

Chapter 1

There are two kinds of people in this world: those who live with shame, and those who die from it. On Tuesday, Adelaide Henry would've called herself the former, but by Wednesday she wasn't as sure. If she was trying to live, then why would she be walking through her family's farmhouse carrying an Atlas jar of gasoline, pouring that gasoline on the kitchen floor, the dining table, dousing the settee in the den? And after she emptied the first Atlas jar, why go back to the kitchen for the other jar, then climb the stairs to the second floor, listening to the splash of gasoline on every step? Was she planning to live, or trying to die?

There were twenty-seven Black farming families in California's Lucerne Valley in 1915. Adelaide and her parents had been one of them. After today there would only be twenty-six.

Adelaide reached the second-floor landing. She hardly smelled the gasoline anymore. Her hands were covered in fresh wounds, but she felt no pain. There were two bedrooms on the second floor: her bedroom and her parents'.

Adelaide's parents were lured west by the promise of land in this valley. The federal government encouraged Americans to homestead California. The native population had been decimated, cleared off the property. Now it was time to give it all away. This invitation was one of the few that the United States extended to even its Negro citizens, and after 1866, the African Society put out a call to "colonize" Southern California. The Henrys were among the hundreds who came. They weren't going to get a fair shot in Arkansas, that was for damn sure. The federal government called this homesteading.

Glenville and Eleanor Henry fled to California and grew alfalfa and wild grass, sold it to cattle owners for feed. Glenville studied the work of Luther Burbank and in 1908 they began growing the botanist's Santa Rosa plums. To Adelaide the fruit tasted of sugar and self-determination. Adelaide had worked the orchards and fields alongside her daddy since she was twelve. Labored in the kitchen and the barn with her mother for even longer. Thirty-one years of life on this farm. Thirty-one.

And now she would burn it all down.

"Ma'am?"

Adelaide startled at the sound of the wagon man.

"Good Lord, what is that smell?"

He stood at the front entrance, separated from the interior by a screen door and nothing more.

Adelaide stood upstairs, at the threshold of her parents' bedroom. The half-full Atlas jar wobbled in her grip. She turned and called over the landing.

"Mr. Cole, I will be out in five minutes."

She couldn't see him, but she heard him. The grumble of an old Black man, barely audible but somehow still as loud as a thunderclap. It reminded her of her father.

"That's what you said five minutes ago!"

Adelaide heard the creak of the screen door's springs. A vision flashed before her: Mr. Cole coming to the foot of the stairs and Adelaide dumping the remaining gasoline right onto his head; Adelaide reaching for the matches that were in her pocket; lighting one and dropping it right onto Mr. Cole. Then, combustion.

But she didn't want to kill this old man, so she called out to him instead.

"Have you got my trunk into the wagon yet?" she called.

Quiet, quiet.

Then the sigh of the screen door being released. He hadn't stepped inside. He called to her again from the porch.

"I tried," he said. "But that thing weighs more than my damn horse. What did you pack inside?"

My whole life, she thought. Everything that still matters.

She looked to the door of her parents' bedroom, then called down one more time.

"Five minutes, Mr. Cole. We'll get the trunk in the wagon together."

Another grumble but he didn't curse her and she didn't hear the sound of his wagon's wheels riding off. For a man like Mr. Cole, that was as close to an "okay" as she was going to get.

Would she really have set him on fire? She couldn't say. But it's startling what people will do when they are desperate.

Adelaide Henry turned the handle to her parents' bedroom and stepped inside and shut the door behind her and stood in the silence and the dark. The heavy curtains were pulled shut. She'd done that at dawn. After she'd dragged the bodies of Glenville and Eleanor inside and put them to bed.

They lay together now, in their marriage bed. The same place where Adelaide had been conceived. They were only shapes, because she'd thrown a sheet over their corpses. Their blood had soaked through. The outline of their bodies appeared as red silhouettes.

She went to her father's side. The fabric had adhered to his skin when the blood dried. She'd pulled the sheet up over his head. Better that way. She didn't want to see what remained of him. She poured gasoline over his corpse, from his forehead to his feet.

Now Adelaide moved round to her mother's side.

She'd pulled Eleanor's side of the sheets up only to her chin, hiding the damage done to her throat. She hadn't felt able to pull the shroud over her mother entirely. Strange to get squeamish about that part considering all the other damage done to Eleanor's body. Adelaide tilted the jar above her mother's head but found she couldn't pour out the last of the fuel. She held it over Eleanor and stared into her mother's opened, empty eyes.

She couldn't bring herself to do it. She set the jar down and crouched by the bed. She whispered into Eleanor's dead ear.

"You kept too many secrets," Adelaide said. "Look what it cost you."

With that, she rose and reached into her pocket. The matchbox bore the symbol of the African Society, a silhouette of a Black man driving a plow. She struck a match and watched it burn. She flung it at the bed, where it landed on her father.

She turned quickly so she wouldn't have to see the bodies catch, but she heard it. As if the whole room took a single deep breath. An instant later she felt heat across her scalp and neck, but when she stepped out of the room the flames still licked at her skin. She realized it hadn't been the fire that burned at her but the guilt.

On the upstairs landing her right knee buckled and she nearly went down. Kneeling with one hand on the railing. She'd done it. Behind that door her parents were burning. Maybe she should stay with them. That's what she considered. Enough gasoline had spilled on her hands, her dress, that it wouldn't take long for her to burn. Step back inside the bedroom and kneel at the foot of their bed and be engulfed. End the family line. That's what she deserved. What kind of daughter would do the things she'd done in the last twenty-four hours? A foul and terrible daughter.

Soon Adelaide rose to her feet but hardly recognized she'd done it. As if her body wanted her to survive even if her soul felt differently. She rose and put one foot forward. Then the next. She'd be leaving, it seemed. *Who decided that?* she wondered, even as she held the railing and descended the stairs.

"Well, there you are," Mr. Cole said when she stepped out from the screen door. He looked from her to the house. Did he see smoke yet? Could he hear the upstairs bedroom walls starting to crackle?

His buckboard wagon sat by the porch; horse nearly as malnourished as the man. Adelaide stood six inches taller than Mr. Cole and outweighed him by forty pounds. No wonder he couldn't lift the trunk.

There were handles on either side of the Seward steamer trunk. Adelaide grabbed one end and Mr. Cole took the other. She bent her legs and lifted. Mr. Cole huffed with the strain.

"Quick now," he said. Though he wasn't doing much work, he still felt happy to give commands.

She yanked the trunk toward the bed of the wagon and Mr. Cole was pulled along.

They reached the wagon and with one last effort they set it down in the bed. The wagon sank inches and all four wooden wheels creaked. Mr. Cole's horse took a step forward as if trying to flee the burden. When they stood straight both Mr. Cole and Adelaide were breathless.

Adelaide climbed into the wagon. The only other item she'd brought—besides that trunk—was her travel bag. It had been packed already, sitting right at the threshold inside the house. Mr. Cole got in beside her on the spring seat.

He looked back at the house. "Where's your people?" he asked.

"My parents," she said softly.

"They don't come out to see you off?"

She looked at the house as well. The bedrooms lay at the back of the structure. Even if there was smoke, it probably wouldn't be seen from the front of the house for a little while. Maybe she had a bit more time before the fire became obvious.

“They’re resting,” she said.

Mr. Cole kept any further questions to himself. He held the reins and gave two clicks with his tongue and his poor horse pulled and pulled until, finally, the wagon moved.

Adelaide was leaving California with \$154, a large sum of money and still hardly enough for an entirely new life. But that was all she had. That, and her travel bag, and her trunk.

The farmhouse would burn. Eventually their neighbors—the closest farm lay nearly a mile away—would notice. They would sift through the damage and find only two bodies inside. They would ask where Glenville and Eleanor’s daughter had gone.

On Tuesday, Adelaide Henry had been a farmer.

By Wednesday she became a fugitive.

Excerpted from *Lone Women* by Victor LaValle. Copyright © 2023 by Victor LaValle. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.