

*From Chapter 17, "So Long!"*

"Why, good morning," she said. "Virgie, look who's here."

"Ain't them preachers again, is it?" Virgie asked.

"Lord child, no. They won't be here till evening. It's your friend Charlie, the newspaperman, come to see you."

Mrs. Bradley was a big woman and her skirts about filled the corridor. Her face was heavy and dull but her gray eyes were kind. She had her hair braided and set in a tight bun atop her head. Her big skirts rustled as she moved back to let me in the cell. She closed the door and locked it. "Just an hour, Charlie. That's all today," she said.

The springs on the cot squeaked as Virgie moved to make room for me. They squeaked again when I sat down. We listened to the footfalls as the matron and guard made their way down the corridor. The door at the end of the hall clanged shut.

Virgie's cell was dark but the death chamber across the hall was lit. A man wearing a blue cap and mechanic's overalls was working on an electrical connection on the chair. His elbow hit the enamel chamber pot underneath. It clanked against one of the legs. Virgie started at the sound and so did I. The man moved the pot back in place and continued with his work. The arms and back of the chair were oak and they looked golden in the light. I looked at Virgie as she watched. Her face did not move. Her breathing was steady. When the workman finished what he was attending to, he picked up his carpenter's tray and went out the opposite door of the chamber. He cut off the light.

"Maebelle made you something," I said. "For your birthday."

Virgie stirred. "Miss Harriet's, too," she said. "You remember to get her a present, Mr. Charlie?"

"Yes," I said. I lifted my cap, exposing the flat parcel atop my head. I put my cap on the cot.

"Well?" I said.

"Well, what?" she said.

I nodded and the parcel fell into my hand.

"Birthday cake." I handed the parcel to her.

"More like birthday pie," she said. She folded back the wax paper. The chocolate icing had stuck and the lemon cake was mush. She grinned. "Looks awful good, Mr. Charlie!"