

Sample chapter from John Boykin's forthcoming novel, *The Stone Candle*

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[Background: It's 1872. Main character Ben has fallen in love with Abby Toler, daughter of the town's richest merchant. Her friendship with Ernest Lee, the only black man in town, will be key to unraveling the mystery that drives the story. This is a flashback to the origins of that friendship.]

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Many years earlier

Nobody ever told Ernest Lee when or where he was born. "Don't matter," was all his mother, Bessie, would say.

What is sure is that he and Bessie had been sold to a Mr. Quince in 1846 in South Carolina. Mr. Quince was going to sell them off in 1849 before heading for California to strike it rich in gold. But what good is it to be rich if you don't have the best food? Bessie's cooking was too good to leave her behind.

The three arrived in San Francisco in late 1849 along with throngs of other fortune seekers. It's unclear whether Mr. Quince knew that California was not a slave state before arriving in it – he was not an inquisitive man – but he certainly never got around to mentioning that fact to Bessie.

Mr. Quince overheard a bartender in San Francisco say that there was gold up in Marin County, so he raced up there before word could get around. He didn't bother to learn the nuances of how claims got staked, so he quickly got into a turf dispute with another gold prospector. And quickly got shot.

So Bessie quickly found herself in a little town named Toler with no master, a growing suspicion that she might possibly actually be free, and a hungry young son.

Freedom would be wonderful, but it wasn't going to feed them. So she went up to people on the street to ask for work. Most hurried away from her without a word. To the rare soul who would talk to her at all, the first words out of her mouth were always, "I can cook, clean, and sew." A Mrs. Henderson took Christian pity on her and confirmed her suspicion that she was free. Mrs. Henderson had a hunch

that the town merchant, Alfonse Toler, could use a good servant. She told Bessie to stay put around the back of the livery stable while she went and asked him.

Bessie cooked and cleaned for Alfonse Toler until he died in 1851. Alfonse's son Matt then took over his store. Having enjoyed Bessie's cooking for two years, he kept her as his own servant.

So Ernest Lee grew up in Big Matt Toler's servants' quarters. He worked in the garden, helped tend the horses, helped with laundry, and sometimes helped Bessie in the kitchen.

One of Bessie's sayings was, "It's harder for 'em to hate you if they like you." A naturally social boy, Ernest Lee developed a knack for quickly sizing people up to gauge how they would respond best to him. With some, he made jokes. With others, bright-eyed politeness. With others, flattery. Whatever worked. No one in Toler knew quite what to make of a black boy, but he became as likable as an outcast could be.

The one person who liked Ernest Lee the best was Big Matt's youngest daughter Abby. He could always make her laugh. She would give him a topic, and he could always make up an entertaining story on the spot about that topic. While her parents divided their attention between Abby and her older brother and sister, Ernest Lee always had time for her.

"I don't want you spending so much time with that little Negro boy," her mother would say, though he was in his midteens when Abby was four.

"No! He's my friend!"

Her parents especially disapproved of any physical contact between them. "Don't you know those people are dirty?" Big Matt would say to her.

"No he's not. Nothing ever rubbed off on me."

Once, Big Matt saw Ernest Lee giving her a piggyback ride out in the backyard. With all her joyous shrieking and giggling, neither of them noticed Big Matt charging out of the house yelling, "Stop that! Right this minute!" until he plucked her off Ernest Lee's back. While Ernest Lee cowered from him, Abby kicked and kicked and hit her father until he nearly dropped her.

"I want my piggyback ride!"

"Not from him."

"Yes, from him! He gives the best piggyback rides!"

Big Matt snarled at him, "If I ever catch you within ten feet of her again, boy, I will break you." He told Bessie to keep him away from Abby or he would fire her.

But he had not reckoned on his daughter's will. Abby would pick whom she played with, nobody else, and Lord have mercy on anyone who stood in her way. She refused to speak. She refused to eat. She refused to look at her parents, to bathe, or even to get out of bed. When her mother pulled her squirming and kicking out of bed the next morning, Abby dragged the sheet and blanket all the way out into the hall with her, then bit her. She knocked a crystal vase off a small parlor table, promptly got spanked for that, and promptly kicked over the table.

After two days, her parents gave in. As they always did sooner or later.

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