

## The Good Girl

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“Hillbillies. The whole bunch of ’em is hillbillies,” Aunt Annie proclaimed, wringing the neck on the chicken struggling in one hand and grabbing another bird with her free hand. “You stay away from them boys, ya hear? They was causin’ trouble afore they even popped out of the baby oven.”

“Is this clean enough?” I held my pin-feathers-picked carcass toward my aunt. Despite her calico sun bonnet, sweat dripped down her face.

“Fer a six-year-old, it looks more than clean enough.” Aunt Annie hitched her chin toward the headless body unmoving in the grass. “Ya hear what I said about them boys? If it was up to me, none of your uncle’s brothers or their spawn would ever step a foot on this place.”

“Yes’m.” I used the pleasing-grownups voice I’d learned over the years to stay in my parents’ good graces—especially tricky with my daddy prone to fits of rage directed at my mother if he didn’t like *that goddamned snippy tone*. I picked up the dead chicken above its curled feet. “When they get here, I’ll read a book.”

“Or you can stay in the kitchen and help me with the biscuits ’cuz them worthless wives won’t lift a hand. I’ll die of shock if they bring a radish to gnaw on.” Aunt Annie elbowed sweat off her forehead, dipped the chicken she’d killed into a vat of boiling water, and handed me the soggy mess. “Finish this one, ’n then go see how Mama’s feeling. Tell her to stay inside. This heat can’t be good for someone in her condition.”

“Yes’m.” Though I’d already done a good enough job picking two other chickens, I recoiled a second from my third one. My stomach rolled. The coppery smell of blood and wet feathers still carried the warmth of life instead of the chill of death.

Playtime came only after work, but I longed for a rest from the spectacle of butchering. Two summers of visiting my aunt and uncle on their farm had taught me fried chicken appeared on my plate because my aunt had slaughtered the meat I ate with gusto. She also planted, grew, and harvested all the carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, green beans, radishes, cucumbers, and squash in the rows and rows of vegetables down by the creek.

The water we drank and cooked with and parsed out to clean our faces and teeth bubbled from a spring in an old tree trunk a mile from the house. The dusty, red-clay road and jagged ruts created after rainstorms and winter snows made carrying buckets of fresh water one of the toughest jobs done every day. The *bathroom* perched on the edge of a ravine so far away no one used it after dark. Baths we took in the creek running far below the house.

Finished picking, I presented the chicken for inspection. Aunt Annie nodded. I washed my hands in hot water, lathering the soap we'd made earlier in the summer, and cleaned the tell-tale red traces from under my fingernails. I splashed water on my bare feet for good measure.

"You want some iced tea?" I asked my aunt, now splitting open the chickens and tossing the guts to twin BlueTick hounds leaping like acrobats in the air for the delicacies.

"Not yet, Sweetheart. But ask your mama. Give her lots of ice. No sugar, remember."

No sugar because Mama was six months pregnant with her fourth baby, and the doctor said she'd gained too much weight and ran the risk of *pre-eclampsia*. I never found the meaning of her condition in my pocket dictionary, but the adults' muted voices echoed with worry. Puffy eyes, wrists, fingers, and ankles stirred my fears Mama was in a very bad way.

So I did everything I could to stay out of trouble. No arguing with my two older sisters. No tattling. No whining. No telling anyone how I lay awake every night in the stifling upstairs bedroom as the owls hooted mournfully, the katydids sang loudly, and the ghost of my mother— young and slender again—danced at the foot of my bed.

When I entered the kitchen, the closed curtains created a cave smelling of sweet milk and butter and clabbered cheese. The screen door slammed behind me. I froze, then remembered. Mama and Daddy now slept in the company bedroom. That space, saved for special visitors, lay on the other side of the parlor at the front of the house. Until this summer, Mama and Daddy had always slept upstairs where my sisters and I shared an oversized bed. Aunt Annie and Uncle Gus occupied the big room at the foot of the stairs. Mama's belly extended too far for her to climb steps, so my sisters took my parents' former room.

I slept—or tried to sleep—alone.

Because of the size of the house, plus the organ in the parlor and the battery-operated radio in the dining room, Aunt Annie felt justified in her snooty attitude toward the *hillbillies*. She claimed the two brothers-in-law lived with their wives and six sons in a four-room shack that stunk like a pig pen. What's more, a pig pen was clean and neat. No matter what Uncle Gus threatened or promised, she'd refused for twenty-one years to visit her in-laws.

*Their hovel's so far back in the hills, it's in Kentucky* she often declared, her lips pursed in a thin, white line.

“Hey, Bobbiejean.”

I jumped. “Mama, you scared me. What're you doin' up?”

“Too hot to sleep.” Seated at the kitchen table I'd scrubbed after breakfast, she lifted her long, red hair off her nape. “How your sisters can stay in bed when it's so hot is amazing.”

Tempted to tell her they whispered and giggled some nights until the moon disappeared behind the mountain, I said, “You want some iced tea? We got plenty of ice to make the ice cream.”

Her yellow-green eyes brightened. She licked her cracked lips and leaned on one elbow. “Since I won't be able to eat any ice cream, I'll accept that offer. With extra ice.”

The ragged rhythm of her breath throbbed beneath her teasing tone. Goosebumps marched like ants up my arms as I reached into the cupboard. I grabbed a tall glass and carried it into the separator room for ice. My own breath caught in my throat as I inhaled the smell of sour milk. Glory, how could Mama stand the stink when she passed on almost everything to eat but mashed potatoes with a little milk gravy?

I returned with the glass and filled it from the pitcher that took two hands for me to lift. I didn't spill a drop. My chest swelled. I was definitely getting stronger from carrying water and pulling weeds and milking Cleo, the gentlest of the three cows.

"You seen your daddy this morning?" Mama drained the glass of tea and held out the empty for a refill.

"Huh-uh. He and Uncle Gus left about six o'clock." I said *he* instead of *him*, because I was talking to Mama. She encouraged me to talk like a girl who had read *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables* and *Ramona Quimby* by the time I was five. Daddy said ain't, but Mama never. She and Aunt Annie liked me to read to them every afternoon during their break from chores.

"Stay out of Daddy's hair today, Sweetheart." Mama ran her fingers through my curls—as red as hers but tangled from tossing until pale, gray light ate away the dark. "I kept him awake most of last night, so he needs a break today—a little beer and cards. Do you have a book?"

"I'm re-reading *Little Women*. That's my favorite. Jo's so smart."

"I like Jo too." Mama bussed behind my ear. "I think I'll go back to bed for a while."

"Want me to read to you?"

"Not now, thanks." She struggled to stand, and her face went pale as milk.

My heart dropped. Lightheaded, I took a shaky step toward her. "You sure?"

"Later." Her knuckles whitened on top of the table. "Not while y'all're eating ice cream. I promise."

“I don’t care. I can pass on ice cream.” I loved spending time with Mama better than with anyone else, though I liked hearing Aunt Annie tell stories about life when she was my age.

“I promise,” Mama repeated and waddled out of the kitchen.

Aunt Annie came inside as Mama rounded the corner. She stared at Mama’s retreating back without calling out. Her jaw trembled, but she clamped her teeth together and turned away so I couldn’t see her face.

“You want to help with the cobblers?” she asked, her voice tinny and unnatural.

“Can I make the crust?” I held my breath. She was particular about her baking.

“Bring me the lard . . .”

We worked side by side for the next two hours. She even let me roll out the biscuit dough while she made two gooseberry pies. I cut five dozen rounds, placed them on the baking sheet and brushed the tops with butter. Next, I dredged the chicken she’d cut into pieces in flour and laid them out for frying in sizzling, lard-filled, cast-iron Dutch ovens. She fussed about her decision not to make her famous chicken ’n dumplings. *They’ll think I’m stuck-up . . . and they’re right.*

I was churning butter when a couple of women’s voices called, “Yoo-hoo? Anna?”

“Damn. I knew they’d show up early.” She removed her floury apron and went to the screen door. Two roly-poly women stood on the side porch with two grease-stained skilletts.

“That is a hard climb from the car,” one of them said. “It’s been so long, I forgot.”

Face tight, eyes hard, Aunt Annie opened the door and admitted the women. She agreed it was hot enough to fry eggs on the sidewalk if they had a sidewalk. She took their offerings—one pinto beans, the other a corn casserole their kids loved. She offered tea. She introduced me, and they exclaimed about my hair. They’d never met anyone with hair the color of carrots. Aunt Annie pulled me to her side. I’m sure she thought their remarks hurt my feelings.

In the middle of more comments about my hair and skin, three boys about my age barged into the kitchen without knocking or calling out. They all talked at once, staring at me like I was a freak. I resisted the impulse to stick out my tongue at their bad manners.

*Devil's apprentices*, Aunt Annie had stated. She clapped and waved the boys outside.

Raylene, the fatter woman, laughed. "Small fer their age. Probably why they're hellions. Whyncha go out and play with 'em, Bobbiejean?"

"Bobbiejean's got chores," Aunt Annie said. "Besides, she can't take much sun."

"Is that why she's whiter 'n the underbelly of a dead fish?" Raylene cackled.

Aunt Annie squeezed me into her thin body, sharp as barbed wire, then nudged me toward the back door. "At least she's not freckled as a guinea hen."

"Now, Anna." The other woman spoke for the first time. "Raylene didn't mean nothin'."

I should've gone up the stairs to my room, but I wanted to kick something so bad I detoured and slipped outside intending to run down the hill and wade in the creek to cool off. As I rounded the corner of the house, a moon-faced boy leaped up, his mouth and eyes wide. He yelled *boo* at the top of his lungs. My heart pounded so hard, I stumbled as I jumped back.

The other two boys came from out of nowhere, laughing, slapping their chests, and snorting like pigs. "Skeeredy-cat," they chanted. "Baaaaby. Skeered of her own shadow."

Heat rushed to my head, and I was afraid I might faint. I yelled, "Am not!"

The one a couple inches taller than me got right in my face and whispered, "Prove it."

Dancing black sun-dots hurt my eyes. I ignored the tiny voice trying, from deep in my broiled brain, to get my attention. "How?"

"C'mon—if you dare—we'll show yew." His bottom lip curled.

Everything I'd ever learned about dares from a book and from Mama evaporated in the fraction of an instant. "Show me, hillbilly."

The heat and black flies and burrs in the grass should've slowed our break-neck race down the hill, across the creek, and up the bluff facing Aunt Annie's house. But the tallest boy set the pace, and I kept up. When we entered the dark, sunless woods, acorns crunched under our bare feet. One of the boys cautioned about gopher holes, but I shrugged off his warning. Snakes were my downfall. Whether garter snakes in the garden or black snakes in the henhouse or water moccasins sliding off the creek bank, snakes turned me into a cry-baby mess.

My sides ached and I knuckled under my ribs, trying to catch my breath. The tallest boy slowed, stopped, and pointed at a gray, rickety building in the clearing. The tin roof over the porch had collapsed, and the three windows facing us had more broken than whole panes. A huge, black dog bayed and charged toward us, scattering half a dozen chickens scratching in the dirt around the front door. Glory, I hated stepping in warm chicken shit.

The tallest boy shushed the dog. "You scream," he said, puffing out his thin chest, "I'll sic Robert E. Lee on you."

His two brothers came and formed a circle around me. The middle one whispered, "No bawling, neither."

"Why would I?"

Sweat crawled through my hair and down my neck, pooling at the top of my shift plastered to my back. My stomach knotted. No one knew I'd gone off with these boys. What if they told me to take off my underpants? Or ordered me to get buck-naked?

Ridiculously, the birds calling each other gave me some small reassurance. The boys hustled me around the house. A tin shed stood some distance from the back door. A sound—like hooves—slammed against the shed's walls. A high whinny pierced the air.

"That's Sooner," the tallest boy said. "Want to see him?"

Aunt Annie and Uncle Gus owned no horses, but I loved them like no other animal. Of course I wanted to see Sooner. "Is he wild? Is that why you thought I'd be afraid?"

The boys laughed, beckoned me closer, and pointed to a knothole at eye level. Holding my breath, I put my eye to the spot. Air whooshed out of my lungs. Guttural neighs, followed by the wall shaking, sent me scrabbling backwards. I fell on my butt and my teeth clacked together.

“In’t he sumpfin?” The tallest boy asked. “He’s crazy as a bedbug. We gotta keep him tethered to the bedpost or he’d be gallopin’ all over creation. Just like a horse.”

My ears clanged, but I jumped to my feet and ran. Please, let me find my way to Aunt Annie’s. Glory, I wished I’d never seen that boy—man?—with long, shiny hair like a mane, his eyes violent—rearing back on his feet and pawing the air with his hands.

*Do not cry. Do not cry. Do. Not. Cry.*

Behind me, the boys crashed through the undergrowth and yelled *stop*. I paid no attention. When we reached the pasture where I walked Cleo home every day, I ran harder. I pushed myself forward as if Sooner bore down on me like the devil. I half expected the ground to open up and swallow me into the gates of hell. Aunt Annie often mentioned that bad-girl fate.

Ready to confess, accept any punishment, I flew past the barn where Uncle Gus’s brothers and wives sat in their junky cars, engines running. The sudden blare of their honking horns fueled my terror. Heart thumping, I lengthened my stride. Aunt Annie emerged on the porch, dressed in a Sunday-clean dress and no apron. She raced toward me, and I collapsed into her open arms, sobbing.

“Where’ve you been, Bobbiejean?” She wrapped my legs around her waist and sprinted for the barn. “Your mama’s in a bad way. Your daddy took her to the hospital. She lost the babies. Twins. Born dead . . .”

The trip to the hospital blurred. I couldn’t feel my body. Or hear. Or speak. When we reached the hospital, I couldn’t walk. Daddy’s stone face confirmed my dread.

Mama was dead.

Because of me. Because of the last words I remembered Aunt Annie moaning.

“Your mama saw you leave with the hillbillies. She got agitated. Tore outta the house. Slipped. Fell. Went into labor.”

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