



ALLISON
PITTMAN

A NOVEL

STEALING
HOME

Praise for
Stealing Home

“*Stealing Home* is pure poetry wrapped in wisdom. Allison Pittman gifts us with characters deep and true, dialogue that’s real, and a plot that moves us to laughter and to tears while keeping us turning pages. I want to go to Picksville and watch the next baseball game. I want to meet Duke and Ned and Ellie Jane and Morris especially and all the other people whom Pittman brought into my heart. When I grow up, I want to write like Allison Pittman.”

—JANE KIRKPATRICK, award-winning author of *A Mending at the Edge* and *A Flickering Light*

“*Stealing Home* took me by surprise with gripping characters who dare to defy traditions of race, relationships, and what it means to be a woman, a man, a friend. With baseball in the 1900s as a metaphor, *Stealing Home* is a skillfully woven story about believing in the game of life, love, and ultimately in the victory of change.”

—TINA ANN FORKNER, author of *Ruby Among Us* and *Rose House*

“There is no doubt about it. *Stealing Home* has earned a place on my keeper shelf. Allison Pittman’s wonderfully drawn characters captured my heart and never let go. I hurt with them, laughed with them, loved with them, and cried with them, and I will surely never forget them. Don’t miss this book!”

—ROBIN LEE HATCHER, best-selling author of *Wagered Heart* and *A Vote of Confidence*

“The fabulous ensemble cast of *Stealing Home* broadens the scope of Allison Pittman’s well-crafted novel, setting it apart from typical period romances and grounding the story with historical relevance. Yes, readers will want Ellie Jane to find love, but they’ll want much more than that, too—justice for Morris; hope for Ned; peace and victory for Duke. And they won’t be disappointed. *Stealing Home* drew me in from the first pitch and held me until the final strikeout.”

—CHRISTA PARRISH, author of *Home Another Way*

“Allison Pittman hit one out of the park with *Stealing Home*. The superb cast of characters in this tender story of hope, love, and healing settled in my soul and made me long to stroll down to the town square and linger a while. An unexpected delight in this lovely tale was the narration by Morris, an innocent yet perceptive young man who knows the citizens of Picksville better than they know themselves. More than the story of a few characters, *Stealing Home* is a study of small-town life at its very worst and its shining best.”

—MEGAN DiMARIA, author of *Out of Her Hands* and *Searching for Spice*

“Allison Pittman is a master at creating a fictional world so real you’ll never want to leave it. She balances light humor with insights into romance that make you reexamine your own heart and soul. She keeps you guessing all the way to the grand slam of an ending. And when she writes about baseball, you feel as if the bat’s in your own hand, swinging at the fastest ball you ever saw. *Stealing Home* covers all the bases—a home run of a novel.”

—CAROLINE COLEMAN O’NEILL, author of *Loving Soren*

“Written with an elegant flair, *Stealing Home* is a tremendous story of love, patience, and hope against hope.”

—ALICE J. WISLER, author of *Rain Song* and *How Sweet It Is*

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MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

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For Mikey

PART 1

ON DECK



Cubs swing into Spring minus the Duke

by Dave Voyant

(March 5, 1905)—It seems the Chicago Cubs will start their '05 season without the talented stick of Donald “Duke” Dennison, whose name has been pulled from the roster.

Despite signing a lucrative contract, the Duke has been conspicuously absent for much of the team’s training exercises. When asked about the high-priced no-show, manager Frank Chance seemed unconcerned, saying only that he expected to see the Duke back in the lineup in June. This doesn’t answer many questions for the fans who want to see their favorite royal knock a few out of the park.

Other players seem to be as much in the dark as anybody regarding Duke’s whereabouts. When asked, first baseman Ken “Long Legs” Berg said, “As for me, I wouldn’t care if Duke Dennison took a long walk off a short pier.”

Dwight Institute for the Treatment of Alcoholics and Inebriants

Patient Name: Donald Dennison (Male)

Date of Birth: August 15, 1877

Admitted: February 6, 1905

Discharged: May 1, 1905

Diagnosis: Acute alcoholism

Physician Summative Comments: Patient has responded well to isolation treatment. Night terrors have discontinued. Hand/bodily tremors have greatly reduced. Violent tendencies subdued.

Recommendations upon release: Because patient reports continued occasional cravings, it is suggested that he is released to a transitional environment where access to alcohol is limited for no fewer than twenty days. Recommended: the close supervision of a family member.

Physician assessment of patient's continued success: Guardedly optimistic

Person(s) responsible for patient release: Frank Chance, Dave Voyant

ELLIE JANE

She took the job at the railroad ticket office quite by accident when her father, Sheriff Floyd Voyant, was summoned to the station to arrest the ticket agent who had shown up drunk to work.

It was early June, just after graduation, and Ellie Jane—needing to stop by the post office anyway—had accompanied her father. At the insistence of Mr. Coleman, the station manager, she settled behind the desk to fill in for the afternoon.

She had been seventeen years old. She never left.

Some people, she supposed, might find it monotonous to sit in a little glass booth, day after day, but not Ellie Jane. These were her finest hours, chatting with her fellow townspeople. She might ask, “Oh, do you have family in Tennessee?” or “Didn’t you just travel to Boston last month?” And the person would be forced to reply, even if grudgingly so, with averted eyes and terse comments.

If she were to run into any of these same people in the town square, while running errands in the Picksville shops, they might walk right past her or make a quick detour into the butcher’s shop. But here, if they wanted her to slide that ticket through the little archway cut into the glass, they’d have to engage in a bit of conversation.

This afternoon, the first Tuesday in May, Ellie Jane was finishing her modest lunch of an apple, cinnamon butter bread, and tea, when a tentative knock at the glass window got her attention. It was Morris Bennett, a little early to take advantage of passengers needing help with their bags.

“Miss Ellie Jane?” His voice was soft and muffled. “I gots a telegraph message for y ou.” He slid a slip of paper thr ough the arched opening at the bottom of the glass.

“Why thank you, Morris.” Ellie Jane sent him a smile fe w people outside of her family had ever seen. It was carefully controlled—an attempt to hide the excitement of such an occasion.

Other people might r eceive telegrams ev ery day fr om friends and family who lived in places they took the train to visit. B ut Ellie Jane’s whole life was her e—equally divided between her little glass booth and the home she shared with her father. There was, of course, her brother, Dave, in Chicago, but his was a busy , exciting life that left little time for frivolous messages home.

She fished around in her handbag to slip the bo y a dime, which he took with a toothy grin and dr opped immediately into his pocket.

“Anything else today, m’am?”

Ellie Jane checked the watch pinned to her blouse.

“The two-o’clock will be her e soon, Morris. Perhaps you’d like to stay and see if any passengers need help with their bags?”

“Yes, m’am.” H e touched the rim of his cap and saunter ed toward the platform, hands in his pockets and whistling.

Despite her curiosity , before opening the telegram, E llie Jane carefully put away the r emains of her lunch in her bucket, wiped the corners of her mouth with a pr etty floral napkin, and r emoved the square sign saying the window was closed for lunchtime.

Then, with ner vous fingers, she opened the env elope and saw that the message was indeed from her brother. Her reaction differed each time she read the short note: first a giggle, then confusion, then a rather cold fear.

Dave was sending her a man. And he was coming on the two-o’clock train.

NED

Ned Clovis had just drawn a straight black line under which he wrote a precise black total. He smiled at the number. Spring was a busy time for the feed store—new life all over the neighboring farms. So busy, in fact, that he thought maybe he should stay open all afternoon. But then he felt the vibration of the office clock chiming the hour. Two o'clock.

After blowing the ink dry on the page, he closed the ledger, stacked it neatly against the others, and took his well-worn newsboy cap from its hook beside the door. It was his store, after all. He was the reigning Clovis of Clovis Feeds. Had been since his father died. He could leave any time he wanted. And he always wanted to leave at two o'clock.

Six days a week for the past five years, Ned's path to the two-o'clock train's baggage car led him straight past the little ticket booth where Ellie Jane Voyant sat behind the glass.

Six days a week for the past five years, the window standing between him and Ellie Jane gave Ned the courage to offer her a wave, or a smile or, on days when he was feeling especially brave, a tip of his hat.

Six days a week for the past five years, two o'clock was his favorite hour, bested only by the time spent in church on Sundays where she sat two pews ahead of him, slightly to the left.

Although she often returned his greetings in kind—a wave for a wave, a nod for a nod—in five years, Ellie Jane never left the confines of her little ticket office. As Ned slicked back his curly dark hair in preparation for his daily greeting, he had no reason to suspect that

this day would be any different. Perfecting an air of nonchalance, he measured his pace so he would turn and smile just as he passed the center of the window. Today, however, something was wrong.

Ellie Jane wasn't there.

Not wanting to appear affected, lest *she* be watching *him*, he cast a careful glance up and down the platform that rumbled with the approach of the train. Seeing it in the distance, he abandoned his search for Ellie Jane for just a moment as he closed his eyes and imagined the sound of its whistle — the only noise capable of penetrating the thick packing of silence he'd lived with since he was twelve years old. As long as he kept his eyes closed, he could listen to the train and feel whole.

When the whistle stopped, he opened his eyes and saw Ellie Jane halfway down the platform. Her crisp white blouse billowed about her, standing out in clean contrast to those who wore their coats to combat a surprisingly chilly spring afternoon. Her hair reminded him of hazelnuts, both in its color and its undisciplined pile on top of her head. She seemed to be battling the breeze to keep all the strands tucked away.

This was his chance. He could make his way through the crowd, sidle up to her, tap her elbow, tip his hat. Maybe some miracle would give him the voice of a man rather than a goose when he asked, "Who are you meeting today?" Or maybe he could just gesture toward the train and assume an inquisitive expression on his face, which she would immediately understand.

He imagined her turning and giving him a response in a voice so loud it would capture the attention of the other people waiting on the platform. He wouldn't take his eyes off her lips, watching them for clues, knowing that she'd replied, "My brother, Dave," or

“Miss Higgins’s aunt.” No matter, he would nod in understanding, and they could stand there together, side by side, waiting for the train.

But he didn’t make his way through the crowd—if such a small gathering could be called a crowd. He was about to take a step really, when Ellie Jane motioned for Morris, ever ready to lend an open hand, to come to her. She bent to talk to him, her dainty hand resting on the boy’s shoulder. When she was finished, the shock and smile on Morris’s face made Ned wonder if she hadn’t told him that he would be carrying trunks full of pretty girls and candy, a percentage of each he could keep as a tip.

Whatever the prize, Morris stuck close to Ellie Jane’s side. When the train finally came to a halt, a blur of movement materialized behind the windows of the passenger cars. Ned imagined people gathering their belongings—umbrellas, books, children—and making their way to the front.

Meanwhile, the porter set out the tiny flight of stairs to carry the passengers safely from the car to the platform. One by one, disheveled women and men descended and made their way to waiting loved ones. Ellie Jane and Morris stood, expectant with each new arrival, then shrugged to each other as the former travelers filed right past them.

Finally, when the hands planted on her hips gave Ellie Jane a posture of resignation, one more passenger stood at the top of the steps. He was miraculously unrumpled in a pressed brown wool suit and a bowler hat sitting at a perfected angle over his left eye. His thin brown moustache was trimmed to symmetrical proportion, and the rest of his face seemed so cleanly shaven as to rival the smoothness of his patent leather shoes.

Morris's face fell into slack-jawed rapture, and after Ellie Jane reminded him to hold out his hand for a handshake, he seemed entranced by whatever the man had pressed into his palm. So much so, in fact, that he had to be nudged in the direction of the baggage car.

Having dispatched the boy, Ellie Jane held out her own hand. The man took it, bent low, and gave it a kiss. Ned cringed at Ellie Jane's girlish reaction, bringing her other hand up to capture what must be a lovely giggle while allowing herself to languish in this forward embrace.

Worried about her honor, Ned strode across the platform toward the couple, ready to wedge himself between them, but just as he got close, the stranger stood to his full height, giving a clear view of his face.

Shocked, Ned stopped midstride and turned on his heel, but not before tipping his hat to what must be the luckiest woman in Picksville, Missouri.

MORRIS

Tuesday, May 2

Mama says spending time with white folks will warp my soul. Well today those white folks sent me home with near ly seven dollars. I could spend a year toting for folks on Lincoln Street and never make half that. Course I only sho wed Mama the nickels and dimes—shakin them in my hand like it was the biggest treasure ever. If she seen deep in my pocket she'd snatch it all and give it over to that fool Darnell who's always sniffin around here just in case Mama gets lonely for a man.

Now if my daddy was around I'd let him take it down to Bozie's, roll some bones, and come back with it doubled. But I guess he's back to Georgia for good this time—where he says blacks is blacks and whites is whites and the two walk a wide enough circle around each other that a colored man with good timing can live a life without any trouble.

But I like it here in Picksville. Not on my side of the tracks—where every day seems to be the same kind of nothin o ver and over. But in town bein around all them white people. Lear nin what they know, hearin how they speak, seein how they live. I figure it's trainin me up for when I get out of her e. When I head out west to California or some other part of the country where everybody's new and a boy can make his own life.

Darnell slaps the back of my head and says, Boy don't you have any pride at all? You know you ain't nothin but a grinnin fool to them, scrapin around for pennies.

Maybe so. But I get more than pennies when Mayor Birdiff sends me with a package to one of them pr etty ladies on Sharon Street (boy wouldn't Mama rip into me if she knew I went there!) and I don't scrape for nothin. They like it when you look them straight in the eye, hand at your side—not holdin out but not in your pocket—and say somethin like, There you are sir. Anything else?

And there's always somethin else.

So today I'm outside the post office and Mr. Steve calls out, Can you run a telegram over to Miss Voyant at the train station? I just run right over and say, Yessir. Anything else? I don't hold my hand out for nothin even though I know in some towns there's people who have it a job to take telegrams. But Mr. Steve hands over the quarter anyway—like he always does—and motions for me to come a little closer.

Yeah, he says, There's another two bits in it for you if you come back and tell me who gets off the two o'clock train.

I almost don't knock on the ticket window—Miss Ellie Jane had the sign turned to Closed. But if word ever got back that I held on to a telegram too long that would be the end of the quarters from Mr. Steve. So I knock real gentle and slide the paper under the glass.

For just a minute I pretend I'm me a few years from now buyin my ticket to California and gettin away from here and Mama and Darnell and the ghost of my daddy. But then Miss Ellie Jane tips me a dime for handin o ver the telegram and I say, Thank you m'am. Anything else?

And she says, Yes Morris. I believe I'll need you to help with a passenger's bags. That brings me right back to my senses.

I ain't never seen Miss Ellie Jane so worked up over anything before. She even leaves the ticket booth window when that train pulls up—didn't close it up or nothin, just walked off and left it empty. Then on the platform she's just a bundle of fuss asking me, Do you think that's him?

I say over and over, Do I think that's who?

And she says, Why Mr. Dennison of course.

And I say, How should I know who Mr. Dennison is?

Then she fidgets a little more with her hair and asks, Do you think that's him?

And it starts all over again.

When he finally does come off the train it makes me wonder just how we could have thought he was anybody else. Now I know a rich white man when I see one. But this guy—he is almost pretty. He's wearin this suit the color of molasses cake and one of those dandy hats and more jewels than I've ever seen any man wear—diamond rings on each hand, gold watch, pearl tie clip and cuff-buttons.

Miss Ellie Jane is saying introductions, herself and me the boy to fetch his bags. She gives me a little nudge wantin me to hold out my hand to shake his but I guess she don't know that rich white men don't shake the hands of Negro boys. She keeps nudgin and nudgin until finally I hold out my hand and what do you know? He shakes it. Shakes my hand right there on the train platform in front of everybody.

I'm expectin a strong grip but his fingers never really wrap around mine. When he lets go I realize he wasn't shakin my hand at all. He was slippin me some money. He tells me he has two

bags in the baggage car and a hired cab—Mr. Coleman's own automobile—waitin just outside the station and if I get a single scratch on the leather he will take it out of my own skin.

I want to tell him that I'd like to see him try but then I look and see what he gave me.

Five dollars. Five whole dollars in one bill. I never even seen one of them before, let alone held one in my hand, let alone know it was mine just for pickin up two leather bags and walkin them twenty feet from one railroad car to a hired cab. When I see that bill, all the hatefulness leaves me and all I can say is, Yessir. Anything else?

And he says, Not now but stick close and I'll let you know.

I don't know when I ever carried anything as heavy as them bags. When I'm done, I see Mr. Ned picking up a delivery and he motions me over to talk to him. I like talkin to Mr. Ned because it's not really like talkin at all—it's kind of a game where you have to read his face and his hands and the little sounds he makes and sort of put it all together. He taught me the whole alphabet and some other signs too.

So he points over to the man on the platform with Miss Ellie Jane and asks me if I know who he is. I spell out d-e-n-n-i-s-o-n from Chicago and he asks me again do I know who he is and I say yes and start spellin again and he sort of grabs me by my shoulders and shakes me a little. If he could speak he'd be yellin DO YOU KNOW WHO HE IS and I got no choice but to shake my head no.

Then Mr. Ned grins like he had the winnin bid to share a basket lunch with Miss Ellie Jane at the Sunday school picnic. He points to the boxes waitin to be loaded onto his wagon and asks if I can help.

Now I have five dollars in my pocket and I'm not about to let that rich man down. But then Mr. Ned just points to his wagon and then off in the direction of town, wantin me to help unload at the feed store. He rubs his fingers together to let me know there's a little money in it for me —and somethin more that I can't figure until I get there.



I been up to Mr. Ned's office once or twice before. He's the one got me writin my money in this ledger book so I wouldn't have to hand count it whenever I wanted to know what I have. Seem every time a person lets cash run through his fingers it's a temptation to hold out a few cents for ice cream or smokes and that's the type of thing that can keep a fellow from ever gettin to California. Got nearly thirty dollars already. Don't know when it's gonna be enough but I figure one of these days the Good Lord will let me know it's time to go.

Anyway I guess I knew he has that wall covered with newspaper clippings but I never paid them much attention. Today though he stands and runs his fingers over them until he finds what he wants. Then he pulls one of the tacks out real careful and hands me the paper.

Dennison Signs Record-Breaking Deal with Chicago Cubs

*I read it and look at Mr. Ned and ask, This the same guy?
But he isn't payin no attention to me. He's diggin through a cigar box and hands me a card, one of those that comes in with*

Old Judge cigarettes. I never paid much mind to them but he had a whole box full. The one he shows me has a picture of that man from the train, only instead of the fancy suit he's wearing a baseball uniform, holding a bat like he's about to smack a ball right out of the card and into your face and on the back there's a bunch of nonsense. Mr. Ned let me keep it (he had about a dozen and he don't even smoke), and someday I'm going to ask him what all these letters and numbers mean.

Donald "Duke" Dennison

27 C

DOB 08-15-77

H 5-09

W 170

Hits-L

Throws-R

G 118

BA 388

I look up at Mr. Ned askin, What's he doing here?

He shakes his head and shrugs and grins like someone just handed him a million dollars. Then he gets real serious, looks at me and says, Morris you need to go over to Ellie Jane's house and find out.

(He has special hand signs for our names. Mine's the letter M kind of dragged across his face. Miss Ellie Jane's an E that he squiggles like a long lock of curly hair.)

I point back at him. Why don't you go?

He sort of laughs and walks to the other side of the room. He puts a hand to his ear and makes like he's listenin through the wall, then turns to me again and shrugs.

Nothin, he says, and he says it right out loud in that funny voice he has and I have to laugh. He has a good point. There's not much I don't know about nearly everyone in this town. If Duke Dennison is here with a secret I don't figure it will take much to find out just what it is.

So I smile and shake Mr. Ned's hand and just as I'm turnin to leave he calls me back. He fishes in his pocket and I almost wave it off, feelin like we was more like friends and that I shouldn't take no money from him. Then I see he has a silver dollar and you just don't turn down that kind of cash.

I take it and say, Thank you Mr. Ned. Anything else?

He leans down real close and touches one of those long fingers to my chest then back to his then back to mine then back to his.

Keep this between us.

I'm just down the steps of the feed store when I remember that Mr. Steve has two bits waiting for me if I tell him who was comin to meet Miss Ellie Jane. I figure a friend is a friend and a secret is a secret but a quarter is a quarter too. That two bits will be dropped down in my jar long before Mr. Steve realizes I'm just some ignorant Negro boy who isn't so good at rememberin names.