

HARVEST
OF
TEARS

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PREFACE

Hunger stalked the land for the “Great Depression” was upon it, destroying the dignity and security of a normally productive nation, settling down like a plague of locusts devouring fields of harvest crops. One-third of the country’s 122 million people were ill-fed, ill-housed and ill-clothed for approximately 12 million Americans were unemployed. After the stock market crash of 1929, banks failed alarmingly fast, factories shut down with disastrous results and mortgages on homes and farms were foreclosed at a fast-paced, sickening rate. Soup kitchens and bread lines were established in larger cities to alleviate the destitute. People formed lines everywhere to obtain relief and men were walking, always walking, looking for jobs that were nonexistent or never materialized. Unscrupulous employers lowered wages to sub-survival. Workers were forced to sleep in subways or parks because they couldn’t afford to pay rent. Department stores throughout the Midwest advertised that they would exchange clothing for farm produce. A survey by a leading university revealed that, of the millions of citizens turned transient, more than a quarter of a million were under 21 and almost half of those were girls.

Poverty and frustration saturated the physical and mental well-being of the people, choking out hope, dignity

and self-respect. Suicides were rampant. Respectable women capitulated to prostitution in order to feed their children. Previously sober abstaining men resorted to alcohol in a vain attempt to regain their feeling of usefulness and manhood while others, lacking the strength and will to continue the apparently hopeless struggle, gave up and merely sat, staring into space.

Unspeakable squalor prevailed in both the metropolis and the rural communities. The Depression knew no boundaries and was no respecter of race, color or creed. It reached across every line, touching the life of every person in the country. Lives interweaved with each other over every section of the nation, from the North to the South, from the East to the West; albeit the factory worker, the farmer, the rancher or the gold panner. Each was vital to the other, whether it was the “hick farmer” who brought in the harvest or those “damn yanks” who provided the market.

Incredibly sad and strange as it may seem, there was poverty amid plenty. One of the most disheartening features was that farmers were paid to plow under cotton and crops for lack of a profitable market while millions went without enough food. It was a simple matter of economics—overproduction and under-consumption at the same time. Thousands of bushels of wheat were left uncut in fields because of its low price that hardly paid for harvesting. Fruit rotted in orchards while children, through poverty, were denied it. Cattle and sheep were slaughtered by ranchers because the cost of shipping them to market was greater than their sales; yet, people fought for scraps of meat from garbage cans. Cotton lay dormant, ruining in fields because the cotton pickers could not exist on the 35 cents paid for picking a 100 pounds. And, as a result of overproduction, farmers were unable to pay the interest on their mortgages so, eventually, mortgage

companies went into the hands of the receiver. Farmers lost their farms by foreclosure and mortgage companies lost their holdings by tax sales. The farmers of the South and West were pauperized by the poverty of the industrial populations of the North and East who, in turn, were wiped out by the poverty of the farmers; both were rendered incapable of buying the product of the other. Thus, poverty amid plenty.

Who can say what social aspects have evolved, even still predominate, in the overall life structure of society as a result of the devastating Depression of the 1930s? It would be impossible to take into account or to evaluate the countless ways that it has influenced the lives of those who were mired the deepest in the quicksand of poverty during that era. Their progeny remember parts and pieces of the period only dimly because of man's fortunate ability to blot the image of past unpleasantness from his mind. Even those who were unborn at that time are affected in a multitude of ways. Who can say how many sequential generations will suffer, either directly or indirectly; how and to what extent their harvests will be reaped from the wildly scattered seeds sown by it? Those who were directly involved know inwardly of the Depression's deeply personal, cataclysmic effect on their own lives while their descendents, too young to have endured that dismal season, have no comprehension of its consequence on their lives—nor will they ever. It is impossible to accurately or adequately describe the disastrously debasing subjection to the degenerate privation of that ravaged epoch. This tragic stage in history was one that had to be trodden and performed upon personally in order to be able to discover its truth and meaning, to know the "gut" feelings of hopelessness and despair. Unemployment in the United States reached its peak in 1933 with 24.9 percent of the labor force out of work. More than a quarter million of

these unemployed were Texans; Texans who organized and marched in desperation past the capitol in Austin, demanding jobs—not “gilded promises” stating they could not live on “hot air” alone.

Texans, loyal and fiercely proud of their heritage, haughtily aware that their land was a nation in itself before becoming a state of the Union, did not relish having to call upon government from the outside for help with problems inside its borders. But pride could not prevent the existing conditions of the Union from invading their revered “empire.” Texas ranchers, declaring that they would accept blame for dust and drought but would not take the blame for poverty resulting from low prices, indignantly ordered that prices for cattle be increased. They argued that they did not need “new deals” in Texas from the federal government but only asked for a “square deal.”

Virgil’s profound proverb, “someday, perhaps, it may be pleasant to remember even these things,” bears no particle of truth for those who survived these catastrophic years. Though memories of the dust, drought, degradation, deprivation and the Depression have faded away for the most part; still, millions of stories could be told of those troubled days in time. This, then, is only one of those stories—about a few people in a small Texas town—one small town of this vast country.



An honest man can feel no pleasure in the
exercise of power over his fellow citizens.

—*Thomas Jefferson*



CHAPTER 1

Elisabeth Lancer dropped the hoe and straightened up. Placing her hands on her hips, she swayed back and forth to ease the stiffness of her back. Now, at thirty years of age, her figure still maintained the slender gracefulness of early youth, her eyes were as startlingly green and the long brown hair that hung loosely about her shoulders retained a shining luster. Her skin had turned to creamy ivory after the long winter just passed, having lost the golden tan that she acquired each spring and summer from prolonged exposure in the outdoors.

With a critical eye, she surveyed the area that she had completed weeding on the south side of her home. The flower beds, built along the length of both sides and across the front of the house, contained only rose bushes that were planted in a neat row down the center. Of all flowers, roses were her favorite. With their deeply-rich colors and the classic shape of both bud and fully-opened bloom, they almost seemed to cast a spell over Elisabeth. She ran her fingers lightly, lovingly over several of the tightly-closed buds, the first to appear in this new spring. This was the time that she had longed for all winter. Spring would awaken the dormant plants and would, once again, herald the appearance of her beloved roses.

The gentle early morning breeze was pleasant; the

freshness of the air exhilarating. Elisabeth's face was relaxed, content. She felt that she was a fortunate woman indeed. She had been blessed with three healthy children and a husband who had a fairly steady job at Blossom's Mill. And anyone who had a job of any type, steady or not, in this Depression year of 1932 was extremely favored. Jon had been employed at the mill for six years as a truck driver, hauling flour and grain to points in west and south Texas. But with the cutbacks in employment at Blossom's during this past year, he had worked irregularly. Third in line of seniority, his truck runs had become more and more infrequent.

Finally, after a period of two weeks, he had departed early this morning on a run. *That meant there would be, at least, a small pay check this month,* Elisabeth thought, *although it won't come close to covering even the barest necessities.* She sighed. *Well, we aren't the only ones who are having a hard time these days. Everyone is in the same boat. We may be poor but I certainly don't consider ourselves unfortunate, as Jon does.*

Elisabeth, a remarkably patient woman, accepted life as it came, without questions. Reared on a farm in a family of seven children, she had always been poor. She accepted that. The one thing in life that she could not accept was Jon's alienation, his indifference toward her. Reluctantly, after all these years, she had, at last, become resigned to it. Resigned, because she could find no solution. Because Jon refused to open the door between them. *It's my fault,* she thought, *I'm to blame.* Elisabeth, lost in her thoughts, did not hear Sam's approach.

Sam Britton owned the grocery store, a fourth mile up Sam Houston Road, the one on which Elisabeth lived, at the corner adjoining David Crockett Street. Sam, 42 years old, was a tall broad-shouldered man with an open friendly face that bordered on handsomeness. The unruly shock of

dark hair was fringed with gray. He possessed that special youthful quality, seemingly reserved for those with a genuine outgoing interest and concern for others.

Making his morning deliveries, Sam had parked his dilapidated, but still serviceable, pickup truck in Mrs. Parson's driveway. After depositing her order, he walked across the Daltons' yard with Elisabeth's small sack of staples. As he drew near, Sam could see the gentle, softly-curved swells of her body, outlined and accentuated by the faded but neat print dress. Suddenly an unexpected surge of emotion welled up in him, almost overwhelming in its intensity. *Oh, God, he thought, will the pain never leave me? Won't I ever be able to conquer it? I don't know how I've stood it all these years without telling Elisabeth the way I feel about her.* His eyes were dark with pain as his thoughts persisted. *I should have left Anseltown years ago.* Yet, he knew that as much as it tortured him to see another man married to her and fathering her children, occupying the role in her life that he coveted, the thought of never seeing her again, watching her smile or hearing her laughter, was unbearable.

Elisabeth, hearing his footsteps now, turned, "Well," she laughed, "if it isn't my favorite grocer."

Sam grinned at her, "Let's keep it that way. I wouldn't want to lose your business."

Elisabeth's smile disappeared, "I don't know why, Sam, the way our bill keeps going higher and higher."

"Now, Elisabeth, stop talking like that. I'm not concerned about your bill. I know that it's as good as gold." His face was sober as he looked at her closely. "Have you lost weight, Elisabeth?" he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he added, "You haven't been ordering much meat lately and that worries me. Everyone needs meat for their strength."

Elisabeth's face flushed slightly and Sam hurried to

say "I hope you don't think I'm being a buttinsky, Elisabeth, but I'm just worried about you." Elisabeth looked at him, frowning slightly. Sam said quickly "Well, I mean, I worry about all my friends, Elisabeth. Everyone is having a damn hard time, making ends meet!"

Elisabeth's frown changed instantly to a smile. "Good neighbor Sam!" she said, "I don't know what we'd all do without you, Honestly now, one would think you'd be mad at everybody for not paying their grocery bills, but here you are, worrying about them instead."

Her face turned serious. She put her hand lightly on his arm for a moment as she said, "Oh, Sam, you're such a good man. So kind and thoughtful. You'd have made some girl a wonderful husband." His face grew red but she didn't notice as she went on, "I'm sorry that our bill has got so high, Sam..." He opened his mouth to protest but she interrupted. "No, let me finish, Sam. I'm sorry that we can pay only a little each week on it. But you know that they've cut back an awful lot at the mill and Jon is lucky if he gets to make one run a week now on the truck. But," her voice contained a note of shame as she continued, "we will pay you just as soon as Jon can get more work." Her green eyes misted. "Your bill comes first on our list." She turned away quickly.

Sam said gruffly, "Now, Elisabeth, I don't want to hear anymore of that talk. You know I'm not worried about your bill. All I'm worried about is if you and your family are eating right. You can't just live on vegetables; don't worry about running the bill up. I want to see you ordering more meat. You hear, now?"

Elisabeth had brushed quickly at her eyes while he was talking. Then, Sam heard her lilting laugh again and she said teasingly. "There you go again, Sam! I declare, you're going to get old before your time, worrying about us. We're doing alright. I've still got some canned food from

last summer's garden. By the time it's gone, I'll have this year's garden to pick from. And as far as meat goes, you know, I have my backyard full of chickens. I didn't need to buy very much from you during the winter because the Johnsons butchered hogs on their farm and we got some fresh pork from them along. So..." She looked up at him, her eyes crinkled from her smile. "Now, does that account satisfy you?"

She turned serious. "We are so fortunate, Sam. There are so many who are much worse off than we are. Some people are actually going hungry right here in Anseltown!"

"Some are even starving to death in the big cities," Sam said. "I've read stories, of men going into stores in broad daylight and stealing groceries—only they don't call it *stealing*." He reflected a minute, adding, "And I'm not sure I do either. They say that their families are starving and they are just taking enough food to feed them—that they will pay for it when they can get work. They only take the bare necessities of food—no cigarettes or booze."

Elisabeth's face was set. "I don't blame them, Sam, God knows I'd steal for my children before I'd see them go hungry. Stealing is sinful but I don't think God would consider it a sin in a case like that." She was thoughtful a moment, then added in a firm voice, "Regardless, I wouldn't let them go hungry—I'd have to steal for them."

"Well, I hope that we can get rid of Hoover this year and get this Depression over with." Sam said. "I'd like to see Roosevelt as president—but anyone will be better than Hoover."

"I pray that whoever is elected will be able to end this awful Depression and give people jobs again." Elisabeth's expression was sad but, suddenly, she smiled. "But, in the meantime, I've got so much to be thankful for. My family is disgustingly healthy and," she hesitated a moment before adding, "we're happy." Sam looked at her closely but she

said nothing more.

"I'd better get back to the store," he said, then laughingly added, "People may be standing in line to pay their bills!" Elisabeth laughed.

As he walked away, she called softly, almost shyly after him, "I'm awfully thankful too, Sam, for a friend like you!" He grinned back at her.

Picking up the hoe, she moved to the front of the house. She noticed the badly peeling paint. I hope that we will be able to paint the house next year, she thought. It needs it badly. Modest though it was, she loved her home. She and Jon had bought it in the second year of their marriage, making the down payment from the small nest egg left by his mother at her death. The savings had accrued mostly from the earnings of Jon and his brother. It was said of his mother, noted for her thriftiness, that she could manage to save money from amounts on which others would starve. As a widow, alone with two sons to rear, she had been forced to improvise, stretch and survive on practically nothing.

Despite its peeling exterior, Elisabeth's home was tidily clean, inside and out. The sparsely furnished interior was orderly and neat. Most pieces of the heavy old furniture had been inherited from Tom's mother and Elisabeth's parents. The austere dark wood had been softened by the hand-knitted scarves and crocheted afghans that covered and decorated table tops and chair backs.

The Lancer home, in the northwest outskirts, was three miles from the courthouse square in the heart of Anseltown. The courthouse was the focal point from which all distances to any point in town or nearby area was determined. A tall, dignified old elm tree that stood near the curb of the Lancer's large front yard cast its gentle shade across the lawn. The yards on Sam Houston Road were spacious, as were most in Anseltown. The space

behind the house was even more expansive, stretching back to the narrow dirt road that wound around the thick woods just beyond. A large pecan tree grew in the center of the backyard, shading much of it and also the screened-in back porch of the house. A wire mesh fence enclosed the back half of the yard, cooping the chickens inside that Elisabeth raised. Jon had built the small square barn-like structure that stood inside the fence in the furthest corner near the road and was used to house them.

The Lancer home faced east and, across the street at the front, lay a field filled with dandelions. It was bordered on the opposite edge by a small lazy, trickling creek. Here, neighborhood children gathered to fly kites and play baseball in the spring, wade in the creek in the summer, play football in autumn and build snowmen in winter. The lot just north of the Lancer home stood bare. The house which occupied it at one time had burned several years previously and had never been rebuilt. Zeke and Nellie Dalton resided in the house on the other side of them. A quarter of a mile on down Sam Houston Road, a railroad track, curving around the woods, crossed it and separated the houses of the white people from the tarpaper shacks of “nigger row” as it was called. Sam Britton’s store sat at the opposite end of Sam Houston Road where it originated at David Crockett Street, a street that ran two and a half miles to the courthouse.

As she worked, Elisabeth’s mind dwelled on the happy years that she had spent in this house, despite Jon’s estrangement. Her children had given her so much happiness. Larry, now 13, had grown tall so rapidly this past year that he was somewhat awkward. His voice had begun to change, a condition for which he often seemed embarrassed. He looked uncannily like Jon except that he had inherited her green eyes. A quiet serious boy, he kept his feelings locked inside him, away from others, with the

exception being Elisabeth. An understanding bond linked them closely. They knew how to communicate with each other. Even in silence, they could sense the other's thoughts and feelings. This son of hers, Elisabeth thought tenderly, was so young and so vulnerable. He possessed a great sensitivity that would allow him to be easily hurt. Deeply protective of him, she realized, reluctantly, that she wouldn't always be able to shield him with her armor against the pain that he would encounter in life.

Lisa, 7 years of age, strong spirited and with a mind of her own, had already learned to use her feminine wiles to get her way. Unlike Elisabeth who thrived on work in the outdoors, Lisa preferred to help in the house. She abhorred getting her hands and clothes dirty. Elisabeth, secretly pleased with her daughter's femininity, encouraged it by assigning outside chores to the boys with Lisa performing those inside the house. It was an arrangement that was satisfactory to all concerned.

A smile touched Elisabeth's mouth as she thought of Roscoe, her youngest son of 5. A lovable little rascal, he had yet to outgrow his baby chubbiness and his cotton head that had been a trait of all three until their hair had turned from white to brown. Roscoe had Elisabeth's open-faced look and mouth with upturned corners but, unlike Larry and Lisa who had come by their mother's green eyes, his were smoky black, like Jon's. Exasperating one minute and comically laughable the next, he was a precocious child, a mixture of confused blessing to have around.

Elisabeth dug stubbornly at each pesky weed which persisted on growing between the rocks on the perimeter of the beds. She recalled how she and the children, three years previously, had hauled the heavy stones in their large toy wagon, load after load, from the quarry at the end of the meadow near the railroad track. She had invented word games and puzzles to play with them in order to

make the labor lighter. Lisa and Roscoe, still small, were more hindrance than help but she had to keep them occupied while she worked. Larry had been old enough to assist greatly. Painstakingly, they had placed the rocks in a neat row three feet from the house around the front and sides. When this was finally accomplished, the wagon trips began once more. This time the trips were across the meadow to the edge of the creek where the rich sandy dirt there was shoveled into the vehicle, then delivered and scattered inside the rocked in area. Elisabeth had been stiff and sore for days afterwards but she had no regrets. For, at long last, the time had come that she loved most—the time for planting. She had grown up in the fields of her father's farm and she liked the feeling of being a part of God's plan for nature, of being involved and sharing in His creative work. It was a cooperative venture, it seemed to her, for man planted the seeds in the ground and God gave life to them and provided proper elements in the soil, sufficient sunshine and rain to make the plants burst from the earth bringing forth the harvest.

Carefully and lovingly, she planted the cuttings that she had obtained from Mrs. Parsons' rose bushes. A widow of 70, Mrs. Parsons lived on the other side of the Daltons and her yard was the pride of the neighborhood. Her unceasing work among her flowers resulted in a showcase mass of colorful blooms from early spring until the first autumn frost. With no money for nonessentials, flower cuttings and seeds were gladly exchanged between neighbors. Mrs. Parsons, very superstitious, had strictly forbidden Elisabeth to thank her for the rose cuttings, saying that, were she to do so, they would not live. Elisabeth had not laughed for Mrs. Parsons' beliefs in the realm of the mysterious were taken seriously. She had been known to render severe tongue lashings to those who presumed the liberty of making light of her soothsaying.

Before planting the cuttings, Elisabeth had first rooted them by placing each one separately in fruit jars which she filled with water. The jars were then set on the large wooden table that occupied one corner of the screened in back porch. Under her watchful eyes, they rooted and thrived, quickly growing large enough to be transferred to the earth. Her success with them earned her the reputation of possessing a *green thumb*, of being capable of growing and cultivating even the most fragile of plants when no one else could. Many brought their cuttings to her to “get them started.” Some even brought their ailing plants to be healed. Nellie Dalton once said, “I declare, Elisabeth, I do believe you sing to them.”

Whereupon, Elisabeth had laughingly replied, “I do, Nellie.”

Slowly, Elisabeth straightened. Her back had grown stiff from the prolonged stooping. Looking back at the weed-clear beds, she inspected the area closer. Satisfied that she hadn’t missed any, she proudly examined the bushes, laden with closed latent buds which concealed the potential royal beauty of their contents. It won’t be long until they open, she thought contentedly. She felt relaxed. Her face contained a peaceful expression. Her love of roses, indeed her inner need for them, was deep, vital.

She squinted up at the sun. Its rays were hot, penetrating the thin dress. She could feel the perspiration trickle down her back. Its position in the sky revealed that it was almost noon. So engrossed had she been in her work and thoughts that she had lost track of time. *I’ll finish clearing the north side of the house after lunch*, she thought as she climbed the front steps and sat down in the wide wooden porch swing at one end. She swung gently back and forth to raise a breeze. She wanted to rest and cool off a few minutes before going inside.

Resting from her morning’s labor, Elisabeth continued

to sit. In a reflective mood, she allowed her mind to wander back to her first meeting with Jon. She had been only 17 at the time. Nevertheless, she had fallen in love with him at first sight. First laying eyes on Jon when he stepped onto the pitcher's mound while playing in a baseball game, she had stared silently, intently at him for a long time. Finally, she turned to her best friend who was sitting beside her under the shade of a tree and stated as a matter of fact, "I'm going to marry that boy, Lou Ann."

"Well, I declare, Elisabeth," Lou Ann said in a shocked tone of voice, "How on earth can you say such a thing? Why, you don't even know him."

"I don't care!" Elisabeth retorted, tossing her long brown hair, "I'm going to marry him just the same. You just wait and see."

"Well, I know that when you make up your mind about something, Elisabeth, you usually do it but, I have my doubts this time."

"Like I said, Lou Ann, wait and see." Elisabeth laughed. Almost everyone in town had turned out that hot summer day to watch their local baseball team play the one from Westville, a farming community ten miles away. There was nothing else to do on a Sunday afternoon in Anseltown. The only entertainment afforded was the one movie house and it had been closed on Sundays by voters who viewed it as a possible source of sinfulness that would desecrate the Sabbath. Hence, the slightest diversion attracted the townspeople like flies swarming to honey.

After the game, Elisabeth casually strolled over to Walter Edwards, one of the players, and said, louder than was necessary, "It's a wonder your team won today since you weren't in church this morning, sinner."

All the while, she was casting her eyes at Jon who was seated nearby, changing his shoes. Laughing at her remark, he looked up at her saying, "I didn't think Walter even