



Tulsa Burning

Friends show
their true colors
in times of
trouble

ANNA MYERS

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Chapter 1

I NEVER HAD ME BUT THREE friends. Last spring right after I turned fifteen, I lost one and almost lost the other two. I lost Rex, Isaac nearly died, and I near about lost Cinda because of impure thoughts. Until last spring, I never knew much about hating or about how wanting revenge eats away at your insides. Truth be told, there's a bunch I didn't know until last spring. Sometimes I wish awful bad that I had never had to learn.

My name is Noble Wayne Chase. The first name is the same as my grandpa's on my ma's side. His name was Noble, and he had one brother named Worthy and one named Loyal. His sisters were named Patience and Joy. I can't tell you about the others, but I reckon my grandpa lived up to his name.

He died when I was just a baby, but my ma used to tell me about him all the time. He was a blacksmith, and he helped lots of people with stuff, including building houses around the little town of Wekiwa, Oklahoma, back when it used to be an Indian village. I wish I could have knowed my grandpa named Noble.

Nobody except Mrs. Mitchell, Isaac's mother, has ever called me anything but Nobe. Mrs. Mitchell is the teacher at the colored school down the road. She lives just about a half mile from us. After I got big enough to sell milk, Mrs. Mitchell always bought a jug from me every day, even after Isaac left home. "I've started drinking lots myself," she told me, but I was pretty sure she just didn't want to cut back on the money she gave me.

Pa would have throwed a ring-tailed fit if he'd ever known how I tagged after Isaac. Pa didn't like coloreds. He didn't like me selling milk to Mrs. Mitchell either, but he didn't stop me because we needed every cent we could get our hands on. Ma always said she didn't have nothing against the Mitchells for being colored. She said God made colored folks same as he made whites.

I ain't so sure Ma told the truth about that because she sure didn't seem to like it that Mrs. Mitchell and Isaac lived in a nice little house with boxes of flowers on the windowsills. It was a lot better house than ours, and I noticed Ma's expression would sour whenever we had cause to ride past the Mitchells' on the way to visit Widow Carter. She wouldn't admit it, but I'm pretty sure for some reason it bothered Ma, a colored family living better than we did.

The Mitchells being colored or having a better house than ours never bothered me. All I knew was that Isaac always treated me good and when Mrs. Mitchell talked to me, I felt like Noble, like I might grow up to do good things, things like my Grandpa Noble used to do.

It's hard to imagine. I'm on the scrawny side, which shouldn't be surprising given that my stomach never is full unless I eat down at the Mitchell place. My hair used to be yellow but it's almost brown now. My eyes are blue and weak, and they water if I read too long. My eyes are quick, though. They always told me when Pa got a mean spell on. My feet are quick, too. I could outrun him enough to hide even when I was little. I had me a special place in the barn, one where me and Rex hid, one Pa could never find. When I got older, I figured out that me and Rex could just walk off for a spell until he cooled off. To Pa I was just something to hit if the hitting was easy, not something to go out of his way for.

I don't need to walk off or hide from Pa anymore. He died last spring, just after I turned fifteen and just before I learned about hate and revenge. I reckon everything started the day he was buried. I remember standing beside Ma while Preacher Jackson read from the Bible. The preacher ain't none too strong, and he breathed sort of heavy as he read. Some of the neighbors stood around us. There was Cinda with her folks, Mr. and Mrs. Phillips. Widow Carter and her brother, who wasn't quite right in the head because of the war, were there. So was Mr. and Mrs. Collins and three of their young 'uns. Sheriff Leonard was there with his puffed-up face and his red nose. Off a few steps from the others stood Mrs. Mitchell and Isaac.

I looked at Mrs. Mitchell, and her eyes were kind and gentle, like she was saying she understood. Mrs. Mitchell had seen the bruises Pa left on me. "Your father is not a good man, Noble," she told me once. "Don't let him decide your future for you." She had handed me a saucer with a piece of hot apple pie and poured me a glass of milk from the jar she had just paid

me for a few minutes earlier. "You are a bright young man, and you must stay in school."

Well, I thought, Pa won't be complaining about school being a waste of time now. Pa wouldn't ever yell at me again. There would be no more bruises. I looked over at my mother's tired face. Ma's face was always tired, but never as tired as it was yesterday when she drove the wagon back from town. It was on toward dark when I had seen her coming, turning the wagon off the main road onto our long drive. I leaned against the barn, watching. Only Ma could be seen. Was Pa stretched out in the back, like when they had left to see the doctor?

I waited for the wagon to move slowly down the drive and stop, finally, in front of the barn.

Ma got down from the wagon without looking back, and I knowed for sure then that my pa was not in the wagon. It was me that had helped Pa into the wagon, him leaning hard. It had seemed strange to have Pa touch me like that, to need me to lean against.

"We'll see the doctor," Ma had said, and then they were gone down the tree-lined drive. I had watched until they were out on the main road. I turned back to the barn then. Pa would have had a fit if he was to come back and find the chores not done.

But Pa had not come back.

"He's dead," Ma had said once on the ground. "He was gone before I got to town. Doc said it was most likely his heart, just like I figured when the pain started. Same thing killed his pa the year we married."

Ma ran her hand across her eyes. "I reckon you're starved." She looked closely at me, like she hadn't seen me good at first. "I'll fix you a bite to eat."

I had followed her into the kitchen. I wanted to question her. What would we do without Pa? Could we still farm the land?

I wanted to tell Ma I was glad, glad the man who never did give me no kind word was gone. It wasn't that simple, though, on account of I wanted to tell her I was sorry, too. At least, I wanted to be sorry. My pa was dead. Shouldn't I be sorry? Instead, I didn't say nothing. Instead, I went to the washstand, poured water from the big pitcher into the tin pan, rubbed the homemade lye soap across my hands, and washed. It was Ma that said something. "We'll be leaving this place," she said.

I whirled to look at her. “Why? We can work the place! You know we done most of the work our own selves, not Pa.”

Ma sighed and looked away from me to study the potato she had been peeling. “It’s the bank, Nobe. Our note’s due, and Charlie Carson ain’t likely to give us no extension without your pa. Banks don’t put no stock in half-growed boys and worn-out women.” She began to take long slices from the potato in her hand. “No, we got to leave.”

My heart had begun to beat fast. Leave this place? I had never known no other home. Leave the pond with the willow tree? Leave Ma’s grapevines growing beside the porch and the patch of sunflowers in the front pasture? Leave the barn where I milked old Buttercup and where I liked to rest, wedged among the bales up in the loft with the sweet hay smell like a salve for my hurts?

Ma had gone back to fixing my meal, like I wasn’t even there beside her, waiting. Finally I spoke.

“Where? Where can we go?”

“Into Wekiwa, we’ll have to go to town. Sheriff Leonard says he and his wife need help at their place, what with her being sickly and all. He says she don’t get up most days a-tall, and she needs someone there to be with her.”

I swallowed hard. I hated Sheriff Leonard, hated the way the man’s bulging eyes looked at my mother when he brought Pa home drunk. Those awful eyes followed Ma around the room in a way that made me want to hit him. I was kept from doing so only because I was a boy and he was a man, a man with a badge that flashed even in the dim light from the lantern.

“Ma, not the sheriff’s place!”

“It’s a fine place, indoor toilet and all, three stories high. There’s two rooms up on that top floor for you and me. Won’t it be a wonder living in a house where the roof don’t ever leak?”

“Please, Ma. We can think of something else.”

I shoved my knotted fists into the pocket of my worn-out overalls and searched for words. It wasn’t likely I’d be able to come out and talk about what I knew Sheriff Leonard had in mind for Ma. She knew, too, didn’t she? I had to ask.

I drew in a breath and let go with the question. “Ma, you know the sheriff has got ideas about you. You know that, don’t you?” I didn’t look at her and kept my eyes down.

“Son,” she said, and her voice was weary, “I got no plans to do anything that ain’t decent, but I got to think of the future. The sheriff’s wife ain’t likely to live much longer. There’s money there, Nobe. If I was to marry Sheriff Leonard—”

She paused for a minute, and then went on. “Why, there’d be ways to do things for you. Maybe you could go off to one of them colleges like that Mitchell boy did.”

I stared at her. “Don’t be making no such plans on my account,” I said. “I don’t want none of the sheriff’s money, and I don’t want to live in his fine house with you hoping his wife will pass on soon.”

Anger flashed across her face. “I never done no planning before I married your pa.” There was a break in her voice, and for a minute, I thought she might cry, but she didn’t. “Now he’s laying in the back of Jones Furniture Store, stone cold and waiting for Roscoe Jones to make him a box.”

She pointed to the skillet. “See them taters? They’re nearabout the last food we got.” She shook her head. “Oh, we could find a neighbor to take us in, be someone’s charity. No, I got to plan for the future.”

There was no trace of a sob in her voice toward the end, only flatness and a terrible final sound.

“I’m going out,” I said. “I’ll be back when supper’s ready.”

“You done washed,” she protested, but I was already through the back screen door and onto the porch.

The spring night met me with the cry of what seemed like a thousand tree frogs, and I breathed in deep gulps of the soft air, trying to forget everything but the night and its sounds. Old Rex came to me, and I dropped down on the edge of the porch to stroke his back.

“Good old boy,” I said. “We’re leaving this place. Ma’s planning for our future.” A moan come up from inside me then, a moan born from a sudden and certain thought. “He won’t want a dog,” I whispered, and I pressed my face against the top of Rex’s head, “but I won’t go without you. I won’t take a step toward that sheriff’s fine house, not without you, boy!”

Ma called me then, and I went inside. Dinner was on the table. I slid onto the bench, bent over my plate, and went to filling my mouth with fried potatoes and onions. Ma brought her own plate and settled across from me, but she took only a bite or two. We didn’t do no talking. When I was done

eating, I carried my plate to the rickety cook table and set it next to the dishpan. Then I went back outside.

Rex stayed beside me. For a long time, we walked through the fields and pasture. I kicked a rock, and from long habit bent over to pick it up, only to stop myself. I wouldn't be plowing these fields no more. I was done with fighting the rocks. The rocks could have the place now. When I got too tired to make my feet move good, we returned to the house and settled on the ground beneath the big cottonwood near the barn. From there I could see my ma's bedroom window. Soon a lantern light appeared there briefly before she blew it out.

"She's in bed now, so I can go inside," I said to Rex.

I went into the house, blew out the lantern on the kitchen table, made my way to the tiny room at the side of the house, and threw myself on the narrow bed.

THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED before we buried Pa. The next day, standing beside the grave, I could feel Sheriff Leonard looking at me. I tried not to think about the stinking sheriff, just kept my eyes on the preacher, who was talking about heaven. It was purely impossible for me to believe Preacher Jackson had any real hope that Melvin Chase could make it to heaven. Everyone around our place and in the small town of Wekiwa knowed that my pa was a drunk. It didn't seem likely to me that God would let a man who had once puked right on the church steps during Sunday service into heaven. Pa had never done one thing good that I knowed of.

Suddenly I closed my eyes, remembering. There was that one time. I was four, so that made it eleven years ago. It was summer, and I had gone out into the backyard with no shoes. I went to pick little purple wildflowers for my ma, and I got caught in a big patch of stickers. At first I just hollered out but soon realized no one was coming to help me. Standing on one foot, I picked up the other one, turned it up, and started to remove the stickers, but I lost my balance and tumbled into the thorny patch. My legs, protected by overalls, were fine, but I didn't have on no shirt. Now my back was full of stickers too. I just gave up, closed my eyes, and sobbed.

Then I felt myself being lifted, higher than I ever had been lifted before. The arms that held me were strong, and I knowed, even without opening my eyes, that it was my pa who lifted me.

He'll hurt me now, I thought. My pa always hit me if I cried, and so forgetting the stickers in my back, I drew myself as much as possible into a ball and waited for the blow.

"Don't cry, little man," a voice said. The voice was my pa's voice, but I couldn't never remember Pa ever talking soft like to me before. "Let's get those burrs out of you, and you'll quit the hurting."

The man's face was close to mine. It could not be my pa; there wasn't no smell like the one that came from Pa's bottles and stayed on his breath. Afraid, I opened just one eye to peek. It *was* my pa! He carried me into the house and put me on the kitchen bench. Pa took over every sticker. With his own hands, he done that. Next he wet a cloth with water warm from the teakettle and washed my face, back, and feet. Then, without a word, he kissed the top of my head and went out the back door.

Now, remembering, I touched the top of my head. Oh, Pa, I thought, why couldn't you ever be that way again? I remember trying once a few weeks later to recreate the scene by going on purpose into the stickers when my pa was nearby. I yelled out in pain, but my pa, cursing, just left me there and disappeared into the barn. I stayed in that sticker patch crying for a long time. Ain't no use bawling, I finally told myself. You might as well give it up.

I bit my lip and crawled out of them stickers all on my own. My hand had blood on it, but I didn't do no more crying. I couldn't remember crying much at all after that day, but now, standing beside my pa's grave, I felt one tear slip from my eye and roll down my cheek.

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