

THE
Sweetest Rain

FLOWERS OF EDEN . BOOK ONE



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JOHNSON



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The Sweetest Rain

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DEDICATION

For Zoë, my first-born granddaughter and definitely the artist in the family.

I treasure each and every one of the beautiful pictures you've given me.

*Every grandmother, mom, or aunt should have a girl in her life as precious
as you!*

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. —Isaiah 55:10-11, NRSV



EDEN, ARKANSAS
AUGUST 1930

*S*now, beautiful snow! Cold and wet and heavy, each puffy flake brushing Bryony's cheeks like an icy kiss. Pure delight swept through her, and she twirled and twirled and twirled, her bare feet stirring the rapidly rising drifts until the airy crystals rose all around her in a wintry cloud—

“Bry. Bryony!” Something hard landed square in the center of Bryony's chest. “Move over, will you? It's hot enough without you breathing on me.”

Her sister's words didn't register at first. *Hot?* Only a moment ago she'd been dancing through snowdrifts!

Then reality returned, along with the stifling heat of the August night. Bryony rolled onto her back and rubbed her breastbone, still smarting from Larkspur's elbow jab. Come December, when frost covered the ground and winter winds rattled the windowpanes, they'd all be wishing for a taste of summer's warmth.

Except maybe not *this* summer's.

Bryony drew up her knees and fanned herself with the hem of her thin cotton gown. How they survived this miserable heat was

beyond imagining—and it wasn't over yet. Even the crickets' incessant chirping sounded like one long complaint.

Blowing out a sigh strong enough to lift the heavy, damp strands off her brow, Bryony shoved herself upright and dropped her legs off the edge of the narrow cot. Beyond the porch screen she could just make out the shadowy tree line at the far edge of the cotton field. Glimpses of pink through the branches told her dawn wasn't far off. No sense trying to grab another half-hour of sleep when this was surely the coolest part of the day. May as well get up and get cracking.

Careful not to disturb her two sleeping sisters, Bryony edged past their cots, eased open the screen door, and padded across the dry, stubbly grass. After a quick visit to the outhouse, she drew a bucket of well water and splashed her face. Not as refreshing as the snowflakes she'd been dreaming of, but at least it was wet. As droplets trickled down her face and throat, she looked toward the creek and strained to hear the ripple of water over stones as the creek wended its way toward the river. Not much water to speak of in the creek these days, and the river was down, too. Bryony couldn't remember the last time they'd seen rain.

A movement caught her eye—a dark form rising and stooping along the rows of cotton. It could only be Grandpa, getting a head start on another long, murderously hot day. He paused, looked her way, and waved. There wasn't enough daylight yet to see his smile, but she knew it was there. Grandpa Rigby smiled not because he was happy but because he refused to lose hope. "Every day we're breathin' is a gift," he'd say. "We ain't dead yet, so's we gotta keep on keepin' on."

Bryony wasn't sure she subscribed to Grandpa's brand of cynical optimism. She wanted to believe something better awaited at the end of this drought, and she fervently hoped it encompassed more than merely "keepin' on."

The sere summer air had already sucked the dampness from her skin, just like it was drying up those cotton stalks Grandpa kept nursing along. The harvest would be pitiful at best, and surely

wouldn't bring enough at the cotton gin to sustain them through the winter.

Winter . . . snowflakes . . . Bryony yearned to be cold again, just for five minutes.

Groaning under the weight of the water pail, she carried it to the vegetable garden and portioned out minuscule sips to each stunted plant. "Drink up, y'all. You never know when the next drop could be your last."

By the time she finished, Grandpa had made his way back to the house. Sweat soaked his yellowed undershirt beneath faded denim overalls. He fanned his reddened face with a wide-brimmed straw hat that had seen better days. "Cotton looks ready for pickin'. Best get the girls up so's we can start."

"Yes, sir." Bryony could just imagine how thrilled her sisters would be with the news. They all had to pitch in or the work wouldn't get done. It had been that way for twelve years now, ever since Mama first brought them to live on Grandpa's tenant farm on the Heath family's Brookbirch Plantation.

Grandma had already gone to her eternal reward by then, and not quite four years ago Mama joined her. An old man and three skinny girls trying to keep a farm afloat? Insanity. Sheer and utter insanity.

"Lark. Rose. Get a move on." Bryony let the screen door slam behind her, and both sisters bolted upright.

"For pity's sake, Bry." Raking stiff fingers through her matted blond hair, Larkspur growled her irritation.

Rose, the family redhead and at sixteen the youngest, hopped off her cot with an eagerness Bryony envied. Of all of them, Rose loved the farm best, maybe even more than Grandpa.

Already dreading a hot day of picking cotton, Bryony started for the kitchen. "Rose, get the milking done, and see if the hens favored us with any eggs this morning. Lark, set the table for breakfast."

"Always so bossy," Larkspur grumbled as she swept passed Bryony.

The remark stung, and Bryony bit back a snappish reply. Tears nipped at the corners of her eyes.

"Don't mind her." Rose gave Bryony a hug that was long enough to be encouraging but quick enough to avoid sharing too much body warmth. "It's the heat. Makes us all testy."

Testy didn't begin to describe it. "We're about to get a lot hotter. Grandpa says the cotton's ready."

Two conflicting emotions flashed in Rose's eyes: anticipation followed instantly by comprehension. "It's gonna be bad, isn't it?"

Bryony knew her sister wasn't talking about the hot day ahead. She nodded slowly. "It's gonna be bad."

"We'll make it, Bry. Somehow we'll survive. God can't let this drought go on forever."

With a quiet sigh, Bryony followed her sisters into the bedroom, where she shucked her damp nightgown and wiggled into a thin housedress. After running a brush through her hair, she twirled the thick strands into a bun. Standing before the highboy, she glimpsed her sisters' reflections in the mirror. They were an odd bunch. Bryony had inherited Mama's ebony waves, while Larkspur took after their fair-haired, blue-eyed father. Redheaded Rose, who at sixteen already had the womanly figure neither Bryony nor Larkspur could ever hope for, bore a startling resemblance to photographs of Grandma Rigby in her youth.

And their personalities were as disparate as their looks. Rose was the eternal optimist, Larkspur the dreamer, and Bryony . . . Bryony just kept doing her best to hold what was left of her family together.



Hours later, her back aching and sweat dripping from every pore, Bryony winced as the sharp spikes of a cotton boll tore at the exposed skin above her leather gloves. After stuffing another handful into the long, heavy bag dragging behind her, she straightened with a moan and mopped her forehead with the sleeve of her

chambray shirt. Peering at the sky from beneath the wide brim of her sunbonnet, she estimated the time to be nearing five o'clock.

Relentless. No other word described the sun's ferocity. Heaven help her, she couldn't last much longer in this heat. Her heart pined for the way things used to be. Before the drought. Before Papa was killed in the Great War. Before Mama uprooted them from their comfortable home in Memphis and brought them to the farm. She imagined sitting on their Memphis front porch, a stately elm blessing her with its shade and a pleasant breeze wafting the curling tendrils off her neck. She'd sip from a tall glass of cold lemonade with real ice cubes while a handsome beau kept the porch swing swaying gently with a push of his spit-shined brogues.

"Ouch!" Rubbing another scratch from a cotton boll, Bryony decided she'd better pay more attention to her cotton picking and less time dreaming about what would never be. Not to mention mooning over nonexistent beaux. *This* was her life now, taking care of Grandpa and her sisters on a struggling tenant farm in Eden, Arkansas.

One row over, Grandpa paused to ease his back and gulp a swallow of water from his canteen. Shifting the strap of his cotton sack, he whistled out through his teeth. "Fraid it's worse than I thought, Bryony. We're gonna be in a world of hurt this year."

She angled a glance toward the canvas tarp at the end of the row, where they'd been emptying their sacks. After a full day of toil, the pile remained heartbreakingly small, and she could no longer hold back the tide of worry that had been building all summer. The cow's milk was drying up, the hens had all but stopped laying, and what she'd canned from their vegetable garden wouldn't begin to last through the winter. With this cotton crop, they'd counted on at least breaking even. Now, those hopes were gone as well.

Fatigue and despair stole the last of her strength, and she sank to her knees in the dirt. She'd cry if her body could spare the tears. Tipping back her bonnet, she scanned the field until her gaze

settled upon her sisters, working side by side several rows over. After the Thanksgiving Day tornado of '26 that took Mama's life, Bryony swore on her mother's grave to take good care of Larkspur, Rose, and Grandpa.

But with food growing scarce and no money in the bank, what was she supposed to do—let them all starve?

There had to be an answer, some way to provide for her family until this cursed drought ended and the farm turned a profit again. Maybe if she talked to the landlord, explained their dire situation, he'd show a little compassion and give them extra time to cover the rent. He might even help out with a loan to get them through next spring's planting season. Might be a long shot, but she had to try. She'd walk over first thing in the morning.

She wouldn't tell Grandpa, of course. It would hurt his pride to think his granddaughter had gone begging. First off, she'd need an excuse for leaving Grandpa and her sisters to pick cotton without her. She could take a jar of pickles from the cellar and say she was going into town to trade it for a sack of flour so they could have biscuits and gravy for supper. Except rumor had it Mr. and Mrs. Heath used to be quite partial to Grandma's bread-and-butter pickles, and Bryony wasn't above bearing gifts if it would soften their landlord's flinty heart.

After a swallow of water too warm to be refreshing, Bryony adjusted her bonnet and returned to picking cotton. If her seventy-year-old grandfather could keep working like a dog, she could, too. She had to. Their very lives depended on it.



Mornings on the west veranda, then move to the east side for the afternoons. It was the only way Michael Heath could abide the cruel turn this summer had taken. Sketchbook propped on his knee, he adjusted his glasses and leaned forward to study the sprig of elongated leaves he'd laid upon the porch rail. *Itea virginica*, more commonly known as Virginia sweetspire. Even shaded by the

house and carefully watered and cultivated, the shrub showed signs of distress.

Michael debated whether to draw the leaves exactly as they were, with brown and shriveled margins, the tips curling inward as if in self-protection, or to render them supple, green, and healthy, as they were meant to be.

Maybe some of each, because nothing was ever perfect. Not in this life anyway.

As he chose a light umber pencil from his artist's kit, a whisper of breeze carried someone's tuneful humming to his ear—"Singin' in the Rain," a popular but woefully inappropriate ditty for the summer they were suffering through. Lifting his head, he peered down the long, tree-shaded drive and saw a woman strolling toward the house. A floppy straw hat with a ridiculously wide brim shaded her face. A loose curl the color of the darkest burnt umber fell across one shoulder.

Véronique? A torrent of memory engulfed him, and for a heart-stopping moment he was sitting at an outdoor Paris café.

Eyes squeezed shut, he poked two fingers up under his glasses and rubbed furiously. No . . . no, he was home in Arkansas. Paris and the war remained in the distant past, along with everything else he'd consciously chosen to forget.

He pried open his eyes and saw the woman more clearly now. Not *Véronique*, but the resemblance had certainly taken him aback. Whoever she was, Michael's next impulse was to gather his supplies and slip inside before she noticed him. He didn't care for social callers, didn't care much for most people in general. Since coming home two years ago, he did well to tolerate the company of his own parents, who mostly let him be, thank goodness. His glance fell to the withered sweetspire leaves.

The woman's footsteps crunched on the gravel. "Good morning," she called, sounding entirely too cheerful for eight o'clock in the morning.

Too late to escape. Michael laid his sketchbook on the table

next to him and stood. His throat dry and raspy, he asked, "Can I help you?"

Ten feet from the bottom of the veranda steps, she froze, her mouth dropping open. "Oh. Guess I've been squinting into the sun too long. I thought you were Mr. Heath."

"I am Mr. Heath." Michael's lips twitched. Not really a smile, but he couldn't miss the irony of being mistaken for his father. "You're looking for the elder Mr. Heath, I'm sure. Tell me your name and I'll fetch him for you."

"You're his son?"

"Michael. Yes."

"I heard you'd come home awhile back. Pleased to make your acquaintance." Marching up the five steps, she shifted a cloth-covered basket to her left arm and extended her right hand in greeting. "I'm Bryony Linwood. My grandfather, George Rigby, is one of your tenants."

"Bryony, or *bryonia*, a genus of flowering plant in the gourd family."

She blinked, a surprised grin brightening her soft features. "You know what my name means?"

"Sorry, bad habit." Hesitantly, Michael accepted her handshake, then quickly withdrew. "I'll get my father."

He marched to the screen door and yanked it open, then made his way through the rambling first floor of the family mansion to his father's office—not his favorite place to be and one he avoided if at all possible. "Dad, there's a woman here to see you. Her grandfather is—"

An upraised hand silenced him. His father took another few seconds to study some figures in the account book lying open on the desk. "Mm-hmm, mm-hmm . . ." He removed his round tortoise-shell glasses and looked up. "Yes, Michael, you were saying?"

He repeated his announcement. "Rigby, I think the name was."

"George Rigby. Yes. Falling behind on his rent." Tiny beads of perspiration dotted Sebastian Heath's broad forehead. He whipped

out a handkerchief and blotted his face. "Wouldn't be surprised if he sent his granddaughter to plead for another extension."

"I wouldn't know." Michael couldn't bring himself to care much about his father's business dealings. He edged toward the door. "Should I send her in?"

The elder Heath brought both palms down on the desk with a resounding slap. Eyes narrowed, he shot Michael a pointed glare. "No, son, I want you to *bring* her in, and then you will sit down and pay attention to how this plantation is managed. It's long past time you took an interest in your future inheritance."

Michael braced for the queasiness he'd come to expect when such conversations arose. "Dad, please—"

"Don't argue. If you want to continue living in this house, you'll do as I say." With a meaningful *ahem*, his father returned to his accounts.

Stomach churning, Michael backed out of the office, then strode several paces down the hallway before pausing to take a calming breath. *In . . . out . . .* He couldn't do it, couldn't be the son his father wanted him to be, and no amount of hammering, bending, or twisting would ever force this square peg into a round hole.

Gathering what composure he could, he returned to the porch, where he found their visitor twirling the sweetspire sprig, a pensive look turning down the corners of her full lips. She'd removed her hat and laid it on a chair, and now her long, lustrous hair, secured off her neck by a faded azure ribbon, cascaded down her back.

She looked toward Michael as he stepped through the screen door. "So sad, isn't it? Everything's drying up and withering away."

Michael swallowed and tore his gaze from the ribbon at her nape. "My father said to show you in, Miss . . ."

"Linwood. Bry—"

"Bryony, I remember." He smiled in spite of himself, curious why her parents had chosen such an unusual name. Somewhere in his sketchbooks he had a drawing of the greenish-white, star-shaped *bryonia alba* blossoms. A hardy plant with medicinal proper-

ties, yet deadly poisonous if misused. How much resemblance did the woman bear to the specimen for which she was named?

"Excuse me, you're staring." Laughing softly, Miss Linwood laid the wilted leaves on the railing where she'd found them. "You were going to take me to see your father?"

"Yes. Right." Giving a huff, Michael held the door, then led Miss Linwood through the foyer and past the curving staircase. As they rounded a corner, he stopped abruptly and pointed down the hall. "Last door on the right. Can you find your way from here?"

"I'm sure I can. Thank you." Her confident air wavered. With a tremulous breath, she drew back her shoulders and strode toward the office.

Michael watched discreetly until she tapped on the open door and was invited inside. If indeed she had come to ask for a rent extension, he could understand her trepidation. Father was an uncompromising businessman and not easily swayed by sob stories.

Not even those of his own hurting children.

Seeing a motion at the end of the hall, Michael ducked into the foyer, barely escaping his father's keen glance. He winced at the carefully modulated tone of the query that followed: "Michael? Are you joining us?"

Without answering, Michael slipped out to the veranda, hurriedly collected his sketchbook and drawing supplies, then darted down the steps and along a shady path to the river. No doubt he'd have to explain himself later. For now, though, he'd avoided one more of his father's continual and utterly futile attempts to manipulate him into some semblance of normalcy.

Normal? For Michael, his last hope of living a normal life ended the day a creeping yellow cloud descended upon his foxhole. Though by some miracle he'd been spared the worst, two days later, three of his closest friends were dead from the agonizing effects of mustard gas.

Nothing had been the same since.