and screamed at the top of her lungs that she wouldn't go into that place where her mother was dead. Of all the mourners, only Tate, the oldest, and Wally, the most rebellious, marched stoically down the aisle and took their places beside their father, the three of them staring straight ahead, not shedding a tear for anyone to see.

After the funeral, Wally said, the family came to Walter Rose like Greek choruses. In bunches they came to him, bemoaning the past, describing the present, predicting the future. They came to him in compendia of cousins, aunts, and uncles, and then finally the lone triad of his dead wife's sister, her daughter his niece, and his older brother Tate. They came to him with one voice, telling him how he might possibly handle little Tate and Bea and even Waltice, but he wouldn't be able to handle baby Walt, not by himself.

Grandpa Walt might have listened and given a curt nod, but I don't think he said anything. I think he just stood at the window and watched his brother and sister-in-law going down the walk with a tiny bundle in a wicker basket between them. He might have cried after they were gone, but I don't think he talked about it.

Grandpa Walt married his sister-in-law's daughter, so his niece became his wife, and his sister-in-law became his mother-in-law. Elizabeth Slade never approved of Grandpa Walt from the first day she learned her sister would marry him. He was a railroad man - bad enough - but he lived above the railroad tracks along the river - worse. When Grandpa Walt married Elizabeth Slade's sister, Elizabeth Slade tolerated him. When Grandpa Walt married Elizabeth Slade's daughter, Elizabeth Slade moved in with them. He could marry her daughter, she explained, but he must take her, too. Desperate, Grandpa Walt agreed.

Grandpa Walt came to live with us after he got old and couldn't remember anything. He didn't want to live in Mountain City, but he never complained. He just ran away from home and tried to walk back to Riverside twenty-one miles away. Every time, Wally just borrowed a car and went looking for him, every time asking when she finally found him why he kept doing that to her. Grandpa Walt just looked out the window and speculated about the possibility of rain.

But one afternoon when Grandpa Walt didn't run away, a wagon passed the apartment house where we lived, a rickety old wagon pulled by a worn out old mule driven by another silent soul I didn't know, but heard stories about. Grandpa Walt and I watched from the porch swing as an ear of corn dropped from the wagon. He took my hand, and we went out to pick up the ear of corn. Then he led me back to the kitchen, and

there, while Wally and JD were down at the dime store, Grandpa Walt took out a huge, black, cast-iron skillet and parched every kernel of that ear of corn. Together we ate every bit of that corn, washing it down with tepid water from the tap.

Both of my grandfathers tried to kill themselves in that front bedroom where I was going to hang the gold star if we ever had one. Wally surprised Grandfather Harp trying to slit his throat with a kitchen knife, blood all over everything. I don't know how Grandpa Walt tried to do himself in. Didn't work - whatever it was - for either one of them. Finally, both of them just sort of dried up and died, like Grandpa Walt's favorite pink and blue hydrangeas turning brown on the bush.

Mountain City came alive with the war effort, just like in the movies. Men went bravely off to war or stayed bravely behind to sell war bonds and keep the town dark at night. Some survived; some didn't. Women doled out ration stamps for sugar and meat, knitted scarves, and kneaded mysterious bags of oleo with plastic bubbles pinched to release red dye into a white, gelatinous goop. Children hauled around red wagons filled with scrap metal and newspapers. In a time of loss and deprivation, no one was exempt.

I got the idea that Wally's loss was nylons, but I wasn't nearly so impressed with Wally having to go without nylons as I was with watching the tiny trickles of sweat work their way through her leg dye down the backs of her legs as we rode the train from Riverside to Valdosta to visit Grandfather Harp and all those friends Wally knew from when she lived

there. Beside Wally sat her half-sister Adie, named for her grandmother Elizabeth Slade. Like her grandmother, Adie was erect and proper, and, though prone to giggling, Adie became solidified in rectitude by the loss of her fiancé somewhere over France, and the loss of something else after four years in a small, relentless bible college in central Kentucky. Adie was one of the only truly good people I ever knew, but her life was never anything I coveted. Cousin Janie and I were flower girls at Adie's wedding, which seemed to take place in a train station where our new Yankee uncle was one of many soldiers going somewhere. Later, calling that man "uncle" tasted bitter on our tongues. After the war, he resided in his air conditioned office writing fiery sermons which he preached while all dressed up in his white shirts starched and ironed by Adie, who believed his words as she washed and ironed and scrubbed and cleaned. At his command, Adie took up her proper first name Elizabeth and gave up the nickname Adie, to which she had answered for twenty-five years. He forbade her to wear her favorite color red, and she honored and obeyed until several years after he left her to run away with the young church secretary, taking with him the son he estranged from Adie by wild allegations of her mental ill health. After that false prophet died somewhere up north, Elizabeth Slade Rose took off her wedding rings and began to answer to Adie again. Slowly, she began to wear muted reds and maroons, and slowly, she allowed a giggle to return.

I was confused about war. People in Mountain City said the United States would win the war because God was on our side. I wondered about that - that and the

burning of Atlanta – as I sat in our genteel, Bible-thumping, hellfire and damnation church, studying the stained glass Jesuses, listening to the rousing hymns, watching Wally singing in the choir, looking for JD walking down the aisle with the other deacons and elders to serve the believers little pieces of unleavened crackers on silver trays and grape juice from little individual clear glass vials passed in slotted holders of silver, too. No wine in that dry county, not among that community of believers. No wine, no Catholics, no Jews in that county, and no blacks in that church. There was one Catholic in town later on, Mary, the county health nurse whose fierce net game beat me regularly at tennis. There was also a woman named Pearl, married to a man who looked like Daddy Warbucks, and she was the only Jew in town. In Sunday school, I learned that Jesus had said something about not throwing Pearl in front of the pigs. I didn't know why anyone would want to do that anyway.

A big oil painting, titled "Behold, I stand at the door and knock," hung on the wall above the baptistery where I was dunked fully clothed to assure salvation.

"Washed in the blood," I heard the minister say as my head went under and my white dress became heavy with the baptistery water.

"We are all sinners," the minister assured me, "sinners who need to be washed in the blood."

Going under, I didn't understand how I could be cleansed if I was washed in the blood in a dirty concrete baptistery ringed with green mold.

A twenty-foot stained glass Jesus suffering little children to come unto him shone red and gold on the heads of the choir. I liked the little children all gathered at Jesus' knee, but I didn't understand the suffering part. Maybe all of us were sinners who

needed to be washed in the blood, but I thought being in church felt more like a giant love-in accompanied by foot stomping hymns raising a grimly joyful noise while I watched the feather on Wally's hat bob in time to the music. The likelihood of my sin impressed me less than the happy hymns about living in the land of milk and honey where people were bringing in the sheaves at harvest time during three hundred sixty-five days of sunshine in a celestial subdivision called Beulah Land.

Beulah! Beulah worked for us. While Wally and JD worked late at the dime store, Monday and I were left in the care of Beulah, a young country girl. Although I was told to sleep in my own bed, frequently Wally found me snuggled beneath a quilt in the arms of that blonde, gentle countrywoman who petted me and spoke with a twang, which I imitated and for which I was corrected. I loved that gentle country woman who sang soft, twangy country songs and rocked me hypnotically in a safe country cradle of lost loves and hurtful romance, where I learned that *the roots of your raisin' run deep*. I guessed that was Beulah Land.

I'm living on a mountain underneath a cloudless sky. Praise God!

Beulah arrived early and stayed late. I woke in the quiet house in my trundle bed, which during the day slid under the big four-poster where Monday slept; and I listened for Beulah's soft humming, which came simultaneously with the smell of coffee I knew Beulah would be drinking by the time I crawled out of the covers and padded through the house to the kitchen. Beulah would have one of Wally's cups and saucers sitting on the kitchen table, and the cup would be, by

the time I appeared in the kitchen, half full and with a partially eaten piece of toast resting against the edge of the saucer. My Beulah, blonde and ruddy cheeked, would smile at me in the doorway from wherever she stood in the kitchen; and then without speaking, she would pick me up and cradle me in her lap while the two of us finished the toast and coffee, neither of us speaking very much.

Drinking at the fountain that never shall run dry.

Days began deliciously the same every morning Beulah was there. I took the toast and dipped it carefully in Beulah's coffee, muddy brown with real cream sweet from her father's farm, and then I took a bite and gave Beulah a bite. Together we finished the piece of toast, and sometimes we had another.

Oh, yes, I'm feasting on the manna from a bountiful supply.

If Wally and JD were already gone and if there were no specific orders from Wally for Beulah to do an important job, sometimes we would just sit, and Beulah would gently rock me and sing. Sometimes we listened to the rain when the clouds came quickly with lightning and thunder and big flat raindrops falling in a rush, lasting a few minutes, then stopping suddenly with the air cleared clean and everything smelling different. I have never felt so cleansed as I did then.

For I am dwelling in Beulah land.

That's how I was born and christened – not in any grand and apostolic manner, but born again and christened as if hit across the prow with a bottle of intoxicant, blessed with the name of my father's dreaded aunt, then washed in the blood and the anger and the retribution, but cleansed, oh, yes! whiter than snow, while feeding on the manna, quenched drinking at the fountain, caught sleeping in the bosom of the mother of Abraham.

Beulah Land!