

# Livin' In High Cotton

By Jennifer Youngblood and Sandra Poole © 2004 Arbor House Books

## Chapter One

Cartersville, Georgia

1923

Down South, things don't ever change all that much and that suits most Southerners just fine. Every year, cotton seeds are planted deep in the red, fertile clay in the hope that come harvest time, the stalks will be loaded with lush, white blooms. And why shouldn't the cotton grow abundantly? It has done so every fall for centuries, providing the life-sustaining bread and butter of the South. Life travels comfortably down a smooth road, and just when the complacent traveler is convinced of the outcome, a bend in the road changes everything.

It's strange, how the day that forever changed Shelby's life began the same as any other day. Had she known what lay ahead, she wouldn't have wasted the better part of her morning listening to the petty rambling of Mrs. Joyce Clements. Shelby had barely gotten Homer and Sarah fed and dressed when she heard a knock at the door. Homer had eagerly run to open it.

"I'll get it."

Before she could stop him, he swung it wide, and the whiny voice of Mrs. Clements filled the hall.

Wiping her hands on her apron, Shelby looked around the kitchen; it was in total disarray. Why did she have to come by today? Shelby had promised to take Homer and Sarah swimming at the creek later on in the day, and she had a long list of chores to do first. She could get everything done in plenty of time if she hurried, but the last thing she needed was to have to entertain Mrs. Clements for several hours. She had already been by twice this

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week and it was only Thursday. Tuesday, her excuse had been to inquire if Shelby had heard any news from Ellen yet, but Shelby knew the real reason she dropped by unexpectedly. She wanted to find something wrong with the way Shelby was handling things while her mama was away. Shelby glanced at the mess in the kitchen. The sink was piled high with dirty pans and dishes. Sarah had decided that it would be more fun to smear her grits and eggs all over the table rather than eat them. Biscuit crumbs were scattered over the wooden floor.

“I'm going to give that ol' biddy a mouthful to talk about today,” Shelby muttered under her breath. “Why couldn't she have waited about thirty minutes to come? I would've had this mess cleaned up by then.”

Mrs. Clements followed Homer and Sarah impatiently down the hall toward the kitchen. “Where is your sister? Well, good morning, Shelby.” Her arched eyebrows gazed around the kitchen, taking in every detail. “It looks as if you're getting off to a late start.”

Shelby felt her face flush and her temperature rise. How dare this woman come barging in and then have the nerve to criticize her? Two things Shelby detested were nosy people and gossips. Joyce Clements, with her constant babbling and haughty air, was both. Once Shelby had candidly told Mama this and had gotten a reproving glance followed by a gentle reminder that one should not judge others. “Joyce has had a difficult time since Henry passed away last fall. She can be a little overbearing at times, but we might be the same if we had to walk in her shoes.”

Remembering how Mrs. Clements' pudgy feet always seemed to be stuffed into her shoes, causing fleshy ripples across the top, Shelby had retorted, “Hopefully, I'll never be big enough to walk in her shoes.” As soon as she uttered the words, she saw the color drain from Mama's face and quickly apologized for the remark. Since that day, she had tried to be kinder in her thoughts toward Mrs. Clements. Most of the time her persistence paid off, and she was able to view the woman's offensive and intrusive behavior in a comical light. Today, however, she was in no mood to be tolerant. I must at least try to be civil out of respect for Mama, she told herself. I'm probably just being overly sensitive because I want to do a good job of taking care of things while Mama is gone.

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She took a deep breath and smiled. “Mrs. Clements, I can take care of these dirty dishes later. Why don't you go and have a seat in the parlor? I'll make us some lemonade.”

Mrs. Clements nodded, but her feet stayed rooted to the floor. She had something to say first. “Look at my feet. They're so swollen. I just come from Mabel Whitaker's place. It's awful the way Mabel carries on 'bout Linda Joyce, always fussin' over her while her boys run around like wild Indians. She'll fill the washtub and set it out in the sun and let the water get just right for Linda Joyce. She'll wash her from head to toe and then she'll holler for Junior.” Mrs. Clements' voice became shrill as she mimicked Mabel. “Come here, Junior. Let me wash your face.” Mrs. Clements laughed. “Of course Junior runs up the nearest tree and hides. Can't say as I blame 'im. I wouldn't want my face washed with the same rag that just washed Linda Joyce's rear end.”

Shelby chuckled despite herself. Mrs. Clements' face puckered up like she'd bitten into a sour pickle. She shook her head. “Shame—such a shame. Them children runnin' wild.”

Homer tugged on Shelby. “Sarah hit me on the arm.”

Instead of reprimanding Sarah, Shelby decided to divert Homer's attention. “Would you take Sarah outside to play for a little bit?”

“But Shelby,” he protested, “you said you would let us go swimming at the creek.”

“I will, but you have to mind me,” she said, giving him a look of warning that dared him to protest any further.

Mrs. Clements glared disapprovingly at Homer. “Children should spend more time workin'. Reverend Dobbs says that idle hands are tools of the devil.”

Homer's eyes widened. “I ain't no devil.”

“Hush now,” Shelby interjected. “Mind your manners. Go on outside.”

Firmly, she guided Homer out the back door with Sarah in tow. “Make sure you keep a good eye on Sarah,” she yelled after them.

When Shelby brought the lemonade into the parlor, she wasn't surprised to find Mrs. Clements next to the china cabinet, scrutinizing each piece of silver. Seeing Shelby

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enter the room, she sat down on the couch directly across from Shelby and reached for a glass of lemonade, shaking her head in dismay. "Every time I come into this room, I wonder why in the world Ellen chose to paint it such a peculiar color."

"Mama loves flowers. We chose the rose color in here because this is where we do most of our entertaining and we wanted it warm and vibrant."

"Yes, it certainly is that," Mrs. Clements smirked.

Shelby ignored the comment. "We even dyed our curtains a hint of rose to match. White walls are so boring. Don't you think?" With a hint of mischief in her eyes, she continued. "After all, what fun is it trying to be just like everyone else?" She looked steadily at her visitor and waited for a reply.

Mrs. Clements shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Well, it is different," she replied, her face slightly reddening. She quickly changed the subject. "Shelby, this lemonade tastes a bit too tart. How many lemons did you use?"

"Three."

"Yes, that explains it. Next time use only two and add an extra fourth cup of sugar."

Shelby politely smiled and nodded at her plump, middle-aged guest and tried to seem interested in their conversation. Had Mrs. Clements been attractive in her younger years? She doubted it. Her straight, mousy-brown hair was now streaked with gray and her squinty eyes framed by tiny wrinkles. The plaid dress she was wearing looked stylish and expensive. It had probably looked beautiful in the Sears and Roebuck Catalog, but on Mrs. Clements it looked all wrong. The waistband was too tight and only emphasized her expansive waist. Gold buttons accented the top of the dress, and Shelby had the distinct impression that any sudden or jerky movement would cause them to pop off. She stifled a grin.

"Have you heard any news from your mother yet?"

"No, ma'am."

"Land sakes, it's been two whole weeks since she left. One would think she would be wanting to make sure you young 'uns are doing all right."

The comment struck a nerve. "I'm sure Mama has been extremely busy trying to take

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care of Gramma. She would not have gone all the way to Alabama on such short notice if Gramma hadn't been so sick.”

“Oh, of course, dear,” cooed Mrs. Clements. “I didn't mean to imply otherwise. I was only suggesting that this situation must be very difficult for you children and your papa. How is he managing in Ellen's absence?”

“Fine,” Shelby answered curtly. As long as he's not drunk or angry, she wanted to add.

“Good. I just hope we can receive word soon of when she'll be returning.”

Shelby nodded in agreement and smiled politely, saying nothing. Yes, Mama could not return soon enough.

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The afternoon sun streamed through the kitchen window and down onto the brightly scrubbed kitchen floor. Shelby wiped her hair from her forehead and leaned against the wall to rest. Mrs. Clement had talked incessantly for two straight hours. After she had repeated every last scrap of the latest town gossip she could think of, she gave Shelby advice.

“Now, Shelby, you had better watch yourself. A pretty, young lady such as yourself should be extra careful not to get too friendly with the men folk. They might get the wrong idea. Take it from me. I know.”

With a sigh of relief, Shelby wrung out the mop and put it away. The kitchen was clean. Now all she had to do was dust the parlor before they could go swimming. Mrs. Clements' warning was still running through her mind. Shelby found it interesting that Mrs. Clements would describe her as pretty. At sixteen, Shelby was barely five feet tall and very slender. Her dark, chestnut hair was caught at the nape of her neck, making her almond-shaped eyes even more prominent. She picked up the feather duster and walked into the parlor and over to the fireplace. Shelby stood on her toes and peered into the mirror hanging over the mantle. Critically, she studied her reflection as she wrinkled her nose. She had never given her physical appearance much thought, only making sure she was properly dressed and

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well kept. Lately, though, more people were paying attention to her looks. When had the change occurred? Even Mama had noticed. She had pulled Shelby aside and told her that while it was a blessing to have good looks on the outside, it was more important to be beautiful on the inside. “Just remember that pretty is as pretty does,” she had said.

Her heart clutched. The intrusive questions Mrs. Clements had asked about her mother's absence had left Shelby unsettled. She wondered why they hadn't heard from her. Has something bad happened to Gramma? With each passing day of Mama's absence, things seemed to get a little worse. Papa had been okay the first couple of days after she left, and then his disposition turned sour. He seemed nervous and irritable. Homer and Sarah seemed to get on his nerves by just being there. Last night, Shelby had seen him staring at her in that weird way again, the way he had since she was thirteen. It made her skin crawl. Mama, with her genteel manner and quiet way, had always been the rock that held everything in place. And Shelby's protection. What would happen now that she was gone?

“Shelby!” Homer yelled impatiently. “Are we ever going to go swimming?” “Yes, get Sarah and come and help me finish up so we will have time before Papa gets home.”

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After carefully placing her stockings aside, Shelby raised her skirt to her knees and lay back on the grassy creek-side and breathed deeply. The air felt moist against her skin, and a slight breeze was blowing. She closed her eyes and let the warmth of the sun envelop her. It was a perfect afternoon. A bird was chirping somewhere in the distance, and the playful laughter of Homer and Sarah mingled pleasantly with the soothing sound of flowing water. She sat up and watched the two of them. Homer, not quite seven, was quickly becoming a little man. More than occasionally, neighbors and acquaintances remarked how he resembled Papa with his chestnut brown hair and hazel eyes. Smiling, Shelby remembered how Homer always straightened himself a little taller and jutted out his prominent chin when he heard these comments. Sarah was three and a half and sharp as a tack. Little blonde ringlets framed her chubby cheeks. Despite her stocky frame, she was always running behind her trim, older

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brother mimicking his every movement. "I can do it!" seemed her favorite expression.

Homer glanced over and realized that Shelby was watching him and Sarah.

"Shelby, why don't you get in the water with us?" he asked.

"Please," Sarah chimed in.

"Okay, but you two had better not get my hair wet." Shelby looked sternly at the two surprised expressions and then winked. Jumping up, she ran to the edge and began splashing them both.

"This is war!" shouted Homer.

Some time later, three drenched siblings gathered their things and headed for home. Impulsively, Homer leaned over and hugged Shelby. "I love you. You're the greatest big sister in the whole world."

Touched by his sudden display of affection, Shelby hugged him back as she tousled his wavy hair. "You're not so bad yourself, little man."

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Glad to finally have some time for herself, Shelby sighed and sank deeper into the thick cushion of the wooden swing on the front porch. The air felt cool and fresh and tasted like the honeysuckles growing along the fence. She swung back and forth, listening to the creaking sound of the swing and the rhythmical chirping of crickets. The swim had sufficiently tired Homer and Sarah, and after supper they went to bed without complaint. Homer had wanted to kiss Papa good night first, but Shelby insisted that he could see him tomorrow. She had thought about going to bed early herself but feared Papa's wrath too much. No, he would expect her to serve his supper just like Mama always did. She swallowed the dread that crept into her throat. Feeling a sudden chill, she shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself as she gazed across the yard. Even in the semi-darkness, Ellen's talent for gardening was apparent. Rhododendron and azalea bushes were planted near the house and were bordered by colorful, daisies, tulips, and marigolds. The grass was a lush blanket of green; dogwood, persimmon, oak, and sycamore trees filled the spacious yard. The

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sycamores grew so tall she used to pretend they touched the sky. Shelby looked up at the huge, leafy branches in wonder and up to the black, velvety sky beyond. It seemed as though the trees were stretching out their long branches in a protective gesture over the home.

For as long as she could remember, she had lived in this house. Some Sundays, she had accompanied her mama and a few of the other ladies from church to deliver food to needy members of the community. She had been shocked by the run-down and battered-looking homes. One even had a dirt floor. Before these visits, she had assumed everyone else lived the same way she did. Running her finger over the grainy, wooden swing, she looked at the massive porch, wrapping around the two-story home with its large, picture windows and white, picket fence. Mama's words flashed through her mind. "Children, we should be ever thankful for the tremendous bounty the good Lord has bestowed on us."

Emotion welled in her breast. "I'm trying to be, Mama," she said aloud. Homer's voice rang out, disturbing the stillness of the evening. Suppressing a flash of irritation, Shelby quickly got up from the swing and ran up the stairs into Homer's room. Homer was crying and tossing back and forth in his bed.

"What's wrong? Homer, are you okay?" Shelby leaned over and nudged him. He was still half asleep.

"I want my mama. Please come back," he wailed.

Shelby sat down on the bed and gathered Homer in her arms. She pulled him close and gently stroked his hair as he sobbed. Then becoming somewhat embarrassed, he pulled away and wiped his tear-stained face. "When is Mama coming home?" he sniffed.

"Soon, Homer."

"I was having a bad dream."

"It's okay. We all have them sometimes."

Homer nodded. "But this one seemed so real I—"

"You can tell me. It's nothing to be afraid of."

"I dreamed that Mama disappeared."

Tucking him in and pulling his sheet up around him, Shelby sat on the edge of the bed and patted his arm. "Mama just went away for a little while to take care of Gramma."

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"I know. I know that," said Homer emphatically. "It's just that..."

"What?"

Homer tilted his face upward and looked pleadingly into Shelby's eyes. "I dreamed that you disappeared, too. I looked everywhere for you, but you were gone."

A sudden fear seized Shelby and then quickly faded. "Don't be silly," she answered flippantly. "Wherever would I go without you?"

Shelby's answer gave Homer the reassurance he needed. He snuggled under his covers and grinned sheepishly. "I guess it was just a silly old dream."

Shelby winked. "That's right. Now you'd better get some sleep."

Both Homer and Shelby jumped when they heard a booming voice from downstairs. "Shelby! Girl! Where are you?"

His eyes widening, Homer exclaimed, "Papa's home! Shelby you won't tell Papa I've been crying, will you?"

Was that fear she saw in Homer's eyes? Did he sense the change in Papa too? She wished that she could crawl in bed with Homer and hide. "It will be our little secret," she whispered as she blew him a kiss and turned off the lamp.

She rushed down the stairs and into the kitchen, trying to ignore the sudden pounding in her chest. The disheveled appearance of Papa staggering around the kitchen with his sweaty forehead and shirt untucked caused her to stop dead in her tracks. He looked so haggard she barely recognized him.

"Whur've ya been, Girl!"

"I—"

"Answer me!" He grabbed her by the collar and pulled her roughly to him. Then suddenly he let her go and turned and slammed his fist down on the table. Wearily, he slumped into the chair and clumsily attempted to remove his shoes.

Never before had Shelby seen her papa in such a state. He always took great pride in his appearance. Realization dawned. He was drunk. Mama was always pestering him about his drinking and had forbid him to ever come home drunk. Only on one other occasion had Shelby ever seen Papa drunk, and that had been like witnessing hell's fury. Swallowing hard,

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Shelby attempted to compose herself. She smoothed her rumpled skirt and went over to the stove.

“Papa, I made some ham, pinto beans, and cornbread. I left yours in the skillet. I'll fix you a plate.” With a shaky hand, she placed his supper and milk in front of him and quickly turned to leave.

“Good night, Papa.” Before she could walk away, he grabbed her arm and spun her around. “What's your hurry?”

“It's been a long day, and I'm tired. Besides, Mama always says—”

He slammed his hand down on the table, causing her to flinch. “Durn you! Your mama ain't here, is she?”

“No. I—”

He reached out and pushed a strand of hair from her face. The look in his eyes made her shrink back. “But you are.” Gruffly he placed his arm around her waist and pulled her onto his lap. “Why don't you sit in my lap?”

Shelby felt a surge of panic. “Don't you think I'm a little old for that?”

He held her hands behind her back and placed his mouth next to her ear. His lips felt moist and repulsive. “Not fer what I have in mind.”

She could smell the stale odor of liquor on his breath, mingled with sweat. Struggling to free herself, she tried to keep her voice even as she spoke. “Please, Papa. Please let me go.”

Throwing back his head, he let out a loud cackle that echoed through the room. He loosened his grip, and Shelby managed to break away from him. She ran for the back door, but he was faster. He pushed her into the stove and began rubbing his hands over her shoulders. Shelby felt revulsion rise and fought the urge to retch. Now his lips were grazing her neck. On the brink of utter despair, Shelby experienced an instant of clarity and felt a sudden burst of anger. Reaching out over the stove, she grasped the handle of the cast-iron skillet, her knuckles white, and hit him over the head with all of her might.

His eyes registered surprise and then narrowed into small slits of molten lava, threatening to explode. “You little hussy. You'll pay dearly for that,” he said as he staggered backward, trying to regain his balance.

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Shelby hit him again with the skillet, this time using both hands, the sound making a sickening thud as it struck. He fell to the floor, and she hit him again and again. Silence filled the room as Shelby looked at the still figure on the floor. Dropping the skillet, Shelby put her hand over her mouth and backed away, her body shaking violently. A scream tore through the room, and Shelby realized it had come from her. She turned and ran blindly out the kitchen door into the darkness.