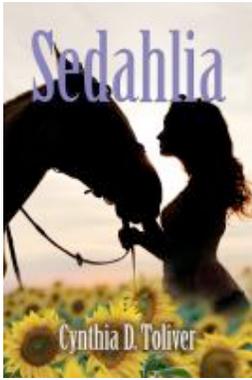


A silhouette of a woman holding a horse in a field of sunflowers at sunset. The woman is on the right, facing left, holding the horse's head. The horse is on the left, facing right. The background is a bright, hazy sunset sky. The foreground is filled with yellow sunflowers.

Sedahlia

Cynthia D. Toliver



Sedahlia explores the human cords that bind and the racial lines that divide two families, the Masters and the Lindseys. When Johnny Masters and Rachel Lindsey dare to blur those lines, personal needs and mores collide, rumbling through the families and the post-Civil War communities in which they live. ***Sedahlia*** is a riveting ride, challenging readers to examine race relations, both then and now.

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SEDAHLIA

A Novel

Cynthia D. Toliver

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First Edition

DEDICATION

JEHOVAH

Ephesians 2:10

May 20, 1872

Jessie hauled the last bucket of water into the house. With a grunt, she hefted the bucket, emptying it into the kettle of water boiling vigorously over the fire. She grabbed an armload of towels and linens from the weathered kitchen table and dropped them into the kettle. Accustomed to heat, Jessie stirred the contents with the ladle normally reserved for soups and stew.

Wringing her steamed hands on her apron, she left the laundry to steep in the boiling liquid. As she walked into the bedroom, she wiped her brow, brushing limp tendrils of jet-black hair from her eyes. A rope stretched across the foot of the bed that Henry Lindsey had bought just before they were married. Jessie jerked the rope; it held taut.

The four-poster bed, with its headboard, backboard and tall, slender posts had always seemed like a prison to her, especially when she lay there, her back to Henry Lindsey, her face to the rough hewn slats that lined the wall. Now, however, the bed was proving useful.

Arching her back, her hands on her distended hips, Jessie stretched, moaning softly. She climbed on the bed and crawled to the end. Using the backboard for leverage, she rose and put her hands through the short spans of rope she had knotted and looped on the posts on each side. With her legs spread wide, she squatted, placing her feet in the makeshift stirrups; just two sheets twisted and tied in a loop. A third sheet lay folded, padding the crevice between the bed and backboard.

Satisfied, Jessie freed her hands and feet and lowered herself to the bed. For a moment, she lay there, relishing the quiet and solitude. Without Henry Lindsey hovering about, she lifted her skirt, baring her privates with no concern.

She closed her eyes and vivid pictures scrolled across the backs of her eyelids. Once when she was about nine years old, she watched Mama Pearl deliver Mina's baby. Mina was only twelve, black as coal and skinny as a maple sapling. Mama Pearl and Mina had walked back and forth, backs bent, one with age and the other with birth. Jessie let herself imagine that being probed by Mama Pearl's musty old hands was worse than having a baby all alone.

A trickle, wet and warm, dripped between her legs. Her water broke. *Good*, she thought. *It wouldn't be long now.*

Jessie eased off of the bed. She busied herself straightening the house, checking the cradle, cooking supper, and praying for a fast labor, like her mother's was said to have been. She wanted things neat and tidy when Henry Lindsey returned - the baby washed and cleaned, the bloody rags burned, her hair neatly braided, and mother and child nestled beneath fresh linens.

Wary, she checked the bedroom again. The front door creaked unexpectedly. Jessie cursed beneath her breath.

"Jessie?"

"In here."

She turned away. She didn't want him to see the uncertainty in her eyes. When she turned again, her eyes were steeled.

"Jessie."

Henry stood at the door, just watching her.

"Yes, Henry Lindsey."

She still called him by both his names as though he hadn't been as close to her as any man. For a brief moment, Henry grimaced. "I be leavin' Sedahlia."

"Oh."

"By meself, Jessie. You be fine here."

"We will." Jessie answered matter-of-factly. Inside though she smiled, not ecstatic but relieved.

He stepped into the bedroom. He had never been welcomed there, not his smell, not his touch, not his body, not his warmth, nor the way he rumbled her sheets. Surveying the room she had made ready, he paused and cleared his throat.

"It be time then?"

"It's time. She's coming."

"She?"

"Rachel."

"Rachel." He threw his head back and laughed, big, bold and boisterous. "Rachel Lindsey."

Jessie looked at him irritated at first, then with a certain tenderness she had previously held reserved. In another life, in another time, she might have loved him. His straight black hair to match her mass of curls; his eyes so dark they were nearly black; his

skin, tanned and rugged. His body, big and rough and hard, with hips and thighs taut and full over lean muscular calves. His Creole voice like velvet; his nose regal like the Kiowas he called brothers.

“I wone be back, Jessie.”

“I know.”

“Rachel Lindsey.” He laughed again and swung his load over his broad shoulders. Jessie stood detached, watching his back as he walked out of her life and Rachel’s. Long after he mounted his horse and turned toward Sedahlia’s gates, she could still hear him laughing.

**PART I.
DROUGHT**

Chapter 1

“Rachel, stop that fidgeting. You’re gonna worry the hind legs right off of that chair.”

Rachel leaned forward, putting the chair on all fours. Sweeping the mass of curly hair from her nape, she laid her head on the copy of “Little Women” she was supposed to be reading.

“I can’t help it, Mama. I’m sooo bored. There’s nothing to do around here.”

Jessie pulled her hands out of the dough she’d been kneading and turned to face Rachel.

“You’re spoiled. I never thought I’d say it, but I swear Miss Virginia is right about that.”

Jessie leaned against the counter, taking a moment to enjoy the slight breeze circulating through the kitchen. Her face glistened, despite the fact that windows lined the two long walls of the kitchen, cleverly located on the north east side of the house. One short wall emptied into the backyard where laundry hung on the clothesline, bleaching in the midsummer sun. On the other end was a large pantry that opened into a covered walkway leading to the breakfast room. The walkway served as a fire stop in case of a mishap in the kitchen. It was not uncommon for a cook to burn down a kitchen, but Jessie never had. She was too attentive to details and unlikely to trust anyone else to her chores or her kitchen.

Jessie turned back to her work. She had toiled since before dawn. The breakfast dishes had been dried and stacked on a towel lain across the counter. Water boiled in two cast iron pots on the Sunshine stove. She had picked fresh mustard greens from the garden. The greens had been washed and drained in a colander in the sink. Dried beans soaked in a bowl next to the greens. On the counter, yams had been washed, peeled and diced.

The chair creaked again. “Rachel, if I have to tell you one more time.”

“They’re back!” Rachel leapt out of the chair she’d been riding and ran to the south-facing window. The chair hit the floor with a thud.

Rachel shoved aside the two pans of cornbread Jessie had left on the ledge to cool and leaned out of the window. Toby Johnson and Major Powell rode up to the window. Toby was a crusty old Negro, with a toothless grin and a taste for Jessie's cornbread smothered in a cool glass of milk.

Major was Toby's lanky, seventeen year old great nephew. This was his first season on the ranch, and he was a determined, if slow learner.

"What you got on that there ledge, Missy?"

"Oh, Toby, it's just some of Mama's old cornbread."

Jessie walked over to the window with a knife and two mason jars. "Rachel, get out of that window. Go and fetch me a pitcher of milk from the icebox."

"Toby, Major." Jessie sliced the cornbread and handed Toby then Major a slice.

"How do, Miss Jessie?" Toby nodded and nudged Major so hard that Major almost fell off of his mount.

"Thank you, ma'am." Major regained his balance, took off his hat and hung it on the horn of his saddle. His hair curled into tight little balls all over his head. He ran his fingers through it with little effect.

"Toby, you see Mr. John on your way in?" Jessie asked.

"No, ma'am, can't say as I did."

"Well, I suppose he'll be in too, directly. He headed out before day this morning." Jessie affirmed with little reason for concern.

Rachel returned, handed the pitcher of milk to Jessie, and leaned out of the window again. Rachel stared past Toby and Major, but there was no one else in sight.

Major sat taller in his saddle. He cleared his throat, but his voice turned out more squeak than growl. "How do, Miss Rachel?"

"Where's the rest of the crew?" Ignoring Major, Rachel made no effort to hide her disappointment.

"They'll be in directly, Missy," Toby answered with a twinkle in his eyes and a mischievous grin. "They're bringing in a herd of mustangs. The poor things are near starved. We didn't have a bit of trouble catching them. Seems like that stallion figured we might lead them to food and water. At first he gave us quite a run, but the mares

— they didn't have much fight left. That old boy just plum tuckered out after awhile and slithered off. I kind of felt sorry for him.”

“Is there one for me?”

“Well, you know I think Johnny had one picked out just for you. The only colt in the bunch. Jet black that one. A bit puny like the rest, but sure to be a fine one, once he's well fed. He's a feisty one too. He'd a followed that stallion if his mama hadn't taken a nip out of his hide. There'll be no riding him though. Not till he's stronger.”

“Can I go now, Mama?” Rachel ran out of the door without waiting for Jessie's reply.

“No riding him now, Miss Rachel. You mind what I say,” Toby shouted after her.

Major turned his horse to trot after Rachel. Jessie watched from the window as Rachel dismissed him. Raising her skirt and exposing more than ankles, Rachel sprinted across the yard, through a grove of oak trees, to the three-room house she shared with Jessie. Major stayed put, watching her from behind far too long.

“You'd better have a talk with that boy, Toby. You know I don't cotton to cowboys taking up with my Rachel.”

“I'll have a talk with him, Miss Jessie, but I can't say as I blame him. That girl's plum near as pretty as you.”

Jessie put her hands on her hips. “Shush now. You'd better watch yourself, Toby. I don't cotton to cowboys either.” Jessie smiled out of courtesy, but her mouth was set and her eyes were hard.

Sporting a pair of jeans that stretched over her curves, Rachel emerged from the woods. Waiting patiently, Major offered her a hand and she climbed up behind him. Watching them ride away through narrow eyes, Jessie knew she couldn't wait another day to have that talk with John Masters.

Chapter 2

From the top of Sarah's knoll, John Masters surveyed his West Texas ranch. He had risen before dawn, leaving his wife Virginia asleep in their bed. Now the sun was nearly straight up in the sky. Everywhere he looked, he saw dust and death. What little grass remained lay in the south pasture where water, when there was some, drained over rolling valleys into Shale Creek and the limestone outcroppings that marked its upper banks.

John finished the last of the toast and bacon Jessie had wrapped for him and insisted he carry despite filling his belly with cold coffee and a full breakfast before he left. The sun beat upon his brow, furrowed with worry over his herd. The sky, bright, blue and cloudless, just meant another day with no hope for rain. There was little for the herd to eat or drink. Still, John fared better than most of his neighbors, and he inclined his head toward heaven to thank God for his good fortune.

John tried all he could to help, but he couldn't open the sky and make it pour down rain, and he couldn't move water. Still he bought extra grain and rationed it among his neighbors according to the size of each herd. Hardship brought farmer and rancher together. Trading grain too early for harvest for cattle too thin for market, once bitter enemies now shared and spared what they could. They had John Masters to thank for that too.

General Lee turned at the gentle whisper of wind against his right haunch. He pranced in the midday sun, a hint of impatience for his stall, the smell of hay, and a meager ration of water to drink.

John too needed something to quench his thirst. Having had his fill of dust and starvation, he started General Lee toward home at an easy gait.

The wind stirred, whistling across the sun-scarred earth, carrying the plaintive wail of thirsty steers. In the midst of desolation, John spotted it, tall and green, gold crowned against the dull brown landscape. Angling down the gentle slope, John guided General Lee toward the lone sunflower. Last summer the hillside had been covered with a sea of yellow-gold. The sunflower was a favorite of

Virginia's, and John had ordered seeds himself and cast them over the hillside the very year they married.

John leaned over and without stopping, reached down breaking the stem about midway. He admired the flower for a moment before he laid it across the saddle. The sun beat down without mercy. He tilted his hat, the brim wet and sticky against his forehead.

General Lee's ears pricked; his head turned. John turned with him. To John's surprise, a herd of mustangs were strung out across the basin. A rider peeled out of the herd and headed toward John.

John stopped, shifting his weight as he rubbed General Lee's mane. "Be patient, boy. It won't be long now."

The rider waved recognition, urging his horse to a quick trot. John nodded and waited.

Johnny Masters pulled up on his mare, a red roan he had only recently broken.

"They're droppin' bad now, Papa."

"How many?" John asked although he had been to the camps that morning.

"Nearly a hundred just in the south pasture. About thirty since last week, mostly calves and heifers. Another hundred near gone. Pat said it's the same all over."

"We best start skinning then."

"I 'spect so. We can start tomorrow."

"You headed to home?"

"Yep. Pat just spelled me. But I can go back out tomorrow to get the boys started."

"It'll wait till then. Take William with you. Kyle too."

"Kyle's never skinned before, Papa."

John shifted back in his saddle and clicked his tongue. General Lee started again toward home.

They rode in silence, Johnny keeping pace a head length behind, until they reached Sedahlia's gates. They parted there with no more than a nod between them, barely perceptible over the gentle rhythm in which they rode.

While his eldest son headed to the stables, John pulled up behind the house, eased out of the saddle and gave General Lee a swat that sent him toward the stable and water. John turned toward the house, hoping to slip through the kitchen and wash up a bit before he saw

Virginia. She was peculiar about those things, horses on the front lawn, dust in her parlor, like the house wasn't smack dab in the middle of his ranch. John grinned. As much as it irked him, it was what he liked most about her.

Jessie stepped out on the small porch. Sunlight yet hiding him from her view, John admired her. She looked like an African Queen, except her skin was butter-cream instead of coffee, she bore a basket of laundry instead of a crown, and she wore blue gingham instead of kente.

To John's surprise Virginia followed on Jessie's heels. Virginia Masters seldom visited the back of the house. John wondered if the frown plastered on Jessie's face was from the sun or his feisty snip of a wife.

Pale, proper and petite, Virginia answered with her own look of disdain. She lifted a shirt from the pile of laundry, sniffed, and crinkled her nose. Virginia wagged her finger in Jessie's face. "Jessie, you know I hate the smell of lye? Lye's fine enough for you and Rachel. It's fine enough for those filthy cowmen out there. But not for my house."

Jessie dropped the basket where she stood. "That fancy soap of yours uses too much water, and water is too precious to waste."

"Don't you presume to tell me how—" Virginia's voice trailed off.

Jessie followed her gaze. John strode up, a lone sunflower in one hand, his signature Stetson in the other. Jessie bit her lip and slipped away to her chores.

With short rapid steps to John's long, slow stride, Virginia met John at the bottom of the porch. She grabbed his hand and pulled him away from the kitchen. When they were out of earshot, she stopped and raised a finger as if to lecture John one more time about Jessie. John laughed as he swept Virginia off her feet. The years had added girth to his giant frame, and though he carried it well, his belly shook when he laughed.

"Put me down." Virginia blushed red with anger and embarrassment. "Put me down."

Chuckling John set her down.

"Virginia, you and Jessie at it again?"

Fuming, Virginia straightened her clothes. "John, I swear, the older she gets, the meaner she gets. You should have let me fire her ages ago. Why you insist on keeping her around I'll never know. And that girl of hers, Rachel. She's a pretty creature, but wild as a...as a bobcat. And with the boys getting bigger. I just think—"

"Now, Virginia. You know Jessie and me, well we go back a long way. Amelia would be lost without Jessie. Besides, I can't just put them out. Why with Henry gone God knows where. I can't just put them out. I could never do that."

Virginia pouted. "Well, I can understand why he left. That woman's as stubborn as a mule." Virginia turned on her heels and marched into the house.

John held the flower, the only thing growing in the parched, barren soil. "Aren't you forgetting something?" he asked, but Virginia didn't turn around. John looked after her for what must have been the thousandth time in a twenty year marriage.

John's thoughts turned to Jessie. Running rough fingers through the hints of gray at each temple, he sighed. He thought things would change when Jessie married Henry. John thought they could all be happy. He thought Jessie would be well taken care of, but the union quickly soured. Henry hung around just long enough to give Rachel his name. He sent money and an occasional letter, but he hadn't been back since.

John watched Jessie through the kitchen window. Jessie spotted him watching her. He thought she smiled, but her eyes were sad. He wished he could wipe away her pain, but he imagined he'd be more likely to end the drought.

Chapter 3

Johnny dismounted and walked the mare to the corral. She pranced and whinnied as he freed her from the bit and saddle. He opened the gate and nudged her inside. She broke into a wild run, racing around the edge of the corral jerking as though she weren't already free of her rider. Unnerved, the rest of the horses in the corral pawed and neighed. Johnny watched her for a while, understanding her need for space and freedom. His stomach rumbled, bringing him back to reality. He headed to the stable to stow his gear.

Johnny reached for the door with his free arm, but the door swung open almost knocking him over. With his head hung low, Major Powell brushed past Johnny. Johnny swore and caught himself, avoiding an embarrassing spill. His gear began to slide off his shoulder. Annoyed, he redistributed the load. Thinking he was alone, Johnny muttered another obscenity, but to his surprise, Rachel grabbed his arm, pulling him inside. He nearly stumbled again, but recovered. He laughed and leaned to kiss her. "You missed me, huh?"

With an impish grin, Rachel turned away. Johnny's kiss, intended for Rachel's pert lips, brushed her tanned cheek instead.

"Rachel, don't play with me. I've been gone for three weeks. We got cattle dead and dying, and I'm heading back out tomorrow. I'm hungry, and I'm tired."

"Tomorrow?"

Rachel sounded so pitiful, Johnny almost felt sorry for her. Instead he turned toward the tack room, ignoring her. He could be just as good at this as she could, although she had reminded him that he had other appetites that needed to be filled. Calculating, he unbuttoned his shirt and let it fall until it hung loosely over his pants.

"You the reason for the state Major's in?" he teased, trying to lighten the mood.

"And I ain't sorry for it," she countered. "He had the unmitigated gall to try to kiss me. Just cause I let him give me a ride don't mean I'm inviting him to anything else."

Johnny seethed as Rachel followed him across the stable. He didn't know whether to feel sorry for Major or to beat the tar out of

him. Careful to hide his concern, Johnny kept his back to Rachel as he took a bar of saddle soap and worked it into the saddle, but he was intensely aware of her.

Rachel coughed. She walked up to him, standing as close as she could without touching him. "Can you meet me later? After supper maybe? After they've all gone to bed?"

Johnny stopped and raised his head. Her breath brushed the hairs on his nape. His skin prickled. He swore his heart was beating in time with hers. "At the creek?"

"Yeh. At the creek."

"At least give me a k—" He turned, but she was already walking away. "Dammit, Rachel." He closed his eyes and concentrated on his other hunger. When he finished oiling his tack, he headed for the house. If he'd considered his promise to go back out tomorrow, he wouldn't have bothered, but it was his habit to work the leather when he came in from camp. Normally he'd go out for three weeks, then come back for a one-week spell. At first it had been exciting, but since he'd had Rachel it had become lonesome and hard. There was no telling how long he'd be out this time; he would have to make this evening with Rachel count.

By the time he walked back outside the barn, the mustangs had been herded into the corral. Johnny searched for the colt and spotted him safe beside his mother toward the middle of the herd. The colt was the perfect horse for Rachel - dark, spirited - a beautiful animal, Johnny was sure Rachel would love.

Johnny was so deep in thought; he didn't notice the commotion on the other side of the corral. William hung over the fence laughing, while Kyle scrambled around trying to avoid an angry mare. She nipped at his shoulder, and Kyle must have jumped three feet. The mare stayed with him, butting and nipping. William roared.

Johnny took his own time walking over to the corral. When he got there, Kyle was trying to roll under the fence and William was kicking him back. Finally Kyle sunk his teeth into William's bootleg. Kyle must have bitten hard, because William backed off with a holler. Kyle scrambled under the fence as the mare took a final nip out of his backside. She seemed to be laughing herself.

Johnny suppressed a grin as Kyle lunged at William. William had calm and size on Kyle. It wasn't long before William was riding Kyle and Kyle was bucking just like the mare.

William laughed. Leaning forward, he forced Kyle's face into the chalky dirt. Kyle choked and gagged, flailing his limbs in anger and frustration. William outweighed him by fifty pounds.

"Uncle," Kyle muttered.

"Louder," William gloated, as he dunked Kyle's face in the dirt again. William was a bully, though a good-natured one, and he especially liked getting the best of Kyle. William laughed as Kyle coughed and sputtered, cursing angrily beneath his breath.

"Uncle," Kyle shouted.

William dunked Kyle's head once more for emphasis. He stood up slowly, too slow for Kyle. Kyle sat up and pushed William hard. William tumbled over laughing. Slight and gentle like his mother, Kyle was as fierce as any of John Master's sons when backed into a corner, and he hated humiliation. He'd wished out loud for six of his eleven years that he would be half a head taller than William, but it was evident that day would never come. Kyle jumped up, jaw set, fists balled.

"You two still playing in the dirt?" Johnny laughed as he stepped between them.

William grinned.

"Uncle," Johnny teased as he punched William playfully. "You two are a sight."

Kyle relaxed and laughed too. With all the flailing Kyle had done, William was just as dusty. They were both sweating and the sweat was rolling down their faces and arms like muddy rivers.

"You two had better get cleaned up before Ma sees you."

"And you'd better button that shirt," William laughed. "Come on. Let's go see Jessie."



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