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MATTIE'S
CHOICE

A 20TH CENTURY
HISTORICAL NOVEL

Mattie's Choice

Gay N. Lewis

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Mattie's Choice

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Dedication

To Mae and Kathleen

Two strong women who lived during perilous times
One was strong enough to stay.
The other strong enough to leave.

Acknowledgements

Mattie's Choice has been the book on my heart for almost a decade. I've written and rewritten it many times. This book is a departure from my Sarah the Love Angel series. *Mattie's Choice* falls into the genres of Historical Fiction, Women's Fiction, and Christian Fiction. Sarah is whimsical and humorous. This book tackles the dark subject of abuse. This book's premise is about choices, the way we interpret Scripture, right or wrong, and the choices we make based on what we perceive the Bible to say. There weren't many resources in 1925 to help abused women, but they exist today, and I hope women will search for them.

As I neared completion of the manuscript for the umpteenth time, God directed me to two ladies. These women volunteered to read and critique *Mattie's Choice*. I'm forever indebted to their wisdom, insight, and encouragement.

Mary Vaeth was the first to offer. She's a neighbor here in Weston Lakes and moved to Texas in 1998 from Long Island, New York. Mary taught in public schools for twenty-five years and was an adjunct instructor and field supervisor of student teachers for Molloy College on Long Island. After moving to Texas, she

taught in a private Christian academy. Mary is a writer and has received awards for her work. The column she writes for our local magazine, *West Side Stories*, is informative and entertaining. We met at the Weston Lakes Book Club and developed a friendship due to our shared interests.

Juanita A. Blezinger is a new friend. I spoke at a luncheon and she approached me to say she'd love to proof my work. I'd never had a stranger volunteer before, so I was honored. I sent her a few chapters and was impressed with her attention to details. Juanita has earned three degrees. The last one is a Doctorate of Education, Curriculum & Instruction, from the University of Houston. Juanita used her degrees to teach in Texas public schools and also at the University of Houston. She enjoys time with her grandchildren and leading a quilting project at her church. Juanita and her church make almost three hundred tacked quilts each year and they give them freely to provide warmth and comfort to those in need. When asked, Juanita assists students by proofing thesis work required for graduate studies.

Thanks, Mary and Juanita! Your critiques helped me add dimension to the work, and the reinforcement was invaluable.

My editor, Lisa Lickel proved a priceless source. She spent hours reading this manuscript and offering suggestions. Thanks, Lisa!

As always, I thank Joan Alley, Owner of Prism Book Group for publishing my offerings. I also thank Nicola Martinez and Pelican Book Group for the final publication of this book.

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Tuesday, April 7, 1925

Foolish? Well, maybe. Friends and family thought so.

Mattie wrinkled her nose as she whiffed the outdoor privy. Could anything reek worse? A pigpen might smell better. Married only a few days and here she stood, longing for the indoor plumbing she'd left in her childhood home.

Why care if modern conveniences no longer existed? Jesse meant more than a life of ease. Her handsome new husband with his thick, wavy black hair took her breath away and made her heart gallop faster than a race horse each time she saw him. Running off to Tulsa to marry Jesse Colby seemed the most romantic adventure in the world. But now? No matter. Too late for doubts—that was, if any came to mind.

She lifted a thick, black braid tied at the end with a blue ribbon and wiped her neck with a handkerchief. Heavens to Betsy! The sun pelted down hot, even for springtime in Oklahoma.

Had she looked pretty for her groom as he ate breakfast? He'd failed to say anything before he left for work. He preferred her long hair worn loose like when they'd courted, but she'd secured it back for housework. Is that what had bothered him—kept him

quiet?

Bending over the number two tub behind the small, white clapboard house, she rubbed Jesse's cotton shirt on the ancient washboard. The washing machine at her parents' home had made laundry easier. Another modern convenience gone. Sigh. No use to moan or lament. Oh well. If Momma had used the washboard in the early days of her marriage, Mattie could, too.

Squeezing water from the shirt, she eyed one of the pullets promenading about the yard. "As soon as I finish these clothes, I'm going to wring your neck. Jesse likes fried chicken, and you're headed for the skillet!"

"Hi, sis, talking to the hens since you got married?"

Mattie turned to see her twin brother beaming at her like a peacock.

"Oh, hi, Maury. What're you doing here? Are you skipping school?"

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Sure I am, but you should be in school."

Maury's grin twisted to a glare big enough to light a fire. "So should you."

"Don't start on me. Even if I wanted to, I can't change it. I'm a married woman now." Mattie picked up the basket of clothes.

Maury followed her to the side yard where a cable hung between two poles.

Her neighbor, Mrs. Shuster, called out a "Yoo hoo," waved, and went into her tidy little house across the street before Mattie could wave. Momma's best friend always had a kind word and a hello for everyone.

"I know you've got a husband, but I'm grieved

about it. You should've stayed in class, too. You're the smartest one in the family."

Mattie smiled up at him. "I'm not that smart, and besides, what would I do with schooling? Most girls my age get married and have babies." She pinned a shirt on the line to dry.

"Yeah, but they don't have to marry this young. Most finish high school and some even go to college."

"Yes, they do, and after they're done with education, they marry and have kids. What good is learning if they don't use it? And how can they anyway? Women don't have openings in today's world, especially here in Osage County. Now you let me be." Her defiant tone wouldn't escape Maury's attention. No one knew her pigheadedness more than her brother.

Maury's face puckered as if he'd eaten a sour pickle.

"No use for you to get riled up. Let's change the subject." She grinned at him.

"Ah...uh...sure." Maury spoke cautiously as if he feared an Oklahoma tornado. "OK, but I miss you in Mr. Whitson's class. You memorized and recited poetry better than anybody."

"Poetry was always my favorite." Mattie finished the work, stood back to survey the results, and nodded her head in approval. "Want to come in and have a glass of buttermilk? I churned some this morning. I also have sweet milk and tea cakes."

"Thanks, sounds good. Maybe some sweet milk and a cookie, but let me help you empty the water first. It's too heavy for a mite like you." After pouring the water out, he propped the tub against the house. "You and Momma always did the clothes on Monday. Are

you changing your wash day to Tuesday now that you're a married woman?"

"No, Monday is still my wash day, and Tuesday is ironing day. It rained yesterday, remember?"

"Now that you mention it, I do."

His famous chortle resembled a goose cackle and made Mattie smile. She cuffed him on the shoulder as they walked inside.

Maury sat at the small table in the tiny kitchen, and Mattie's stomach turned queasy as if she'd eaten rotten food the night before. Her twin glanced at the modest space. What must he be thinking? He should recognize the table and two chairs—they'd been in Grandma's house. If he looked, he could see two matching chairs in the front room with nothing else in there.

Thank goodness for relatives—otherwise they'd have precious little. Besides the table and four chairs, they owned a bed. Jesse brought it in when he rented the house.

"I'd heard Jesse rented this place. I had no idea at the time that he planned to move you into it."

Mattie busied herself with hostess duties. "Neither did I." She smiled. "It was vacant for several months, and when I heard Jesse rented it, I thought he wanted privacy. I didn't know he was planning on it being our home. Mr. Monroe rented it for two dollars a week. It needs some fixing up, but we can do that. Jesse mended the chicken coop and bought a cow. I'll plant a garden out back as soon as I can get the ground tilled."

"Nice of Mr. Monroe to leave the gas cook stove and icebox." Maury gestured to them as he spoke.

Mattie nodded. "Jesse says it won't be long before we can afford more."

She brought the glasses of milk and a plate of cookies to the table.

"Tea cakes are my favorite, and you're the best cook in the family. I'll miss your cooking, and who'll pacify the squabbles we all have? You're stubborn, but you're the one to smooth things over. When one of us bucks up against the other, you make things right. You're a good egg. What will I do without you?"

Maury bit into a cookie, and affection leaped into Mattie's heart faster than a soaring bird. She loved her family. Why had she gone against her parents' wishes? Affection turned to agony swifter than she could say her favorite phrase, heavens to Betsy.

"Come by anytime. I plan to keep sweets baked."

Nodding, Maury played with a crumb he'd dropped on the table. "I'll do it. Tell me about Jesse. Does he like working at the filling station?"

"Yes, he does. He says a horde of folks will be buying Model Ts, and he thinks those expensive gasoline buggies are swell inventions. They cost a lot of money—about three hundred dollars. If you don't have cash, you can buy one on the installment plan. Did you know that?"

Maury nodded.

"And Jesse's real talented with mechanical equipment and carpentry work—knows how to patch up all sorts of things. People drop off household stuff, and he picks up extra money with odd repair jobs. He builds a bit of furniture for someone now and then. If the person can't pay, he trades labor for vegetables or a ham, but it works out in the long run."

Maury's sorrowful eyes cut her as sharply as a knife, and her belly flip-flopped as if she'd plunged off a cliff. As twins, they'd understood each other without

words. Heavens to Betsy! It dawned on her like hot sun at midday. Maury wasn't merely brooding over her deserting schooling. Her sudden marriage didn't make sense to him. They'd always been best friends, but she'd left him out in the cold and kept secrets from him. If the situation was reversed and Maury had been the one to elope, she'd be in the same boat. How could she explain it? Why couldn't she think of something to say?

Maury rubbed his chin. "Momma and Papa long for you at home. We all do."

"I miss each of you, too."

"You're barely seventeen. We only had one more year to go and then we would have graduated together. You didn't have to marry Jesse, did you?"

Mattie frowned. "What do you mean?"

Maury licked his lips and then blew out a deep breath. "Are you in the family way, Mattie Alice?" Maury used her middle name when he was serious about something.

"No, I'm not! Why would you ask such a thing?" Mattie's voice squeaked. She sounded like an angry mouse caught stealing cheese.

Maury positioned both hands around his empty glass and toyed with it. "Well, there's some speculation. I heard Momma and Papa wondering about it, and I know the kids at school are talking."

"Well, let them talk. I don't care."

Maury continued to turn the glass around in his fingers. "You don't care what Momma and Papa think?"

"Of course I do, but I married Jesse because I love him. Time will tell I'm not in a family way."

Maury blew his breath out sharply. "Now don't

get your dander up. People always speculate when a young girl runs off in the clear blue to get married."

Mattie raised her chin and sharply inhaled. "I suppose they do. It seemed romantic when Jesse planned it."

"I need to understand. Why did you agree to it, Mattie?"

"Jesse wouldn't hold off. I asked him to wait, but he said no—he needed a wife right now, and if I didn't want him, Ruth Groverton was available. She's had her mind set on him for some time, and Jesse knew I didn't like her. Recall the time she tried to come between the two of us?"

"I remember. We didn't allow it. I'll have to hand it to Jesse. He used the rivalry between you and Ruth to his advantage, but surely Ruth isn't the only reason you gave in. That makes no sense."

"The anger in your voice stands out like a sore thumb." She grinned. "You think of yourself as my big brother and protector."

"Well, I am three minutes older and ten inches taller."

Mattie exhaled and allowed her shoulders to slump. "Jesse kept threatening to replace me with Ruth, so I agreed to marry him."

"Didn't you know he was seeing Ruth?"

"Of course I did, and I didn't want to lose him to her."

"So you're saying jealousy is the main reason you did this? That's a lot of hooley." Maury's eyes grew almost to the size of the cookie plate.

Mattie drew in another deep breath and slowly exhaled it. "Maybe a little bit of jealousy. I love Jesse and didn't want to lose him, but Papa played a role,

too.”

“How’s that?”

“Jesse thought Papa had an ax to grind when it came to him courting me. You know how Papa is—strict and all.”

“No matter. Jesse should’ve asked Papa for your hand.”

“Jesse knew Papa’s answer would be no.”

“Papa would’ve said wait ’til after graduation.””

Mattie studied Maury for a moment. “Maybe, but he would have said that to buy time. He thought Jesse would tire of me and go away.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I heard him and Momma talking. Papa wasn’t concerned about our eight-year age difference. He thought Jesse would soon leave me heartbroken.”

Mattie chose a cookie and broke it in half. “Papa thought I’d come to my senses when I saw what kind of person Jesse really is. He said I was naïve in the ways of men.”

Maury nodded. “Papa’s right. Even though you know how to manage a household, it doesn’t mean you understand a man’s way of thinking.”

Mattie placed her hands on her hips and shot daggers at him with her eyes. “What I don’t know, I can learn.” Mattie jutted her chin.

“I’m sure you absorbed a lot of new stuff on your wedding night.” Maury’s lips spread into a wide grin. Then he laughed heartily while Mattie fanned her cheeks with her hand. He gulped down his milk and almost choked in the process, but he regained his composure. “So you knew Papa and Momma had misgivings about Jesse?”

Mattie offered Maury another cookie. “Yes, I did,

and Jesse knew Papa didn't like him. I told him what I'd overheard."

Maury dusted an invisible piece of lint off his shirt. "Big mistake. You should've kept quiet about that." His eyes met hers. "Maybe Papa's got good reason not to like Jesse."

"Papa's wrong. He doesn't know Jesse the way I do."

Maury shook his head. "Jesse courted you for about four months. How can you really know him? I've heard he's got a bad temper."

Not wanting Maury to see her growing frustration, Mattie stood and gathered their glasses. She emptied the water bucket into the dishpan sitting inside the dry sink and plunged the milky glasses into soapy suds.

"Momma and Papa wouldn't want you living like this. You have no indoor plumbing," Maury spoke as he watched.

"We'll have it one day. We have electric, but Jesse says it's too expensive to use. I chose this. When you love someone, you make sacrifices."

"Seems a lot of sacrifice to me. What's a day for you like these days, Sis?"

Mattie turned to look at her twin. "It's a lot different than it used to be. I get up at four o'clock. I don't want to wake Jesse, so I dress in the kitchen by kerosene lantern light. I feed the chickens and milk the cow. Then it's time to make breakfast. After Jesse leaves, I busy myself with chores like laundry."

Maury's lip curled downward. "You left your family and a nice, easy life to work from daylight to kingdom come? Holy mackerel! That's nuts. Momma wouldn't allow domestic help. If she had, you wouldn't have known how to do all this. I doubt you'd

have considered marriage." He waved his hand as he gestured to the kitchen. "The longer I sit here, the more I wish I'd been with you the day you met Jesse."

Mattie returned to the table and narrowed her eyes at Maury. "Why? Do you think Jesse would've ignored me if you'd been with me?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. I wasn't overly concerned when you started courting him, and that turned into a mistake on my part." Maury rubbed his chin. "You used to sew. Momma said you were so good at it. Have you had time to sew yourself a new dress, or anything, for that matter?"

Mattie shook her head. "No time for that. I darn the clothes we have. Later, I'll ask Jesse for some material, and I'll make a dress as pretty as the one I had on when we met—the green one. Jesse likes my dresses. I was wearing the blue dress I'd made when Jesse came over to tell me I looked sweet in it. After that he started coming to our church socials. Fun, remember?"

"I saw Jesse steal a kiss when we went on that fall hayride. He thought I was too busy to notice." Maury shook his head. "Should've said something then."

Grinning, Mattie's face flushed again with heat. "That kiss began it all. After that, Jesse came by. We took long walks. He was the perfect gentleman, and when Papa said it was time to come inside, Jesse didn't like it. When he'd had enough of being told to leave, he came to a decision right then and there: he wanted us to get married."

"So you knew Papa had a problem with Jesse, and you didn't want to heed his advice. Since Papa's always been a wise man, what made you think him a fool about his feelings for Jesse?"

Mattie ducked her head, studied the table, and then fixed a strong gaze on Maury. "I walked by the station Friday before last, and Jesse invited me inside for a soda. He just up and said, 'I'm going to marry you tomorrow, Mattie.'"

Maury didn't move as he listened.

"I felt stunned—sort of like a bolt of lightning struck me. He told me I couldn't say no because he had everything ready for our start. He'd rented this house, bought livestock, and wanted nothing more in life than for me to be his wife. He told me if I wasn't ready, Ruth was."

"Jesse used your arch enemy to get what he wanted. He's also smart enough to know you'd feel obligated to marry since he had this house ready for you. He's a wily one." Maury folded his arms across his chest. "Why didn't you tell me about Jesse's plans? I'd have smashed those ideas to smithereens."

"I promised I wouldn't. Jesse knew you wouldn't like it and feared you or Papa might talk me out of it, so I agreed to meet him the next morning for the ride to Tulsa."

"But, Mattie, you've never courted anyone else." Maury shook his head. "Don't you think Papa had a right for concern about the first man in your life, age, and education?"

She placed her hands in her lap and clasped them tightly. "Age didn't matter, and Papa would have never changed his mind about Jesse."

"So you decided to take matters into your own hands and run off and get married." Sarcasm dripped from his voice like melting icicles.

Mattie squared her shoulders, "I love him with all my heart. People can just talk all they want to. I don't

owe anybody any explanations. I've got my pride."

Maury gave an exaggerated exhale.

"I'll make a mental note to think about stubbornness and pride later. Is there much difference between the two? Blue blazes, Mattie. How can you be stubborn and gentle at the same time? In many ways, you're just like Papa—obstinate. Papa stands by decisions even when a change of mind would be in his best interest. You're right about one thing. What's done is done. But I want you to know if this new life gets too rotten for you, you can always come back home."

"No, I can't. Papa is too angry with me. His exact words were, 'You've made your bed, Missy, and you'll lie in it. You can't come home.' He'll never forgive me. I made my choice."

"Papa's angry. He's also a man of principle and believes in standing by a decision. Papa may never approve of Jesse, and he trusted you to come to your senses, but you went against him. So, yes, he's mad, however, you're wrong. Papa loves you and will pardon you in time. He let Momma and Grandma give you household items, didn't he?"

Mattie's eyes brimmed with tears.

Maury groaned as if a wet blanket covered his shoulders. "You'll make the best of whatever the future brings you, but I'm always here for you, no matter what happens."

Mattie nodded her head. She rose from the chair, moved to the cupboard, reached for her bowl, and swallowed several times so she could speak. "You want to stay for dinner? Jesse should be home shortly. It takes about fifteen minutes for him to walk home. We're having skillet potatoes, biscuits, and gravy."

"Thanks, that sounds good. I love your biscuits.

Do you have fresh butter?"

"I churned it this morning."

The front screen door opened and swung shut.

"Oh, heavens to Betsy! Jesse's home early, and I don't have dinner on the table." Mattie began to roll and cut dough.

Jesse came into the kitchen, and she spun to greet him.

Jesse's smile faded faster than dew in the sun when he saw Maury.

2

"Well, isn't this a cozy scene? What are you doing here, Maury?" Jesse spoke loud enough for the neighbors to hear.

"Gee whiz. Don't have kittens. I just dropped by to see how the newlyweds are doing."

"We're doing just fine. Don't you have something to do, or some place you need to be?" Jesse placed hands on a vacant chair as he glared at Maury.

"As a matter of fact, I do." Maury rose from the chair and moved to the cupboard where Mattie stood.

"Bye, Sis. Thanks for the invitation to dinner. Maybe another time." After a quick hug, he turned and left.

When Maury reached a safe distance out of hearing range, Mattie turned to Jesse. "I invited him to eat with us. Why did you run him off?"

"I don't want any man near my wife."

Mattie drew her brows together. "Maury isn't just a man; he's my twin brother."

"He *is* a man. I will not have him coming here and talking to you."

"What? I don't understand. It won't hurt anybody for him to visit with me."

Jesse closed the short distance between them and bent to her eye level. Mattie's knees grew weak as he trapped her against the cupboard. Her heart raced with the speed of a cheetah. If only she could step aside, but

she found no place to move in the little kitchen.

"No more, you understand? You will not see or speak to that brother of yours again. I don't like him, and he doesn't like me."

Her eyes stung as if a cold wind had suddenly whooshed into her face. She'd never seen Jesse like this. He'd been emotionless the time he'd threatened to break up with her and go to Ruth. From where did this fury come? She placed a trembling hand over her chest. He'd been her handsome knight in shining armor, but now his face had contorted into the look of a devil.

"You can't mean what you're saying. Not seeing or speaking to Maury would kill me."

Jesse raised his right hand and slapped her hard across the cheek. "You're my wife. You'll do what I say. You're forbidden to talk to him anymore. My wife will not talk or be seen with any man ever again. A few seconds ago, you said you didn't understand me. Do you now?"

Mattie's eyes widened. Jesse had hit her. He had shouted at her. She wanted to reach up and touch the smarting cheek, but she didn't. Her body shuddered as Jesse bent down once more to stand nose to nose with her. His fiery eyes would deliver the fear of Satan to a preacher. "No more, Mattie." Jesse straightened to his full height.

The ten inches separating them made Mattie feel as though she were a puny nothing.

Jesse took one stride to the table and sat down.

"When will dinner be ready? I don't have long. If you hadn't been so busy talking to that infernal brother of yours, you would've had your work done."

Mattie twisted back to the cabinet and continued with food preparation. She willed her hands to stay