



LETTERS

*from My*

SISTER

*a novel*

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FRASER LUESSE

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In loving memory of two sisters—  
my maternal grandmother, Icie Wyatt McCranie,  
and my great-aunt, Effie Jane Wyatt



# ONE

Callie Bullock traced an imaginary circle on the windowpane, framing a cluster of ladies in their picnic dresses—swirls of fine cotton in shades of spring. Like pastel swans, they glided across the lawn, gathering in flocks of three or four to preen, pose, and cast an inquisitive eye on their surroundings.

“Deliver me from the company of women,” Callie said as she completed the circle.

Her older sister, Emmy, came to stand behind her and followed her gaze. “I hope you’ll make an exception for me, Callie, or I’ll have to sleep upstairs with the boys. Sometimes they smell.”

They laughed as they looked out the window at all the neighbors who had come to enjoy the annual fish fry and picnic their parents hosted on May Day, after the men seined the creek.

“I’ll bet you those women spend the whole day lamenting the scandalous rise of hemlines in ladies’ magazines,” Callie said.

“Could you endure the horror more easily if I let you wear my new blue and tan?” Emmy nodded toward their shared dressing table.

“Might ease the pain.” Callie sat down and stared into the mirror as her sister placed the wide-brimmed, tan linen hat on

her head and carefully adjusted its band of pale blue raw silk, which was tied into a bow in back.

There stood Emmy with a shiny cloud of golden hair swept up into a perfect pompadour under her Gainsborough—Emmy with eyes the color of aquamarines and flawless ivory skin. She looked nothing like Callie, with her ebony eyes and thick, curly cascade of deep chestnut hair, now subdued into an elaborate French braid—Emmy’s handiwork. No one would guess they were even related, but they were sisters and soul mates, just two years apart—Emmy twenty and Callie eighteen.

Callie heard a knock at the door just before Hepsy stepped in. Hepzibah Jordan worked as the Bullocks’ cook and housekeeper, but she was far more than an employee. Hepsy kept the entire household running smoothly and was a trusted counselor and confidante to all the women in the family, as well as to Callie’s brother George, who was her favorite. She was slim but strong, her eyes a pale amber against bronze skin. She wore her hair braided and neatly gathered into a dignified upsweep.

“Girls, your mama’s lookin’ for you,” she said. “Best get on out there.”

“On our way, Hepsy,” Emmy said. “How are you holding up?”

“Considerin’ I’m ’bout to feed half the county, I reckon I’m alright. Your mama got me some good help for today, so we gon’ make it.”

Callie and Emmy followed her out, abandoning the refuge of their room to join the crowd. They were standing together on the lower porch of their parents’ house when they spotted Ryder Montgomery. Callie rolled her eyes at the sight of him approaching in his pinstriped seersucker suit and perfectly matching boater hat. “Probably spent more time choosing his outfit than any woman here,” she whispered to Emmy.

Ryder climbed the front steps, bowed, and kissed each of them on the hand. “If it isn’t the fair Bullock maidens, looking lovely as two summer roses.”

Emmy all but recoiled, discreetly wiping her hand against the back of her dress. Something about Ryder “brought out the Mama” in Emmy, their brother Sam always said. She offered him a starched greeting. “I trust you and Lucinda are well.”

“Good as gold.” He grinned and winked at her, tipping his hat as he made a beeline for Minnie Weeden, the voluptuous daughter of a scrappy couple who had just moved into the community to run the cotton gin. Minnie, Hepsy said, was “common as a house cat and not as particular.”

“Do you think he’s sincere about *anything*?” Callie asked.

Emmy shook her head. “The only thing Ryder’s sincere about is getting what he wants, no matter who he hurts in the process.”

“Why do you let him get to you, Em? He’s so predictable—not worth worrying about, if you ask me.”

Emmy rubbed the hand Ryder had kissed. “I’m not sure that’s true. Look, there’s Lucinda.”

Ryder’s wife was refined and striking, with deep auburn hair and smoky gray eyes. Emmy and Callie watched her move as far away from Ryder as she could, distancing herself from the humiliating stares as her philandering husband made a spectacle of himself chasing after the ginner’s daughter.

“No woman deserves to be treated like that,” Emmy said. “And to think she could’ve had George.”

As the musicians began to play, all the children at the picnic gathered around the maypole, its long multicolored ribbons streaming down from the top. They chose their colors and began a circuitous dance around the tall pole, plaiting the ribbons over and under each other.

An army of kitchen help, discreetly and efficiently directed by Hepsy, filed toward the long, rectangular tables laid end to end at the front edge of the lawn, each one covered with a crisply ironed white tablecloth. One after another, Hepsy’s crew streamed out of the kitchen and around the house, carrying

mounded bowls of coleslaw and potato salad made with Hepsy's homemade mayonnaise; cast-iron pots of long-simmered collard greens seasoned with ham hocks; cut-glass plates of sliced onions and last summer's canned bread-and-butter pickles and dills; and finally, platter after platter of golden-fried bass, bream, and catfish. Off to the side, a single table, probably ten feet long, was overladen with layer cakes, cobblers, and pies, seven wooden freezers of hand-turned ice cream lined up like soldiers in front of it. Some of the servers placed baskets of Hepsy's homemade dinner rolls on every table and quilt on the grounds while others poured and refreshed glasses of sweet tea and lemonade.

As Emmy joined the throng of guests, Callie drifted, looking for a quiet spot where she could observe the whole to-do at a distance. She paid her respects to the women gathered around her mother and then slipped through the crowd to a solitary rope swing hanging from a centuries-old oak near a rear corner of the house. Giving a light push with her foot, she leaned back so she could look up into the branches as she glided back and forth, stirring a gentle breeze.

The white oak was at least eighty feet tall, its trunk so big that Callie's two oldest brothers, James and George, could stand on either side of the trunk, reach their arms around it, and never touch fingers.

From the swing, she watched George dip ice cream for some of the senior ladies. As he set the serving spoon on a white napkin, someone across the lawn caught his eye—Lucinda.

Callie watched Ryder's long-suffering wife, wondering what George was thinking as he looked at her. She jumped at the unexpected voice behind her. "Sooner or later, Miss Bullock, you'll have to talk to *somebody*."

She turned to see Knox Montgomery, Ryder's twin brother, standing behind her. Dragging her foot to stop the swing, she smiled up at him. "I guess you'll have to do."

Such a strange thing about the Montgomery brothers—if you didn’t know them, you probably couldn’t tell them apart, but once you did know them, they barely resembled each other. The twins had the same dark hair, but Knox kept his neatly combed while his gadabout brother always looked like he’d just stepped off a sailboat. Their eyes were the same shade of ice-blue but looked at the world through completely different lenses. Ryder’s indifferent stare reflected his selfish nature but could turn deceitfully charming, should it suit his purpose. Knox viewed everything and everybody through the constant and true filter of his innate kindness and compassion, which you sensed when he looked at you. Ryder was a shallow mud puddle, his brother a deep, deep well.

Knox sat down on the grass beside the swing. “Give me the lay o’ the land?”

“Well, let’s see.” Callie surveyed the lawn. “The Bartell sisters are actively—and obviously—trolling for husbands.”

“All five of them?”

“All five. Be glad you’re taken. Up on the porch, Miss Nicey Malone is leading a shocking discussion about the raising of hemlines in ladies’ magazines. Miss Nicey is an anti-ankle-ist.”

“As well she should be.” Knox stretched out his legs and leaned back on one elbow. “I don’t suppose you’d take pity and share Emmy’s whereabouts to spare me the ordeal of trying to find her in this hungry mob?”

Callie watched as he searched the crowd for her sister, his eyes wide and hopeful, his lips slightly parted as if he were holding his breath until he found her. The expression on his face flooded Callie with a peculiar fear that had long plagued her. Perfection made her uneasy. The most pristine lawn was the very one that fire ants would tear into if somebody didn’t look out. The prettiest Lady Baltimore cake at the church fellowship was the one most likely to get knocked off the table and ruined if everybody wasn’t careful. And the love that Knox and Emmy

felt for each other—something anybody could see the moment they were together—was as perfect as anything could be, like a pearl of great price, sure to attract thieves and marauders.

Callie scanned the crowd and spotted Emmy, as she always could in any situation. “There she is.”

Knox hurried to his fiancée, and they took each other by the hands—the only public show of affection Aurelia Bullock allowed her daughters—then returned to the swing together.

“Shouldn’t you two kiss or something?” Callie teased Knox and Emmy to chase away her own misgivings.

“I’m going to smother you with a pillow the minute you fall asleep tonight,” Emmy said.

Knox offered an arm to each sister. “Ladies, it would be my honor to escort you to the feed trough.”

The three of them worked their way through the crowd to the food tables, then found a shaded quilt to settle on. Soon a parade of young men made their pilgrimage to Callie, as they always did. She was polite—or tried to be—but quickly tired of them all.

“I’m going for a walk,” she said as one of Hepsy’s helpers came around to collect her empty plate.

“Better to be a moving target?” Knox asked.

“Exactly.” Callie dusted a few cake crumbs from her dress and strolled around the edge of the gathering, stopping here and there to greet her parents’ friends and neighbors, as was expected of her. Just beyond the far reaches of the crowd, which covered the front yard and wrapped halfway around one side of the house, Callie saw a stranger standing a few rows into her father’s field.

Ordinarily, she would never approach a man she didn’t know, but he was openly examining her father’s cotton and wasn’t dressed in work clothes, so he must be a guest of her parents. Moving closer, she could see that he looked to be about George’s age, late twenties or so. He was probably six feet tall. His beard

and mustache were neatly trimmed, cut close to his face, and his tousled hair—longer than most men wore theirs—was a golden brown with honey-colored sun streaks. He wore gray trousers, a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and no tie.

Kneeling to study a cotton plant, he picked up a handful of field dirt and was sifting it through his fingers when he looked up and caught Callie staring at him.

Smiling, he stood and lifted his hand in a half wave. She waved back and walked to the edge of the field. “Good afternoon,” she said.

He dusted his hands together to knock off the dirt. “Afternoon.”

“Are you lost or hiding from the crowd?”

Again he smiled. It was a nice one, honest and sincere. “Maybe a little of both. How about you?”

“Well, I live here, so I’m definitely not lost. I guess that makes me a fugitive from the party.”

“I’m Solomon Beckett,” he said.

“Callie Bullock.”

“Mr. Ira Bullock’s daughter?”

“Yes. Are you new to our community, Mr. Beckett?”

“I am.” He stepped out of the cotton field and came to stand beside her. Up close, Callie could see that he had unusual hazel eyes, their golden center melding into a soft bluish gray. “I met your father at the feed store last week,” he was saying, “and he invited me to your picnic. I just bought the Cruz farm.”

Callie frowned as she remembered it. “The old Cruz place is . . .”

“A challenge,” he finished for her. “But most of the soil is good, and the land was cheap. I’m afraid I’m not as prosperous as your father.”

“Nothing wrong with that. Daddy started with forty acres and two ornery mules that cussed each other all the way to the field. At least that’s the way he tells it.”

“Then maybe there’s hope for me?”

Callie shrugged and grinned. “Maybe. Is the old house still there?”

“Such as it is. Needs a lot of work I don’t have much time for.”

“Oh, but it’ll be worth it!” Callie forgot her usual reserve with people she barely knew. “The corner porches and the beautiful staircase—did you know Mr. Cruz carved the leaf pattern on the newels himself?”

“No, I didn’t,” Solomon said.

“Miss Katherine—that’s what everybody called Mrs. Cruz—she must’ve told us about those carvings a million times. Before she got sick, she used to host Christmas tea parties for all the girls in her Sunday school class. My sister, Emmy, and I never missed one.”

“You’ve convinced me.” Solomon raised his right hand. “I solemnly swear that I’ll make the house tea-party worthy again. Just as soon as I get the farm going so I don’t lose it all.”

“How do you mean to go about building your farm?” Callie asked. “Will you raise cotton or corn or cows . . . ?”

“Too expensive to jump into cotton right away—and I don’t know enough about it yet—so I’ll start with cattle.”

“Beef, I imagine?”

“Black Angus, most likely.”

She bent down, pulled a dandelion from the grass, and absently twirled it as she tried to imagine the overrun Cruz farm in lush pastureland and beef cattle. “I’ve heard Daddy talk about some of the new grasses they’re trying over in Georgia. Do you think you might plant some of those?”

“First I have to clear the land and let it tell me what it’s good for, then I can— What? You’re looking at me like I’m crazy.”

Callie was frowning, her head tilted to one side. “Where exactly did you learn to speak with dirt?”

Solomon put his hands in his pockets. “I read a lot, especially

*The Progressive Farmer*, but I learned most of what I know on a small farm in Missouri.”

“And does it say different things—the dirt in Missouri and the fields here in Alabama?”

“It does.” Solomon nodded toward the field, and Callie followed him a few rows into it. He bent down and scooped up a handful of red dirt to show her. “Where I grew up, the soil is loamy and brown, best suited to grains. Alabama dirt has iron and oxygen in it—that’s what makes it red—and the oxygen helps it drain. Plus it gets hot summers and mild winters. So it loves cotton—soybeans and lots of produce crops too, but maybe cotton best of all.”

Callie knelt down and scooped up a handful of rust-red earth, then let it fall through her fingers. “It’s amazing, isn’t it?” she said as much to herself as her new acquaintance. “Something we can’t even see makes these fields want to grow cotton.”

“You won’t get any argument from me.” Solomon stood and offered Callie his hand to help her up. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and gave it to her to wipe her hands.

“Have you always farmed?” she asked.

“No, I spent quite a few years working sawmills and riverboats on the Mississippi. But I got tired of it—never being still. Farming’s more—I don’t know—solid, I guess.”

She looked at the red dust now covering his white handkerchief. “I should wash this.”

“No need.” He took it from her and shook it before putting it back in his pocket. “Have you always been interested in science?” They walked through the tall cotton plants back to the edge of the field.

“I’m very interested in nature,” she said after thinking about it. “The phases of the moon and the rise and fall of the rivers and the weather and wildlife and the cotton crops—would you call that science?”

“I would.”

“Then I guess I’m interested in science.” She reached down and plucked another dandelion, held it to her mouth, and blew, sending its miniature feathers into the air. “Hepsy—she runs our house—she says it’s good luck if you blow a dandelion and all its feathers fly.”

Solomon looked at the bare stem. “Looks like you’ve conjured yourself some luck then.”

“We’ll see.” Callie scanned the crowd in her parents’ front yard and sighed. “Maybe I’ll make it back to my sister without having to endure any wearisome conversations.”

“Can’t be all that bad,” Solomon said.

“Then what were you doing alone in Daddy’s cotton field instead of squiring some female to the dessert table?”

He raised an eyebrow. “How do you know I’m not married?”

Callie pointed to his left hand and then his neck. “No ring, no tie, no wife.”

Solomon laughed and nodded. “Maybe I need a missus. She’d know how to behave at big to-dos like this.”

“Not to worry,” Callie assured him. “I’ll introduce you to my sister. Emmy’s engaged, so she’s out of the running for your missus, but she’s very good at making people feel at home. You’ve got to meet your neighbors sometime. Might as well get it over with since they’re all here. Give me your arm so we look respectable.”

Solomon sighed and extended his elbow. Callie took it and led him toward the house.

“Just remember,” she said, “if we should encounter any girl by the name of Bartell, you should act completely smitten with me or she’ll have you at the altar before sundown. No one will be able to save you then.”

When they reached the edge of the Bullocks’ lawn, Solomon stopped at the massive white oak that held the rope swing. “Now that’s impressive.”

Callie waved her arm at the trunk like a magician presenting

her next trick. “Behold the fabled Lookout Tree—that’s what we call it anyway.”

Solomon stared up at the towering oak. “Why ‘Lookout?’”

“Well,” Callie said, “about twenty feet up there’s a big U-shaped fork where the original owner of our house, a Captain Brooks Calhoun, hid from the Home Guards who came for him during the Civil War.”

“He deserted?” Solomon studied the tree, trying to see the fork.

“He made it through Chickamauga alive, but then I guess he decided he’d done his part. Rode his horse home to Alabama in the middle of the night. The guards who came for him must have looked everywhere but up because they never found him.”

“What happened to him?”

“He lived to be an old man but eventually lost his mind and spent his last few years wandering the fields, looking for his regiment. My uncle Wally likes to tease Daddy about it—tells him he spent a fortune on a coward’s manse. Are you contemplating desertion this very second?”

Solomon ran his free hand over the rough bark of the tree and groaned.

Callie laughed and tugged at his arm. “Come on. It won’t be so bad.”

She guided him through picnic tables, clusters of couples on quilts, and children racing each other to the ice cream freezers, introducing him along the way as “Daddy’s friend, our new neighbor, Mr. Beckett.” After navigating him to at least one member of all the families in the community, Callie led him to Emmy and Knox’s quilt.

“Solomon, hello!” Knox stood and shook his hand.

“You know each other?” Callie asked.

“I handled the sale of the Cruz place,” Knox explained. “Solomon Beckett, may I present Miss Emeline Bullock.”

“Otherwise known as my sister, Emmy,” Callie added.

Solomon made a slight bow to Emmy. “Pleased to meet you, Miss Bullock.”

Emmy smiled up at him. “You’re our neighbor, so ‘Emmy,’ ‘Knox,’ and ‘Callie’ will do. We’ll skip past ‘Mr. Beckett’ and call you our new friend Solomon if that’s alright. Won’t you join us?”

“Thank you.” He waited for Callie to sit down and then took a seat.

“Tell me, is the old house still there?” Emmy asked him.

“Your sister asked me the same thing. You’ll be happy to hear it’s still standing, hidden behind a tangle of overgrown azalea bushes and crepe myrtles that are being strangled by ivy as we speak.”

“I’m so happy to hear it!” Emmy clapped her hands together. “Not the crepe myrtle strangulation, of course, but I’m delighted the house is still with us. I expect it needs lots of work, but believe me, it’s a diamond in the rough.”

Solomon shook his head. “Emphasis on ‘rough.’ You’re right, though—there’s something about the old house that I took to right away.”

Callie made a sweeping gesture with her hands. “It’s the curved porches on each side of the front door. They’re like outdoor parlors.”

“She’s right,” Emmy said. “They give the house such a graceful air. Are you living in it?”

“Camping in it might be more accurate.” Solomon tasted his ice cream. “That’s about the best I ever had. Who made it?”

“Hepsy,” Callie answered. “She says the trick is milking the cow under a full moon. And if you ask her for the recipe, she’ll leave out an ingredient. Nobody makes Hepsy’s ice cream but Hepsy.”

“Callie at least tried a few times,” Emmy added. “I never even made the attempt. Is there anything we can do to help you settle in, Solomon? Anything you need for the house?”

“Right now, it’s still in need of nails and lumber, but once I get it repaired, I’d sure appreciate some advice. Men don’t know much about making a house a home.”

“We’d be happy to help,” Emmy said.

“Emmy’s better at the domestic arts than I am,” Callie told Solomon.

“That’s not true,” her sister countered. “You can cook circles around me. And your handwriting’s prettier.” She turned to Solomon. “I loop my *i*’s.”

Callie bowed her head. “It’s the family shame, Solomon. Emmy loops her *i*’s.”

Emmy laughed and threw a napkin at her sister.

“I should have all your copies of the title and deed back from the courthouse next week,” Knox told their new friend.

“I appreciate your help,” Solomon said. “But I’ll bet you’ve got more interesting cases than my farm.”

Knox shooed a dragonfly fluttering close to Emmy. “The biggest one I have right now is not so much interesting as sad. It’s a class action suit against a small factory that wouldn’t allow sick employees any time off or take precautions after one of the workers contracted tuberculosis. Now twenty former employees have it—all of them fired as soon as they got sick. They need expensive treatment if they’re to have any chance of surviving. The owner’s out of state and doesn’t care at all about the people here.”

“It’s just awful,” Emmy said, her eyes misting.

“Think you’ll win?” Solomon asked.

Knox shooed the persistent dragonfly again. “Hard to say. I think our case is solid, but the owner has deep pockets, and time is on his side. Once we’re in front of a jury, though, I think I can persuade them to do the right thing. Hope so anyway.”

Emmy clasped his hand. “You’ll win the day for those poor sick people. I know you will.”

As Emmy asked Solomon about his journey to Alabama,

Callie noticed a strange drift among the crowd. It began with one or two, then four or five, until almost half her parents' guests were moving to the backyard, where Hepsy and her help would be having their lunch in between refilling tea glasses and replenishing the serving tables. Callie's mother would not be happy about guests wandering into the backyard where they had no business.

"Emmy, look," she said, nodding toward the flow of humanity.

"What on earth?" Emmy followed Callie's direction as two or three small clusters of their neighbors joined the crowd.

"Nobody ever goes back there during a gathering," Callie said. "They know Hepsy and her help are either working or having their dinner. What's going on?"

Knox stood and offered Emmy his hand. "Only one way to find out. Shall we, everybody?"

Solomon helped Callie up, and they all started to follow another group around back.

Callie abruptly stopped. "Wait—let's go to the upstairs porch so we can see over everybody."

She noticed Solomon carefully wipe his shoes on a rug just outside the front door. Upstairs, Knox led the way to the upper porch overlooking the crowd. Emmy and Callie stood together, the men flanking them.

A few yards from the house stood an old well, where George had helped Hepsy pump water before the kitchen was outfitted with a working sink. Now the well was used primarily for wash days. But Hepsy hadn't come to the well for water today. She was watching what had attracted everyone else to it—a girl who looked about Callie's age, maybe a little younger. She was singing. And she was mesmerizing.

Callie could see that she was neither colored nor white, occupying an indefinable space somewhere in between. Her fair skin was like porcelain, only warmer, kissed with gold. She had

fine features—high cheekbones and a full mouth. Black hair, held back with combs on either side of her face, fell in shiny curls below her shoulders. Her dress, a delicate rose print, had an empire waist and lace trim.

The girl's voice reminded Callie of a soprano she and Emmy had once heard at the opera house in Talladega, where their father took the family to see *H.M.S. Pinafore*. She was singing an old spiritual Callie had heard the field hands sing as they plowed her father's cotton with his many teams of mules, but the girl's version sounded more like the jubilee quartets that sometimes played local fairs and picnics, its upbeat rhythm contradicting the minor key and eerie lyrics. The girl held one hand about waist high and softly snapped her fingers to keep time.

*“Wade in the water,  
Wade in the water, children.  
Wade in the water,  
God's gonna trouble the water.”*

Hepsy's mother, Tirzah, always said “Wade in the Water” was “both a promise and a warnin’ from Almighty.”

Callie looked at the crowd encircling the singer, all captivated as much by her beauty as her voice. But there was something else—a disturbance among the women, who kept tilting their heads to one side, whispering to each other even as they kept their eyes on the girl. Callie could see colored frowns of concern and white ones of disapproval. It was strange how easily she could tell the difference, even from the height of the porch.

Hepsy stood directly behind the singer. She was composed as always but clasped her hands tightly together the way she did when she was anxious. Looking around the crowd, Callie found the primary source of Hepsy's discomfort. She nudged her sister and nodded toward a mulberry tree just beyond the crowd. Standing in its low fork, elevated and partially hidden

from everybody, was Ryder Montgomery. Something about his stance and his unwavering focus on the girl at the well—like a cat waiting to pounce on a bird—made Callie want to leap off the porch, jerk him out of that tree, and shake some sense into him. Emmy shuddered and silently squeezed her hand.

As the song ended, Hepsy suddenly looked up, not at Callie and Emmy but at a spot to their far left. She nodded, relaxed her hands, and went to the singer, then put an arm around her and led her into the house. Callie and Emmy turned just in time to see their mother leave the end of the porch, where she had been silently observing.

“Well, I guess the show’s over,” Knox said, still looking down at the crowd before turning to Emmy. “Shall we go back outside with the masses?” Emmy smiled at him and took his arm.

Solomon said his goodbyes before Knox and Emmy rejoined the picnic guests.

“I hope it wasn’t too brutal,” Callie told him.

“Not at all. You were a fine guide, and I thank you. I hope you and your sister will come and see the house when it’s no longer a danger to your safety.”

“We’d love to see it.” Callie smiled at him. “Just don’t expect me to carry on about draperies and settees.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Solomon turned to go but then stopped and faced Callie again. “One of these days, you’ll have to help me understand what just happened on that porch.”