

Contents

1. Home Again	9
2. A New Face	21
3. "Just Leave Me Alone"	31
4. Bare Knuckles	38
5. Old-Time Religion	50
6. A Hasty Decision	62
7. Home to Tennessee	71
8. Battle Fury	78
9. A Defeated Army	85
10. "You Mean—She Might Die?"	98
11. Love Never Changes	105
12. Lori and Drake	115
13. Prelude to Battle	126
14. Greater Love Has No Man	137
15. A New Beginning	147
16. A Surprise for Sarah	155

1

Home Again

As soon as Leah Carter dumped the bucket of field corn into the trough, all seven suckling pigs came running across the lot. She smiled at their squeals, and as their pink snouts pushed into the corn she laughed at their eagerness.

“You have the worst manners of any pigs I ever saw! Look at you, Jacob—shoving your brother out of the way! Now you stop that!”

Leah had named all of the pigs after characters in the Bible, and now she saw that she had named them well. The one named Cain was snapping at the one she had named Abel. She caught Cain’s tail and dragged him backward.

“You give your brother a fair share of that corn!” she scolded.

But Cain was true to his name. He snorted and bit at her wickedly, and when she released him he plunged back into the mass of squirming piggish bodies.

Leah gave up on the pigs and leaned on the fence to watch as they chewed and grunted. “You look like some of the Franklin family at the church picnic. I never saw such greed!” she said aloud.

But there was a smile on her face for she loved animals and took pleasure in raising them. Somewhere down the line she knew they would all either be sold or end up on her plate as pork chops.

However, she had learned to forget this—or at least put it out of her mind.

A slight July breeze blew Leah's hair and cooled her face. She was a tall girl of fifteen and saw herself as gawky. Her mother had said, "You're going to be *stately*, Leah, not a giantess!" and another time Ma had said sharply, "Stop stooping over! God gave you a tall, good figure—now don't be ashamed of being tall."

Leah, like many young girls her age, was too conscious of her appearance. Actually she had nothing to be ashamed of. She had light blonde hair, very fine, that hung to her waist when it was not braided and coiled around the back of her head as it was now. Her eyes were a light green that sometimes seemed almost blue. One of her uncles, who had been to the ocean, said, "Leah, your eyes are just the color as the sea at certain times of the morning—not quite blue, not quite green, just a little bit of each."

She had an oval face with a shapely wide mouth, and her complexion was fair. She had a few freckles across her nose—which she hated.

Leah drifted off in thought, wondering how Jeff Majors would think of the way she was growing up. Jeff was one year older. They had birthdays on the same date, June 15, and until the time that the Majorses left Kentucky, they had spent every birthday party together.

The thought of Jeff's leaving saddened Leah. "I hate this old war," she muttered. Her brother, Royal, had gone to fight for the Union, while Jeff's family had gone to Virginia to side with the South. Now Jeff was a drummer boy in the Confederate army—his father was a major—and, strangely

enough, Jeff's older brother, Tom, was back here with the Carters after having had his leg shattered at Gettysburg.

For a while Leah thought of the days when she and Jeff had roamed the hills hunting birds' eggs and chasing possums and raccoons, or fishing. "I wish the war was all over," she said, "and everything could be like it was again. I wish—"

Suddenly strong arms wrapped around Leah, pinning her arms to her side and squeezing her so that she could not get her breath. She was lifted clear off the ground, and she squealed in sudden fear. The arms merely tightened, and she felt a face press against the back of her head—and then she got a resounding kiss on her right cheek!

"Is that you all got to do—stay out here and watch pigs, Leah?"

Leah felt herself released, and she whirled to see Royal standing before her, grinning.

"Royal!" She threw her arms around him and pressed her face against his chest, and his arms closed around her again. Fear that he would be hurt or even killed in battle had been with Leah every day her brother had been gone. And now he was back!

Trying to put an angry expression on her face, she said, "Royal, I could shoot you! Why didn't you tell us you were coming home?"

"Didn't know it," he said airily.

Her brother was not tall—not over five eight or nine—but he was strongly built. He had a cheerful face, hair only a little darker than Leah's, and amazingly light blue eyes. They looked like cornflowers, Leah once told him. He was called "the Professor"

by the soldiers in his unit, for he had spent one year in college and usually had his nose in a book.

He reached out and pinched Leah's chin. "Anyway, I wanted to surprise you," he said.

"Have you been to the house to see Ma and Pa?"

"No, just got here. Come on—you can take me in."

Leah grabbed Royal's hand as they walked toward the house. She fired questions at him, which he answered as best he could. They climbed the steps to the white two-story farm home, entered through the front door, and went down the wide hall that led to the kitchen.

"Ma—Pa—look who's here."

Dan and Mary Carter rushed to Royal and embraced him.

"Why, Son, what a great surprise!" Mr. Carter said. "How long can you stay?"

His father was thin, with the sickly look of the chronically ill. He had brown hair, faded blue eyes, and a firm mouth under a scraggly mustache. He had been shot up badly in the Mexican War and now was a sutler. He followed the Union army in his wagon, carrying supplies such as paper, pins, needles and thread, and special foods that the soldiers liked. Leah sometimes went with him.

"How long can I stay?" Royal repeated. "Long enough to eat you out of house and home, Pa." He hugged his mother with one arm and shook his father's hand at the same time. "Ma, I'm expecting to be fed like the Thanksgiving turkey before he becomes the dinner!"

Mrs. Carter was an attractive woman. She had the same blonde hair and blue-green eyes as his sis-

ter Leah, and there was a strength in her that everyone recognized. "I might know you'd come home hungry," she said. "You sit right down there. I'll start making one of those cherry pies."

"Make one just for me, Ma."

"You start the pie, Ma," Leah said. "Come, Royal—I've got a surprise for you."

Their parents looked at her as if they knew what was on her mind. "You bring him back soon," Mrs. Carter said.

"Where are we going?" Royal asked as Leah hauled him by the hand out of the kitchen and through the back door.

"You'll see." She pulled him down the steps and then turned him to face the huge walnut tree that shaded the backyard. Underneath it a small group sat on a quilt spread on the ground—Royal's other sisters, Sarah and Morena, and a man playing with a year-old blonde baby.

At the sight of the man, Royal dropped Leah's hand and yelled, "Tom—Tom Majors!" and ran across the yard.

Tom Majors looked up. Tom had been Royal's best friend since boyhood. He was wearing a checked red-and-white shirt and gray trousers.

Royal crossed the yard in bounds, dropped down beside his friend, and beat him on the shoulders. "Tom, you old son of a gun, what are you doing here?"

The last he had heard, Tom was a sergeant in the Confederate army, and Royal couldn't imagine how he had gotten back to neutral ground in Kentucky—right here at his own home.

Suddenly a cry rose from Tom's lips, and Royal stopped abruptly and drew back. Tom Majors was

dark complexioned, but now his face was pale, and there was pain in his eyes.

“What’s wrong, Tom? I didn’t hurt you, did I?” But even as Royal spoke, he saw that Tom’s left leg was missing below the knee. He stood up quickly. “Well—say—I’m sorry—I didn’t know, Tom.”

Tom Majors pulled himself to his feet. Reaching out, he took the pair of crutches that was leaning against the tree trunk and settled them under his arms. “That’s all right, Royal,” he said quietly.

Silence fell over the group then. The girl beside him—Royal’s sister Sarah—was the first to recover. “I’m so glad to see you, Royal,” and as he put his arms around her, she kissed him on the cheek. “How long can you stay?”

“Maybe a couple of weeks,” Royal said. He was still stunned by Tom’s injury, and his mind swirled as he tried to think of what to say. Finally, being an honest young man, he turned to his friend and asked, “Where did you get hit, Tom? Gettysburg?”

“That’s right.”

Royal waited for him to say more, but Tom Majors simply pressed his lips tightly together.

“Well, I’m glad it wasn’t worse,” Royal said quickly. “How did you get here?”

“Jeff and Sarah brought me. I was hurt too bad to travel back to Virginia. She’ll tell you about it. I’ll be seeing you around, Royal.” Tom put out the crutches and swung his body along, his face hidden. He disappeared around the house, and Royal stared after him.

Then Royal felt a hand and looked down to see his eleven-year-old sister Morena tugging at him. She too had blonde hair, but there was a blankness in her blue eyes. She had developed into a beautiful

child physically, but mentally she never had matured.

Royal swept her up in his arms. “Morena,” he said, “you are getting prettier all the time.”

She laughed and patted his cheek.

Sarah and Leah stood quietly waiting as he played with the child.

And then he looked up. “Tell me about it.”

Sarah said quietly, “It was a miracle really, Royal. I’d gone to Gettysburg to be with Abigail Munson. She was having her first child and was pretty much alone. I was there when the battle took place. Tom and Jeff were there with the army. When Tom lost his leg and couldn’t travel, we had to do something. It was impossible to get back to Virginia. Both he and Jeff would have been captured.” Her blue eyes were thoughtful as she remembered that time. “I bought a wagon and team—we traveled at night, dodging Union patrols until we got back here.”

“Tom’s changed, Royal,” Leah said. “His leg is healing, but he seems to have given up. He just won’t take an interest in anything—he’s not the Tom we knew.”

Royal glanced in the direction where Tom had disappeared. “Maybe I can help him,” he said. “We were always real close.”

Sarah hesitated. “I hope you can.”

The thought came to Royal that Sarah was closer to Tom than anyone else—they had been almost engaged before the war started. He studied her face and knew that, if Sarah could not help Tom, it would be difficult for anyone to help.

“Well, I’ll do the best I can—we all will,” he said. Then he knelt beside the baby on the quilt. “Look at

Esther—she’s growing like a tadpole turning into a frog.”

“That’s awful, Royal!” Sarah protested. “To call a child a frog! She’s the prettiest baby that ever was!”

Esther was the only sister of Tom and Jeff. Her mother had died giving birth to her, and since all the Majors men were in the Confederate army, the Carters, their old neighbors, had taken the child to raise.

Royal picked her up, and she squealed. He said, “She *is* good-looking, the best-looking female on the place.” He winked at his sisters. “But don’t tell Ma I said so.”

At supper that night there was great rejoicing. Mrs. Carter loaded the table, with help from her two daughters: pork chops, fresh ham, fried chicken, mashed potatoes, candied yams, green beans—and two luscious cherry pies in crumbly crusts.

Royal finally leaned back after his third piece of pie. “It would be a sin to eat any more of this,” he declared.

“It was a sin about a half hour ago, I think, Son.” His father grinned at him. “I believe we have all committed gluttony tonight.”

“Tell us some more about the army, Royal,” Leah said eagerly.

“Well, Tom here could tell you more than I could. For us it’s been either bored to death or scared to death.”

Sarah was sitting next to Tom. “What do you mean?” she asked.

Royal had noticed that Tom had scarcely touched his food. He’d been mostly just pushing it around with his fork. He had not said ten words

either. But at mention of the war, his hand closed tightly on his fork, the knuckles growing white.

“I mean it’s either weeks or even months of drilling—the same old thing every day. Then you go into a battle, and for about one day or two you’re scared to death. Is that the way it was with you fellas, Tom?”

“Just about.” Tom’s face was pale, and his voice was low. He did not contribute anything else to the conversation although he had been through every major battle.

Since Tom had been on the opposite side, from time to time Royal had had nightmares that one day on the battlefield he would face a young fellow in a gray uniform and that fellow would be his best friend, Tom Majors.

Leah obviously saw that Tom was not going to participate in the conversation. “Come on into the parlor, Royal,” she said. “I want to show you some pictures. A traveling photographer came, and we all had our pictures made.”

“But I haven’t had my coffee yet.”

“I’ll bring it to you,” his mother said. “You go on in. You girls too. I’ll do the dishes.”

The girls protested, but not very much. Sarah finally said, “You come too, Ma. We can all wash the dishes later.”

The parlor was a pleasant room with whale oil lamps on the heavy walnut tables. Royal and his sisters seated themselves on the horsehide sofa, Royal in the middle with Leah and Sarah on each side. Morena came to sit on his lap, and across the room Tom sat, holding the baby, Esther. He stroked her hair gently and, as the others exclaimed and laughed over the pictures, he seemed to be far away.

Perhaps he was thinking about his father, now a major in the Confederate army, and his brother, Jeff, a private—wondering if they were about to go into another battle. He glanced down at his pinned-up left trouser leg, and a spasm of pain crossed his face.

From across the room Royal saw it, and his heart constricted. He said nothing, but it hurt him to see Tom Majors, who had always been the most cheerful young man at any party, just sitting there, cut off from all the rest of them.

Finally the women went back to the kitchen to do the dishes, and Mr. Carter yawned and said, "I've had a long day—I'm going to bed. It's good to have you home, Royal," he said, and then he left.

Royal sat on the sofa with Morena beside him. She was content to hold his hand and stroke it lovingly. He smiled down at her. The only language she really understood was the expression on someone's face or the tone of voice.

"You're mighty pretty, Morena," he murmured. Then he looked across at Tom and Esther. "She sure is a beauty, Esther is."

"Yes, she is. She looks like Ma," Tom said. He smoothed the blonde hair and touched the silky cheek with his finger. Esther grabbed it and pulled at it vigorously. This brought a smile to Tom's face, the first of the evening.

For a while the two men talked, but it was an effort. No matter how much Royal spoke, Tom answered only in monosyllables. At last Tom rose, put the baby on the floor, and said, "I guess I'll go to bed too. It's good to have you back, Royal."

Royal sat beside Morena, listening to the thump of Tom's crutches echo from the hall. Then he heard

a door slam. Finally he picked up Esther, and he and Morena went into the kitchen, where his mother dried her hands and carried the baby off to bed.

When it was past everyone's bedtime, Royal was left for a few moments alone with Sarah.

"It's real bad, Sarah," Royal said quietly. "Is he always like this?"

"I haven't seen him smile hardly twice since he got here," Sarah answered slowly.

"But surely he knows that life's not over!"

"He acts as though it is. He never talks about what is going to happen. He doesn't talk about anything."

"But there are ways that he can be helped. There are artificial legs. He could get one of those."

Sarah turned and faced her brother. "Ezra has tried to talk him into that."

Ezra Payne, Royal thought. Their hired hand, who was very clever with tools. Although young, he could make almost anything out of wood.

"Ezra could make one too. But Tom won't listen."

"But we've got to convince him."

"You remember Gus Springer?"

"Sure, I remember Gus." A light came into Royal's eyes, and he said, "Why, yes—*he's* got an artificial leg, and he gets around great."

"Yes, he does—and I asked him to come out and talk to Tom, and he did."

"Well, how did it go? You know Gus. He can do almost anything—you hardly know he's lost a leg. But—" Seeing the look on his sister's face, Royal asked quietly, "He wouldn't listen to Gus?"

"No, and he got angry with me for asking him here." Sarah's eyes filled with tears, and she abrupt-

ly dashed them away. "I—I don't know what we are going to do about Tom."

A feeling of helplessness filled Royal Carter. He put his hands on Sarah's shoulders. "We'll do something," he said firmly. "God saved Tom's life. He's not through with him yet!"

2

A New Face

Come on, Tom, you don't have to dance, but you always liked music. I don't think you ought to sit here at home."

Royal had found Tom on the parlor sofa, watching Esther crawl around on the floor.

"I don't think so, Royal," he said.

A frown passed across Royal's face. He had promised Sarah and Leah that he would do his best to get Tom to go to the dance that was being held at the schoolhouse. They had both warned him that it would be useless to try, for Tom had not left the house more than once or twice since he had come back to Pineville.

Biting his lip, Royal tried once again. "Look, Tom, maybe you feel out of place, your being Confederate and all, but that's all over now."

Tom's eyes flashed. "I may be a cripple," he snapped, "but I'm still a Confederate! People around here aren't going to forget that. Leave me alone, will you, Royal! If you want to help me, *that's* what you can do—just leave me alone."

Royal wanted to argue, but he saw from the stubborn look on Tom's face that arguing would be useless. He turned and left the room and found Sarah and Leah ready to go. They had obviously been listening to his conversation with Tom.

Sarah shook her head warningly. "It won't work, Royal," she said in a whisper.

They went outside, and Royal helped Sarah and Leah into the carriage. He climbed in then and spoke to the horses, and the buggy was soon bumping along the road headed for the schoolhouse. They said little, everyone avoiding the subject of Tom Majors. However, Royal knew that Tom was on their minds.

Royal did say, "He'll come around. It'll just take a little time." He saw that Sarah was unhappy, but he knew her well enough to say no more on the subject.

They pulled up at the schoolhouse. The yard was already full of buggies, wagons, and saddle horses. The sound of music was wafted on the warm summer air, and as Royal helped the girls down, he said, "This is a little bit different from what I've been used to lately."

Sarah reached over and straightened his collar. He was wearing his uniform and looked rather dashing in it. Although not strikingly handsome, Royal was nonetheless attractive. His blue eyes sparkled, and he looked trim and fit.

Lanterns hung over the outside platform that had been built for the dancers, and he looked around at the crowd. "I guess all the pretty girls have been taken since I left for the army."

"No, there are lots of them without their young men." Leah smiled at him. "You better take a stick, Royal, to beat them off!"

He laughed at her and pinched her cheek. "None of them will be as pretty as you, Sis," he said, "except maybe for Sarah here. But you both look like angels."

Sarah wore a rose-colored dress, and her hair was done up in a way that he had not seen before.

She was a beautiful girl, and at once she was claimed by a young man who took her off to dance.

Leah was claimed by one of her youthful friends, David Peterson, who lived just down the road. He was overweight, and his collar was so tight his face seemed to be swollen. He was hopelessly in love with Leah, who liked him but was not nearly as much taken with him as he was with her.

As the sisters had said, Royal became the center of attention almost instantly. He found himself dancing with Maude Kimberly, a short, plump girl of seventeen, who batted her eyelashes at him in a way she evidently thought was very fetching. She was wearing a bright red dress that emphasized her plumpness. She looked in fact rather like an over-ripe tomato, although Royal, of course, did not say so.

After that dance, he danced with Mable Conroy, an old friend, and then he sought out the refreshment table, where he was surrounded by the men. They asked him eagerly about his war experiences. He spoke about them briefly, and then Sarah pulled him away.

"You can talk to the men down at the feed store tomorrow. That's where they go to chew tobacco and spit and decide how to run the country," she said with a mischievous glint in her eye. "Tonight you just have fun!"

Even as she spoke, a clear tenor voice rose up, and Royal looked around to find the singer.

"Why, that's Drake Bedford," he said. He listened for a moment. "Drake always was the best singer—and one of the best fiddle players."

"Oh, yes, he's in his element at these dances." Sarah hesitated. "But he's kind of wild, Royal."

“Yes, he always was. All the time drinking and fighting with some other fellow over some girl. He still doing that?”

“I’m afraid so. He is handsome though, isn’t he?”

Royal examined the features of the young singer. He was tall, over six feet, strong-looking and athletic. He had crisp brown hair, gray eyes, and was wearing a stylish gray suit with a black string tie. When he finished his song, the musicians struck up, and he grabbed a young lady standing nearby and began swinging her around the platform.

“How about a dance with you, Sis?” Royal asked.

“You didn’t come to dance with your *sister*, Royal!” Sarah protested.

“Well, let’s see who I can dance with. There’s Amy Perkins. She always walks all over your feet—don’t want her. And there’s Roseanne Grangerford—she wants to talk about poetry all the time—and bad poetry too. She doesn’t know the difference between good and bad.” His eyes ran over the crowd, and he halted his cataloging of the young ladies abruptly. “Who’s *that*, Sarah?”

Sarah looked in the direction of Royal’s glance. “Oh, that’s Lorraine Jenkins.”

“Who is she? She’s new around here, isn’t she?”

“She’s Hamilton Jenkins’s niece. You know him and his wife, Mae, don’t you?”

“Yes, but I didn’t think anybody as homely as that pair could have any relatives as pretty as she is.”

“You shouldn’t say that! The Jenkinses are fine people!”

“Yes, they are. I was just kidding!”

Royal watched the girl Lorraine Jenkins. She was with a man he did not know, and the man was

obviously taken with her. She was a small girl, and the lantern light glinted on her auburn hair, making it look almost red. She had an oval face, and there was something vivacious about her. He could tell from her chin and the side of her face that she was strong-willed—and that she had lovely eyes and full red lips.

“I suppose I ought to take pity on her and pull her away from that clodhopper that is probably walking all over her feet.”

“You always were chivalrous, Royal,” Sarah teased.

Royal made his way toward the couple and tapped the man on the shoulder. “Mind if I cut in?”

“Well—”

Royal did not wait for him to finish but took the girl’s hand and swung her away, leaving her partner looking rather disconsolate and half angry.

“My name is Royal Carter,” he said. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“No, I’m Lorraine Jenkins.”

“Happy to know you, Miss Jenkins. You’re new in town here, are you?”

“Yes, my home is in Chattanooga. I’m here on a visit to my uncle and aunt.”

“Oh, yes, Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins—they’re fine people. Are you enjoying your visit?”

From across the platform Leah watched as the pair danced. She was suddenly interrupted by a voice that said, “Well, now, it’s Miss Leah, ain’t it?”

She looked around to see a tall, gangly young man standing behind her. She knew him at once, for he was almost unforgettable. He had tow-colored hair, parted in the center, light blue eyes, and

craggy features. He looked a little like a very young Abraham Lincoln with his homely expression.

“Yes, it’s Mr. Rose, isn’t it?”

“Well—” the young man grinned “—that’s what the preacher calls me. A. B. Rose is my name, but folks just call me Rosie. I think I might be able to make it through at least one dance if you’d like, Miss Leah.”

“Why, of course, Rosie.”

He had huge feet, but he didn’t tread on her toes. As they stepped onto the platform, he cleared his throat. “Don’t reckon I’m long for this world, Miss Leah.”

Looking up, Leah was amazed. “Why, what’s the matter, Rosie?”

“I’m not a well man,” he said solemnly. There was a gloomy look on his face. “I’m lucky that I’ve lived to be as old as I have, but it can’t go on forever.”

Actually he seemed to be a rather strong young man, she thought, despite his gangly frame. His hands were corded with muscles, and there was a healthy glow to his face.

Still, he began to catalog his physical ailments. “My rheumatism is doing better, but that’s because I got that medicine out of Memphis for it. But I got these terrible shooting pains in my legs. They can’t be growing pains—at least, I hope they ain’t. Probably some dreadful disease that ain’t been discovered yet.”

Soon Leah began to suspect that Rosie’s ailments were all imaginary. He led her over to the refreshment center and ate three pieces of pie so quickly that it was almost magical. Leah’s eyes

twinkled. "Do you suppose pie is good for your ailments, Rosie?"

"There's no telling," he said, his voice almost funereal. He reached for another piece. "Man that's born of this world is of few days—that's what the Scripture says."

Leah looked across the platform. "You and Drake are great friends, aren't you?"

"Oh, that we are, Miss Leah. He's been mighty good to me and my misfortune."

Leah then remembered hearing that this very young man, who claimed to be an invalid, had been jailed along with Drake Bedford for fighting. The two of them had taken on five toughs from over in North Pine Community and had thrashed them soundly. Now she was sure that Rosie was indeed self-diseased.

The music struck up again, and Rosie sighed heavily. "Well—" he shoved a bite of pie into his mouth "—I guess we better see if I can hold up one more time around that floor."

As Rosie led her to the platform again, Leah said, "Look, my brother's with that new girl in town."

"Oh, that Miss Lori Jenkins?"

"That's her. See—that's my brother, Royal. Remember him?"

"Sure do, but I wish he wouldn't force himself on Miss Lori."

"Why, I don't think he'd do that!" Leah was puzzled. "Why do you say that, Rosie?"

"Well, Drake—he fancies himself first where the ladies are concerned. And he's got his head set on impressing her. I never saw him so set on courting a gal."

Royal had been enjoying his dance with Lorraine Jenkins. He had gotten things to the point where she had asked him to call her Lori, and he was working up to requesting permission to call on her. At that moment a hand clapped him on the shoulder harder than was necessary. He turned to see Drake Bedford grinning at him.

“Hello, Royal. I’m taking your girl away!”

“Why, sure, Drake.” Royal stepped back as was the custom. “I’ll see you later, Miss Lori.”

“Not if I can help it!” Drake Bedford said.

Drake swept Lori away, and when they were out on the floor again he said, “Now, you don’t want to get too interested in that young man.”

Lori smiled at him. She had never seen a man with more self-confidence. *A little bit too much sometimes*, she thought. “He looks fine in his uniform, doesn’t he? My uncle says he’s been in some of the battles.”

“Oh, sure, that’s the way these soldiers are. Throw on a uniform and hear a gun go off—then to hear them tell it, they won the whole war. I see them all the time like that.”

Something about this response displeased Lori. “I don’t think Royal is like that. He seems a rather modest young man.”

Drake looked down at her. He seemed very tall and strong, and his grasp on her hand tightened. “You can’t use but one fellow courting at a time, and I reckon that I’m that fellow.”

Royal was enjoying the evening thoroughly. It had been a long time since he’d been home, and he

was glad to see his old friends again. He received numerous offers to come and take supper—mostly from mothers with marriageable daughters. But he managed to fend most of them off.

Then it was the last dance, and he managed to get close to Lori again. She turned to him with a smile.

“I don’t have much time, Miss Lori,” he said. “Ordinarily I’d wait two or three weeks to come calling, but I’m asking now.”

Lori hesitated. “Well, of course!” she said. “Why don’t you come to supper tomorrow night? At half past five?”

“Will that be all right with your uncle and aunt?”

“Oh, yes, they’ll be glad to have you. They are always very supportive of young men in the army.”

Then they heard a muffled shout, and people began leaving the platform.

“What’s going on?” Royal asked.

“I don’t know. Let’s go see.”

They followed the crowd, and Royal soon saw that a fight was in progress. “Why, that’s Drake!” he exclaimed.

“Yes, it is.”

There was such an odd quality in Lori’s voice that Royal gave her a questioning look.

“That’s Darrell Hopkins he’s fighting with,” she said.

All at once Royal understood. “I see. Over you, I suppose?”

“Oh, it’s so silly. Darrell is just a good friend, but Drake’s decided that he’s my keeper.” A sudden thought seemed to come to her, and she asked, “Are you good friends with Drake?”

“Not particularly.”

“Then I’m afraid he’ll make trouble for you if you come calling.”

Royal smiled down at her. She looked very fetching in her light blue party dress. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were large and beautifully shaped. They were shaded by the heaviest lashes he had ever seen, and she had skin like cream.

“Well, Drake will just have to do what he has to do—but I’ll be there for supper tomorrow night, Miss Lori.”

“Good!” she said. “I’ll try to talk to Drake so that he doesn’t start any foolishness.”

“I sure have enjoyed dancing with you, Miss Leah,” Rosie said. “Surprised I made it, but you must be good medicine for a sick man.”

“It looks like that fellow Drake was fighting was hurt pretty bad,” Leah said, a worried expression on her face.

“Oh, he probably got a few bones broke and maybe his nose smooshed, but that’s how Drake is. I don’t guess Darrell will be courting anybody for a while.” Rosie hesitated, then said, “You might tip your brother off. I see he’s been with Miss Lori a lot. Tell him it might be better for his health if he didn’t do that.”

“He can see anyone he wants to!”

“Well, of course he can. It’s a free country.” Rosie shrugged and then apparently put the matter from his mind. “Look. I got these pills out of Cincinnati last week. They’re supposed to be good for indigestion. Do they look all right to you?”