

Excerpt from *King James Virgin*

Chapter One

Good Seed on Fertile Ground

“For every tree is known by his own fruit. For of thorns men do not gather figs, nor of a bramble bush gather they grapes.” (Luke 6:44, King James Version).

It was late in the fall, right at hog-killing time, when we got the bad news about the president. Before the shocking afternoon announcement, the day had progressed as usual in the combined second and third-grade classroom at Sand Gap Elementary. Mrs. Hellard’s teaching philosophy was to present the hardest subjects during the morning while our minds were fresh and sharp, and we completed our science and arithmetic lessons before lunch. Mrs. Hellard said it was important that the third graders have a solid foundation in multiplication because right after Christmas vacation, we’d be tackling division.

The times table was a quick way to add things, and I was confident I had mastered it. For example, if I saved my snack money, I could calculate in my head that I’d have five dimes by the end of the week; that was more than enough to add a new paper doll to my collection. As for the science lesson, I already knew a lot about how plants multiplied from watching flowers, weeds, and crops in the family gardens. Mrs. Hellard said it was strange and wonderful how God designed each seed to know what kind of plant or tree it should become.

From readings at home and during Meeting, I knew the Bible referred to people as seed. God promised Abraham and Sarah so many seed their people would become as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the seashore. I’d often observed the vast dark sky, dotted with layers and layers of twinkling, blinking bits of light, and I had once seen a shooting star zoom downward and

disappear behind the hills. One clear night, Daddy's upturned face shone in the moonlight as we gazed up at the stars, and he marveled that God knew each by name. Someday, I'd see the oceans, but for now, just walking in the gritty school playground convinced me that the grains of sand there couldn't be counted.

By afternoon recess, the sun had chased away the morning chill, and I pulled my coat off after one turn of jumping rope with the other girls. On the way to the playground, the alluring display of sugary confections drew me into the open door of the school store. My right arm reached for a green-and-white striped Pixy Stix before my better judgment intervened. The eagle eyes of Mrs. Johnson, the stern teacher minding the store, missed nothing. I pulled my empty hand back and proceeded outside.

I'd looked forward to celebrating the last day of the week with a treat, but I hadn't counted on Daddy dropping a windfall into my outstretched hand the night before. As always, I checked the date on the dime and found it listed on the creased page, torn from a comic book. With mixed feelings, I opened the panty and sock drawer of the cedar chest I shared with my little sister and added the dime to our rare coins in the back left corner. My decision to increase our wealth meant I'd have to forgo an afternoon snack again.

During recess, my next-to-best friend made the sacrifice harder. Judy enjoyed a Payday, nibbling off one peanut at a time to make the candy bar last until we returned to the classroom. The mental image of the paper doll rack at the Dime Store sustained me. We were planning to spend the weekend with Grandma Monday, and Mommy promised we'd stop in town on the way.

"We ort to keep back some money for the little chulden's Christmas," I overheard Daddy tell Mommy before he left for work. I wasn't surprised when she regretfully informed Kay and me we wouldn't get new dresses at the Dollar General this month. But, she reassured us, we'd still stop in Liberty to buy food for our roadside picnic. We'd also visit Toyland upstairs in the Dime Store because it was only open during the holiday season. Kay and I would get to explore the shelves in the store's attic; touching and smelling the tantalizing plastic and metal toys

would be even better than browsing the new Sears Christmas catalog. When we visited the store the rest of the year, I always noticed the heavy wooden door, secured with a padlock, that hid the magical world above. I'd wonder which toys were still languishing unclaimed on the plank-and-concrete-block shelves, hoping to have better luck next Christmas.

The Dime Store was my favorite place in the whole wide world. It held an overwhelming treasure of special candy, toys, sparklers, and cap guns with acrid red ammunition rolls. I loved strolling through the aisles, which brimmed with glittery jewelry, tiny jars of smell-good, and makeup for big girls and grown women. But more precious than the live goldfish and the painted baby turtles was the gray metal rack that displayed a beguiling assortment of paper dolls.

The physical activity during recess perked my mind up for the last hour of learning, and I was pleased my willpower had prevailed. I'd held onto enough money to buy a new paper doll while increasing the secret fortune Kay and I shared. As the school day wound down, I felt the usual anticipation as the end of the week approached. I loved being with my friends and learning new things, but I was now looking forward to getting home. My family would be making our usual trip to the grocery store. On the way, we'd settle on the menu for the special Friday supper that was the highlight of our week.

An old farmer rode into view through the classroom windows overlooking the long, graveled drive from the highway. He was making his daily trek up the hill in his mule-drawn wagon to pick up the cafeteria leftovers for his hogs. Mrs. Hellard stood at the blackboard, listing our spelling words for the next test. "Thread, broke, brave, strong, wheel, perfect, destroy, circle," she wrote.

I was relieved to see I knew them all, and I indulged in a simple daydream to relieve the boredom, visualizing myself as a grown woman. I stood before the class with a piece of white chalk in my glamorous hand, my long fingernails painted rose pink. My left hand, graced with a sparkling diamond engagement ring, rested elegantly on my hipbone. In my fashionable, ready-made blue sheath and sharp-toed high heels, I was prettier than my stern middle-aged teacher.

The children in my imaginary classroom weren't afraid of me and behaved well out of love and admiration.

As Mrs. Hellard wrote on the blackboard, the chalk emitted a harsh screech. My shocked, restless mind shot backward to the memory of an unpleasant encounter two years earlier. As I boarded the school bus, a big high school boy thrust his huge leg into the aisle, obstructing my path to a seat. He cocked his head to the side, narrowed his yellowish-brown eyes, and grinned.

“Say,” he drawled, “ain’t you one of them bad Hattons?”

Was he being friendly because he thought I was a cute first grader, or was he taunting me? I suspected he was insulting my family. Was he implying my people pretended to be tough but were such cowards others could mock us to our faces? Without answering, I squeezed by his monstrous knee. I couldn’t share this disturbing interaction with my kinfolk. If it led to trouble, it would all be my fault.

After that, whenever I glimpsed the big boy, my breath quickened, and my heart fluttered. Someday, though, I’d show him. I’d marry a rich, powerful man, and then we’d see who the bad one was. My man would hunt him down, line him out good, and teach him a lesson about picking on little girls.

Sharp rapping on the classroom door burst the delicious fantasy of revenge and jerked me back into the present. Mrs. Hellard placed the chalk on the metal tray beneath the blackboard. She strode to the door, her old-fashioned lace-up pumps clicking on the dark tile floor, and entered the hallway. Through the long rectangular glass in the wood panel, I saw she was talking to someone. When she reentered the room, Mrs. Hellard’s plain, broad face was more somber than usual.

“Children,” the teacher’s hesitant voice trembled, and her eyes looked troubled. “President Kennedy has been shot. Let’s pray for him.”

Given the bad news, her request wasn’t surprising; even Baptists believed Jesus especially valued the prayers of children. The announcement itself wasn’t shocking, either. It was common knowledge that grown men sometimes got themselves shot. Most, if not all, my classmates knew someone who’d either been shot or had shot someone else.

Just weeks earlier, a classmate's daddy was shot down, but he had time to call on Jesus before his lifeblood ran out. Witnesses of the fatal disagreement reported he had prayed hard for salvation during his last minutes. His desperate drunken petition gave his heartbroken people hope that Jesus saved him as he had the repentant thief on Calvary.

Daddy sometimes recalled a bad childhood memory of overhearing a shooting as he walked home from the store. The unexpected blast so startled him that he dropped Grandpa's red tin of Prince Albert's tobacco at his bare feet. For years afterward, every time Daddy heard gunfire, he halfway expected loud screaming to break out. "Ol' Man Lunsford was lucky to lose only his arm and not his whole life that day," he always said as he ended the story.

A wicked man, angry about the outcome of the War Between the States, shot President Lincoln, who was said to be related to Grandpa Hatton through the Hanks bloodline. But how could this happen to our handsome leader with such a beautiful family? Surely, no one hated him that much except perhaps the godless Russians who lived across the sea.

My classmates followed Mrs. Hellard's lead, bowing their heads and clasping their hands on their desktops as she began praying in a low, shaky tone. I glanced sideways at the next row of desks where Joyce sat, blonde head erect, calmly surveying the curious situation. I looked to my right and saw Omer David, eyelids squeezed and palms pressed together, moving his lips in silent prayer.

My hands lay on my lap, not touching each other. I lowered my head, and my long hair fell forward, shielding my face from Joyce's pale green eyes. She'd think me a ridiculous put-on if I took part in this subdued Baptist-style praying. Even in my state of shock, I knew this was no way to ask God to spare the life of a man who lay at death's door.

I'd heard plenty of real praying and knew how calling on the Lord should be done. Mommy and Daddy had been baptized with the Holy Ghost before they met, and religion was the core of our family life. Besides school and Daddy's work at the factory, all our social activities centered around family and church. Before I began school, I didn't understand what it meant to be a member of a peculiar

people set apart from the World. But I now saw my special status with the Lord had drawbacks.

When the Kentucky winters set in with bitter, bone-chilling winds, many girls wore pants. During hot summer days, when the air became unbearably thick and sticky, they changed into shorts or pedal pushers, but Holiness girls wore dresses with no regard for the weather. The Sisters didn't cut their hair because the Bible said it was a woman's crowning glory, although Mommy quietly broke that rule for Kay and me. She regularly trimmed our hair to encourage healthy growth, as Grandma had done for her when the Monday family was still Baptist.

Tall antennas attached to their rooftops revealed many Jackson Countians owned television sets. Most of the Saints, Holy Ghost-filled churchgoers, fiercely condemned the filthy wickedness this modern development brought into homes. Daddy and Mommy agreed that a television set was too expensive and encouraged laziness, even if owning one wasn't an outright sin. Of the elderly Saints' opinion that radio was wrong, Daddy said, "That's just a-bein' quare."

He always listened to the evening news if he finished his chores in time. On weekdays, Mommy often switched the radio on at eleven o'clock to enjoy the "The Sunshine Gospel Hour" while she did her housework. At noon, she turned the round dial through a field of whistling static from the Harrodsburg station to the one in Richmond. We enjoyed listening to "The Man About Town," sometimes hearing familiar voices announcing revival meetings and gospel singings between the calls for things to sell or buy. My favorite commercial during the program was the uplifting jingle for Massey Ferguson tractors. Although I planned to be a teacher and a nurse when I grew up, I'd also own a big farm.

Besides strict rules on physical appearance and clothing, the Saints didn't go to the show or other worldly places. They were especially cautious about how they talked; the words that came out of the mouth, the Saints taught, revealed the heart's true condition. The only dancing allowed was shouting, but you had to be saved before the Holy Ghost would move your body in time with music. As Grandpa Monday's fate proved, pretending to be in the

Spirit after backsliding was dangerous. Mommy recalled with sad shame that her daddy still danced through the fast songs after he began sneaking around with the friendly widow.

A few children my age were already shouting, but Jesus hadn't knocked on the door of my heart. I didn't know why I hadn't been born again, but I suspected it was because of my secret plans and reluctance to let others know my feelings. Anyway, I was sure some of the dancing children were putting on; they had such bad manners they couldn't possibly be saved.

Religion was becoming confusing, but I dared not ask questions. The Saints taught that those without faith would never see God. There were many Baptists in Jackson County, and I couldn't understand why so many nice, friendly people didn't seem worried that they were traveling toward Torment.

Mrs. Hellard, for example, couldn't be a Saint because I'd never seen her in Meeting. But she didn't wear makeup, and I'd heard nary an idle word fall from her lips. She obviously believed in the power of God because she'd requested our prayers for President Kennedy, who was a Catholic and possibly not a real Christian.

My biggest secret was too dangerous to share with anyone. Even Kay, who knew me better than anyone, didn't know I wasn't proud to be one of the plainly dressed people the World ridiculed as Holy Rollers. The Bible warned if you were ashamed of Jesus, he'd shun you in front of God and all his holy angels. There was nothing hidden from Jesus, but I hoped he was the only one who knew the awful truth about my most recent transgression, the evidence now buried beneath a growing mound of stinking, horrid excrement.

I sat in Mrs. Hellard's classroom, still and quiet as a statue. I was too bashful, sinful, and full of pride to cry out the commanding prayer of victory to spare the life of the president. My best friends, Debbie, Judy, and Brenda, would be so dumbfounded they might stop playing with me. Joyce's grandma was a scary ancient Saint who prophesied and spoke in The Unknown Tongue, but Joyce had an independent spirit and didn't seem to be afraid of anything. She'd probably be the first to snicker if I joined the teacher in praying out loud.

I loved the president but wasn't willing to sacrifice my reputation for him. If it were his time to go, no amount of prayer would keep him alive. The Saints often quoted Scripture about a time appointed unto each of us to die and face the Judgment. They admonished each other to always be on guard. As fast and unpredictable as a bolt of lightning splitting the sky, our time to leave this world could come as it had for my grandpa.

Although I didn't dare raise my arms to Heaven and cry out to the Lord like a true Saint, President Kennedy being in trouble made me feel sad and helpless. He seemed more real than Jesus because I'd seen him live on Aunt Mary's fancy color television set. He had the most gorgeous wife and the sweetest little children in America.

But I wouldn't get to visit him in the hospital or attend his Sitting-Up with the Dead if he passed. Washington, D.C. was a long way from Jackson County, and the distance that separated us wasn't measured only in miles. If we lived close to the White House, the Kennedys wouldn't invite my people to share their intimate mourning rituals because we weren't members of the group Mommy dismissively called Higher-Ups. The president's family wouldn't welcome common people like us into their world, even during a time of grief and heartbreak. It was hard to reconcile my love for someone who didn't know I existed—feeling left out intensified my sorrow.

A few minutes later, Mrs. Hellard slipped out of the classroom again. When she returned, she announced our leader hadn't made it. "President Kennedy is dead." Her voice was heavy with sad resignation.

The silence was profound. We would offer up no more prayers for him. He'd crossed over the Jordan, and nothing anyone on this side did could affect his fate. I knew well what happened next. The president would appear before the Judgment Seat of God to answer for what he had or hadn't done during his allotted time that had ended so abruptly and savagely.

He'd had it all: riches, fame, good looks, and anything money could buy. But, as far as I knew, he'd left no testimony of being born again. Was he lost in the end, as the Saints often warned? Whether President Kennedy had made

it to Heaven was between him and his maker. His fate was eternally sealed, and no amount of praying by mere mortals could change anything now. On that point of doctrine, the Saints and the Baptists were in perfect accord.