

# Home, and Everything Else

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I EXPECTED THE HOME PLACE IN Morrison's Gap to be as old and worn as we are. But land doesn't hold onto scars the way people do. In our absence, it had been remade wholly new.

CALLIE SHUFFLES HER FEET, FACE TURNED to the wan morning sun as she waits for me to put words to what I see. She's been blind since the long-ago night we fled this place, the only home either of us ever knew.

"You want me to be pretty or honest?"

She takes a deep lungful of air. "Pretty honest."

"The old farmhouse is gone. And the town proper has spread all the way out here

now. There's a new shop..." I pause, close my eyes, try to conjure the past. "...where the outhouse used to be, maybe? Sign says Morrison's General Store."

I can't keep the scorn from my voice. Callie was a Morrison for the two years she was married. She took back her real name after we ran.

"They kept your corn fields." The crops that hug the west side of the general store and stretch toward the horizon are a riot of green, fulsome growth.

The last time we stood on this patch of earth, a mob of Morrison men were flinging cruel words at us. Words, and more.

*Abomination*

"Take me to the corn," Callie says. I place her hand on my shoulder and we walk to the edge of the field. She reaches out to touch the plants, part by part.



image info

*Jezebel  
Slattern  
Whore*

I never intended to come back. Boston was loud and crowded, but big-city anonymity was a balm, allowing us to live as we wanted. Not like here. In Morrison's Gap, judging eyes had seen everything: how we became inseparable after the fire, closer than it was proper for two women to be, with no need of men. The town's constant scorn had made me doubt my own heart, made me wonder if I was an abomination after all.

But if I was, so was Callie. And that I would not believe.

Her family put generations of their blood and sweat into this soil, carving out a corner of Virginia paradise. When her parents died young, she inherited the farm. And Malcolm Morrison, son of the town's founder, saw his opportunity. She gave him her hand because there were animals to tend, crops to harvest, and no one else came knocking.

No one but me. I was already considered a spinster by then. I lived alone in a small room on Main Street above the bank and took in mending to get along. Raised a farm girl, Callie was more ox and plow than needle and thread. I was out at the farm every few weeks to help with housework and mending. I was the hired gal from town who folks said spent way too much time out at the farm.

The night of the prairie fire, Mal was drowning himself in cheap whiskey. As the wild burn swept toward Callie's farm, he was passed out by the hearth. The crackling blaze woke her—a country girl knows to listen for the dangerous snap and roar of uncontrolled fire. She ran outside, checking

on the fields and the stock, as she'd been taught. Protecting the livelihood was the core of her upbringing. The barn and the animals within were safe from the path of the fire. By the time she thought to return to the house for Mal, he was already on fire. Empty whiskey jug still on his lap.

She fled to town on foot, too spooked to saddle a horse or hitch the wagon, rousing the elder Morrises from their beds. The women folk took her in while the men hurried to salvage what they could of the farm. When the men returned, their eyes were accusing, resenting Callie for her survival.

Not the women. They didn't bother keeping their blame silent.

"Some wife you are," Ma Morrison said, "tending your land before your own husband. It's unnatural. Shame on you."

When the evil old buzzard tried to complain in my earshot, I said Mal was a useless drunk and that Callie couldn't've saved him if she'd tried. Told it to her face and anyone else who'd listen.

The mending work dried up after that. No one in town would hire me. My savings dwindled. I was in the bank withdrawing the last of it when I heard the Morrises had turned Callie out.

*Go back to your farm if you love it so much* were the words town gossip put in Ma Morrison's mouth.

I gave up my rented room, packed my things, and went to Callie. I found her huddled in the corner of her half-charred house, wide-eyed and shivering and thin as a fence board. The only food in the house was milk from the cow and stale bread wrapped in a soot-smear cloth. I warmed the milk, poured it over torn bread. Callie ate, and I went to check on the animals, making sure

they were fed and watered. When I walked back through the farmhouse door, Callie was bright and smiling. But her eyes were desperate. Don't leave me, they said. And I never did. We became partners and more, repairing the fire damage and working the land and falling in love. Managing to survive. But only just.

In Morrison's Gap, resentment was bubbling like hot pitch. Mal's family had spread their poison throughout the town. They'd shunned Callie, assuming she'd fail, and the farm along with her. They waited for her to crawl into town begging for help. When she didn't, they took aim at our unconventional happiness.

On a night when the harvest moon was nestled low in the sky, they came for us.

It'd been a hot day in the fields, preparing the corn for harvest. We were inside with our feet up, drinking cool glasses of buttermilk. I heard the horses first. Then the men. Their hatred seeped under the door and down the chimney, drawing us outside. Callie was afraid they'd set fire to the house; she'd become skittish around even the smallest flame. For my part, I wanted to face them.

They threw rocks. When the rocks were gone, they came at us with fists. I feared violation, but it was blood and bruises they were after, pain that would show. I was prepared to die for Callie, for the home we'd built together. To this day, I still believe that I could've taken on any of those men and won. But together they were too many. It wasn't their sex that bested us, but their numbers.

The thing that finally stilled their violence was Callie's terrified shriek. The buckshot sprayed into her eyes, tearing chunks of skin

and feeling, she told me later, like a thousand feasting demons. Her pain roused a cheer from the men, and their anger dissolved.

I pulled Callie around back of the house and through the trees, still blackened by fire, until the sounds of men and beasts were far behind. I tended to her wounds with river water, covered her exposed skin with my old barn coat. We made for the road, never looking back.

Until now.

"Take me to the corn," Callie says. I place her hand on my shoulder and we walk to the edge of the field. She reaches out to touch the plants, part by part.

*Tassel*

*Stalk*

*Silk*

*Husk*

Words I never knew before Callie. Words I haven't thought about in years.

SHE BENDS TO GRAB A FISTFUL OF DIRT, richly black. It dusks her palm; hers is a hand that worked tirelessly to serve this land. Hers is a hand gentle when it caresses me. A tiny sproutling bobs in the dirt she holds, welcoming her home.

At her request, I've brought her here to spend her last days. She wants to be planted back into the soil that grew her. When the time comes.

I HAVE NO REGRETS ABOUT OUR YEARS together, before or after we left Morrison's Gap. We lived honestly, beautifully, fully. Our love as green and lush as this corn. When she goes, she'll take my heart. Which is why I couldn't say no when she asked to come home. Because she is home to me. Home, and everything else. ❖