

WORTHY

By Carla G. Harper

Chapter One

Summer 1945

Worthy Stokes grew up in a house full of secrets, a place where whispers floated from underneath closed doors and stories about the way things were went unquestioned. On late summer nights outside the tobacco curing barns, her grandfather told scary stories about boogeymen, haints, and evil spirits. Those stories filled Worthy's mind on her daily pre-dawn trek through a thick patch of hardwoods on the way to the widow Frances Johnson's place.

Working for Mrs. Johnson lifted Worthy's spirits. Her kitchen had white walls and cabinets along with windows dressed up in red and white gingham. A brand new GE electric icebox overflowed with good things to eat. Mrs. Johnson smiled a lot and answered questions with directness.

She let herself in through the backdoor after milking a cow in the barn and gathering eggs from a handful of chickens. A piece of toast with strawberry preserves, a glass of milk, and a dime awaited her. Worthy stared at the dime, chewing slowly before slipping it into her dress pocket.

Worthy emerged from the woods an hour later as the sun peeked over the steep roofline of her family's white two-story farmhouse. She caught sight of her daddy walking fast toward the barn. Frankie, her fifteen-year-old brother, sat on the front porch in a rocking chair drinking coffee and listening to radio. Frankie loved three things: radio, engines, and sleep. He always wore a white undershirt and baggy denim jeans rolled up to his ankles and brogans with no socks. He spent any spare moment listening to reports on the allied forces. He'd readily provide updates to anyone who would listen on battles that occurred in places with names no one had ever heard of and hoped never to hear of again. "Our boys took Crucifix Hill," he'd announced the night before.

Worthy went in through the back screen door carrying a basket of eggs from her own coop and a few pieces of split oak. Faint embers waited to be reignited from a splash of kerosene in the stove. She no longer feared the fire when it jumped to life with a loud whoosh.

She mixed up a pan of buttermilk biscuits and filled a cooking pot with water. A small Victory Garden out back produced the green beans. A garden was her contribution to the war effort.

Papa Stokes, her grandfather, had provided seeds and instruction. She worked the soil and tended the plants all for the thrill of presenting a paper bag full of cucumbers or tomatoes to someone who would invariably go on about her generosity.

Ruby sauntered into the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. Her jet-black hair hung straight and heavy just below the ears. A coat of pink lipstick covered her lips, like every day. Even presumably prepared for a day's work in tobacco, she looked stunning in a simple dress handmade by Worthy. Ruby sat down and crossed her legs. "My sheets need changing today - this morning," she said.

Worthy glanced over her shoulder, "Yes, ma'am."

"By the way, you did a piss poor job of washing my panties yesterday, and you left Frankie's socks on the line. You're old enough to do things right around here."

Worthy pulled biscuits out with an old rag as Ruby continued, "If you'd not been cursed with the Stokes' looks, you'd a been ready to marry by now. I was sixteen when I married ya daddy." She added, "God help me" in a lower voice, but sure to be heard.

Worthy dumped the biscuits into a linen towel. A nice breeze came in through the screen door. Ruby said, "Gimme the dime."

Worthy placed it on the table. Ruby stood up and dropped it into her own pocket.

"Mama, if I hurry and get these beans going, can I go on down to the fields this morning with y'all?"

Ruby exhaled forcefully. She stood right in front of Worthy, arms crossed, barely a couple inches taller but enough to tower. "I don't know why you would waste my time even asking such a stupid question. There ain't no way in hell you can possibly have everything done. We's leaving in five minutes."

Worthy began, "But..."

Ruby interrupted Worthy by raising her hand up to unleash an open-handed slap. Clive's low, calm voice floated through the house. "Ruby, you ready to head on down to the fields?"

"I'm coming." Ruby glared at Worthy before grabbing up the towel full of biscuits.

Worthy stood alone until the sounds of the truck and tractor left the yard. She walked into Ruby and Clive's room and helped herself to a Pall Mall hidden in a vanity drawer. Store bought cigarettes were one of Ruby's luxuries "deserved" because of how hard she worked. Placing a cigarette between her lips, she caught a glimpse of a stranger in the large oval mirror attached to the vanity scattered with powders, perfumes and silver grooming brushes, combs and a hand held mirror. The boxy work dress and irregular braids registered, but in the morning light, she looked like her mama.

On the porch, she rocked and took long drags from the cigarette. Her mind's eye turned on an imaginary movie reel that played scenes from stories she and Frankie listened to on the radio.

Except in her imagination, she played the female leads. In one, she wore a crisp, clean nurse's uniform entering a wounded soldier's room. His haggard face lit up as she leaned over to check his bandages. In the next scene, she wore a stiffly pressed uniform including a hat and tight pencil skirt while striding into a General's office with an important memo. "Thank you, Miss Stokes, for your patriotism," he said with a somber nod.

Long after the fire flies had disappeared into the sky, Worthy plopped down in a rocker next to Frankie on the porch, "Shhh, listen. Our boys are closing in on the Japs," he told her.

Worthy considered Frankie's world for a moment, full of updates on the allied forces, adventures of the Green Hornet, The Lone Ranger, Pat Novak For Hire. Frankie spent a lot of time in those other worlds, for the most part, uninterrupted and unscathed. Disgust rose up like a rogue wave completely out of her control. "While the boys take the Japs, I been fighting right here."

He stared at her for a moment before looking away. Worthy laid her head back and listened to the harmony of crickets and katydids playing fiddle on their wings and the cicadas' loud, repetitive buzzing noise and the peep-peep of tree frogs. Their eyes followed Ruby's black Chevrolet sedan bumping past the house. "Mama's home," Frankie offered.

"Gimme a smoke," Worthy demanded.

"Mama'll get a switch after you," he said unfolding a long leather pouch full of hand-rolled cigarettes made from last year's lugs.

Yellowbell bushes grew along the front porch. The thin nubby branches left stinging red whelps that would remain for days on Worthy's legs. Butch, their old mongrel dog, nudged at her hand with his nose. She scratched at his head. "Can you see that light just come on up by Pilot Knob? Ghosts wander around up there." Mist rose up off the distant Blue Ridge Mountains. She let the silence ripen before adding, "I sometimes think there're ghosts living right here."

Frankie turned to look at her. "Stop talking like that, Worthy." He shifted and opened his leather tobacco pouch again. "You scare me sometimes."

Another set of headlights bounced through the woods. This time Worthy announced, "It's Daddy." The truck lumbered toward the barn. Clive got out and walked straight toward the back of the house. Worthy yelled out, "Hey, Daddy!"

Clive shot them a glance. "Wonder why he walked on like that," Worthy said.

Before long Ruby's voice - shrill and grating laced with familiar insults - floated through the screen door. She launched hateful words like small bombs. Next, they heard a loud pop. A sound Worthy knew well, the sound of open palm meeting bare flesh. The voices rose in harsh tones. Then a shriek pierced their ears, like hogs on killing day. A strange paralysis overcame Worthy.

The night noises from the woods seemed deafening. Frankie lunged past her in slow motion. She stood at the screen door like a spectator. Frankie picked Ruby up off the floor. She jumped when Clive spoke from down in the yard below. “Worthy, come down here.”

Her arms hung limp standing in front of him. She searched for his eyes in the moonlight, mostly hidden beneath droopy lids and long, thick lashes nearly touching his bushy eyebrows. His angular face topped with heavy brown hair that parted naturally to the side looked boyish. He reached out and squeezed her shoulder. The smell of moonshine and old sweat filled the space between them. In a cracking voice he said, “I’m gonna hafta leave for a while. You gonna need to be real good and take care of things, you hear.”

He walked toward the barn and his pickup truck. Worthy trailed behind him. “Daddy, wait. Are you going up to Tomahawk to work for a few days and then be back to put up tobacco?”

He looked straight ahead through the windshield, cracked across the bottom and crusted over with pollen and red dust. Worthy said, “You remember last summer when me and you went to Greensboro for them gas rationing stamps and how you made that lady so mad?”

The memory took him off guard, and he smiled. Determined to deter his departure, Worthy talked quickly. From the time she was old enough to walk, Worthy followed in her daddy’s shadow. He often let her ride along places with him. She enjoyed his silent company.

One hot summer day early on in the war, they were running Papa Stokes’ sawmill and ran out of diesel. Gas was rationed by the government still. It took a forty-five-minute drive to Greensboro to petition for more rationing stamps. Clive wore the stained and worn bib overalls pulled on each morning for five straight days. He smelled of sweat, diesel, and pine resin. Tobacco juice lingered on his clean-shaven chin and in the corners of his mouth. A very prim and proper lady greeted them and proceeded to ask the required litany of questions. At one point, apparently offended by his appearance and odor she looked up and asked, “How often do you bathe, Sir?”

Clive assumed this was one more of the questions required to get his extra stamps. He earnestly answered without hesitation, “Oh, put down once a week, whether I need it or not.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “I bathe every day in the summer time.”

Clive replied, “Well good, because it looks like I’m gonna have to kiss your ass to get them stamps.”

The story’s magic wore off quickly. “How long will you be gone, Daddy?”

“I don’t know.”

A mild panic rose up in her stomach and pushed into her throat. “Don’t leave, Daddy.”

“Frankie will watch after you now. I gotta go,” he said and forced the truck into gear. She stepped back and watched until his tail lights disappeared down the long drive. Back on the front porch, she listened as Ruby spoke to Frankie. “Your sorry daddy will pay for this. Mark my words. He’ll pay.”

Worthy ran as fast as her legs would go through the woods to Mrs. Johnson's house. By the time she reached the ornate screen door, her lungs ached and beads of sweat gathered above her lip. It took several raps at the back door before Mrs. Johnson appeared smiling. "There you are. I was doing my Bible study. I didn't think you were coming for pie tonight, but you did after all. Have a seat and let's share a piece together. I had one already, but it was just a sliver," she said.

Worthy watched Mrs. Johnson. Her soft blonde hair rested above the collar of a yellow store bought dress, fitted tight at the waist with a black cloth belt. Her thick calves and small bare feet were visible below the hemline. She turned around with two delicate china plates, each held a piece of pecan pie. Worthy let a bite melt on her tongue and then asked a question that had been with her for quite a while: "How do girls get to go to college?"

Mrs. Johnson smiled. "Well, they just have to be smart like you are is all. Do you want to go to college, Worthy?"

Worthy nodded but kept her eyes on the pie. Mrs. Johnson continued, "It's not as hard as you might think. The Women's College over in Greensboro has that war program still going, I believe. They train you in secretarial skills, and you go to work for the government a couple years to pay back the cost of tuition."

The two kept at their pie in silence until Worthy asked about another topic she'd begun to think about more and more often. "Tell me again about how you fell in love."

A wistful look came over her face as if savoring the memory before telling it again. "Well, I'd been down here going to the Women's College for a couple years, thinking I would end-up an Old Maid like my Aunt Sybil back in Winchester. Samuel - he'd been honorably discharged from the Army after the Germans blew up that place in New Jersey where he was in charge of guarding ammunition."

She paused to take a bite and a sip of cold milk. "I remember thinking that American Legion was the biggest place in all of Greensboro. The air smelled like White Shoulders perfume and the musk of all those handsome young men. He was tall, confident, and his skin was so smooth and shiny, it seemed unnatural. Invitation to the Waltz played. I said yes to a dance with him, and that was that. I never even so much as thought of another man after that dance." She put her fork down. "I miss him so very, very much, Worthy," she whispered and dabbed at tears pooling in her eyes with a cloth napkin. She forced a smile and change of subject. "Worthy, how old will you be come this birthday?"

"I'll be seventeen-years-old."

"Lord have mercy, how time flies. I remember you as just a babe, running up to my back door for a visit. Bless your heart. It's time for you to start dressing like a woman. I tell you what,

when your birthday rolls around I'm gonna see if your mama will let me take you on a trip to Greensboro. How does that sound?"

It sounded like something that Ruby would not allow if it "hairliped Georgia," as she often said. When the clock chimed ten o'clock, Worthy knew that manners dictated she go on home. Before she left out the back door, Mrs. Johnson stood up straight and said, "I've got something to tell you, Worthy, and I don't want you to be sad. Okay? Because it's not right away, but you need to get used to the idea."

Worthy held a blank expression that could have rivaled even the most seasoned poker player, but her knees felt weak. Her mind raced ahead and found the next line before Mrs. Johnson even spoke it. "I'm going to live with my sister. She's a widow too you know, in Winchester, where I came from. With Samuel gone, well, there's little left for me here in Hogan's Creek. Not that I don't love you and my work at the library, but she needs me there to help with the place."

Worthy stopped on the back porch to catch her breath and let the sweat and tears dry on her face before entering the dark, stuffy house. She made it almost all the way to the stairs. It came out of nowhere. The force of Ruby's slap across her face caused her to stumble backwards. She stared straight back into Ruby's eyes in a narrow band of moonlight. One eye had turned puffy, black and misshapen. She didn't move but met her hateful grimace dead on. The second slap came as expected. There was less force, but it stung all the same. In an angry whisper Ruby said, "I done told you a hundred times, Frances Johnson ain't your friend. Stay away from there when you're not working for her. I'm tired of you being stuck up her butt all the time. Do it again, and find out what I have in store for you."

Her breath smelled like decay, the decay of the heap behind the garden where Worthy threw the remnants of cabbage and carrots and potatoes. She stood in the dim light without speaking, waiting. There was no way of telling how much piss and vinegar Ruby had to release on that particular night. It seemed the intensity of the fight with Clive had drained her. She turned and disappeared into the shadowy hallway.

Worthy trudged up the steep, narrow steps and paused at Frankie's open door to listen for his breathing. His snore reassured her. She draped her dirty dress over a straight back chair. In undershirt and panties, she sat on the bed and spoke aloud. "God, are you listening? Forgive me for my bad thoughts. Help me do right." She rested her forehead in her palms, nothing else to say, but she hoped God might say something. Finally, she fell back on the bed and mumbled, "In Jesus' name, Amen."