

West Virginia: Born of Rebellion's Storm 1

WHEN THE
MOUNTAINS
WEPT

 KENDY PEARSON 

Heart
History
an imprint of
PEAR BLOSSOM BOOKS

When Heaven Thunders

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*It is not the light that we need, but the fire.
It is not the gentle shower, but the thunder.
We need the storm,
the whirlwind,
and the earthquake.*

Frederick Douglass
July 5, 1852



1861-1865

*Rebellion's tempest swept the land
and a state was born of a nation torn.
West Virginia: a Child of the Storm*

One



FAYETTE COUNTY, VIRGINIA

February 1861

“**W**e can do this, Daisy. Just don’t you kick me.” Augusta puffed a wisp of hair away and wiped blood from her arm as a new contraction sent ripples through the cow’s coppery hide. Daisy’s brown eyes widened as she let go a rafter-shaking bawl. Poor ol’ gal. “You just hold on, now. It’ll all be over soon.”

Movement caught Augusta’s eye as a woolly spider descended on a single thread. It plunged, paused, plunged again, and settled on the floor. A familiar ache wrenched her already bruised heart. She wasn’t so different from that little wire-legged creeper, was she? She had abandoned her dreams only to plunge into an impossible situation.

Two days—forty-eight agonizing hours—until she’d have her answer.

“Did you do it, Gus?”

Augusta’s head snapped up. “What, Will?” Twelve-year-old Willamina had been planted at Daisy’s other end for the last half hour.

“Can the calf come now?” Her sister slapped at a fly tangled in her unruly curls. “There now, Daisy,” Will crooned as she caressed

the jersey's blocky head. "You go ahead and birth that little one of yours." She winked at Augusta. "Gus will take care of you."

The cow huffed through inflamed nostrils, raising tiny clouds that vanished in the chilly stall.

"Could be there's something wrong here besides this little fellow not being right where he oughta be." Augusta sorted her tangled thoughts, separating tomorrow's worries from the task at hand as hay and manure odors mingled with the metallic scent of blood.

In the next seconds, one hoof and then another emerged, followed by a bony forehead and flat nose. She dragged the calf into the fresh straw and scraped away the mucous sack with her fingers. Always a beautiful thing—new life.

She massaged the moist nose of the stirring newborn. "Well, I guess the good Lord wanted the Dabneys to have another bull. Not much for milk and butter, but I reckon come time to butcher, we'll be thankful for the roasts."

If they weren't forced to sell the little guy before then. Surely, the Almighty had a plan. He just wasn't sharing it with *her*.

"Aww, I was wantin' a heifer this time." Will snagged her worn hat and stood, shaking straw from her britches.

"You can want all you want, but it won't make it happen. We've got two more due to calve in the spring. Maybe you'll get your heifer then. Now, go set the table and ring for supper."

"That's woman's work," Will grumbled.

"Willamina Dabney! I will not have you complaining. You be thankful you've got family to call to supper and food to put on the table." She swatted the girl's behind. "Now scoot!"

Once the newborn discovered its first meal, Augusta stretched weary muscles and quit the barn, aiming to see to Pap's meal, already simmering on the stove.

She dipped broth from a steaming kettle and made her way to his bedroom. Glad to find him awake, she set aside the cup and brushed grizzled hair from his drawn face. He was fretting, and

she knew why. “I’ll be fine, Pap. Don’t you worry about me. I’ll be back from Charleston afore you know it.”

“I just wish I was the one going.” He wheezed and caught his breath. Moist pewter eyes wrapped her in love. “If we can’t get the bank to work with us—”

“I won’t let you down, Pap.” She’d do anything to keep her family together. Anything to keep their farm. “Zander’s coming with. We’ll stay with the Carmichaels. You remember my friend, Maudie Carmichael, don’t you? From Mrs. Munday’s School for Young Ladies?” She stirred the hot broth, refusing to pine for happier times just now. “And Melinda Jane will take fine care of you whilst I’m gone. I wouldn’t be surprised if Izzy didn’t come sit a spell. Maybe play some checkers, too.” She was rambling now, but she’d see him rest from his worrisome talk.

Her dearest friend would watch over Pap, but Augusta still cringed at the thought of leaving him like this. Every day, she thanked the Lord for a little more time. She wasn’t ready to see him go on to be with Mama and Jesus. Not just yet.

Pressing a kiss to his hairline, she squeezed his mottled hand. “I’ll look in on you later.” Grief stole her voice, so she nodded and softly closed the door.

Her sweet Pap. Would he even see Christmas this year?



Charleston, Virginia

Marble columns towered above Augusta’s head, testing her mettle. Her hand hesitated on the cold, brass handle of the door as something contrary to peace sluiced through her. Bold script etched the smooth, stone façade to her left—CENTRAL BANK OF CHARLESTON. She hated this place. It was an edifice to the financial ruin of farmers everywhere—plain folk struggling to

eke out a living from the land, only to lose it all to the snobbish coat-and-tail types in their hilltop mansions.

But all she held dear was precariously perched upon the shoulders of one Thaddeus Fontaine, Bank President.

“I’m here to see Mr. Fontaine,” she told the window clerk. “I’m Augusta Dabney. I believe I have an appointment.”

The white-haired gentleman glanced at a schedule and flipped over the tiny OPEN sign. “Right this way, ma’am.”

She followed the crisp black suit through the lobby and up a gleaming staircase with the scent of lemon oil hovering in the air. She paused an instant to admire the flawless shine of the floor. Quickening her steps, she caught up to the clerk once more. A carved door loomed at the end of the hall; the transom bedecked with flashy gold lettering—PRESIDENT.

“He’ll be with you in a moment, Mrs. Dabney.”

“It’s *Miss* Dabney,” she corrected as the clerk walked away. Drawing a deep breath, she pulled back her shoulders and lifted her chin. She could do this. The door opened and two men stood shaking hands. Her stomach lurched as a jumble of memories frayed her courage in an instant. *Dear Lord, please don’t let him be the bank president.*

“I hope I’ll be meeting you over at the Pattons’ place soon, James. Good to see you again.”

The visiting gentleman whirled without warning, knocking her off-kilter. His hand moved to steady her, then recoiled. “Excuse me, ma’am.” Half a smile did nothing to soften the stern edges of his handsome face.

“Ah, my next appointment.” The banker’s eyes fixed on Augusta. His familiar, enthusiastic smile unsettled her. “Dr. James Hill, may I introduce to you Miss Augusta Dabney?”

One eyebrow arched below carved lines on the doctor’s forehead. “Are you, by any chance, related to the Dabneys of King William County?”

“Why yes, I am. My father—”

“Good day then.” A shadow darkened striking brown eyes before he spun and marched down the hall.

How rude! But she couldn't afford to be rattled.

“Where is Mr. Fontaine?” She frowned, looking past the enormous leather wing chairs for a glimpse of the gray-haired man. Gripping the front of her dress, she pressed down the whirlwind in her middle. If only Fin weren't away on business. Her brother should be here.

“I believe you are looking for Uncle Thaddeus. *I* am now the acting Bank President.” His coy expression only sickened her stomach. “I do hope you remember me, Augusta.”

She remembered him all right—from her one year at finishing school. After a brief acquaintance and a healthy dose of youthful infatuation, she had agreed to accompany him to a coming-out ball. He had been overbearing and much too familiar. The recollection burned her cheeks.

“I see you *do* remember. It was the Hansford House, was it not? A lovely gala, with quite a collection of beautiful women, as I recall. Ah, but I was fortunate to accompany a particular auburn-haired lass that evening. Was it so long ago, Augusta? You've changed.” His fingers touched a tendril fallen from her hat. “More . . . beautiful.”

Drawing back just enough, she narrowed her eyes. “And do you recall that particular lass slapping you for being boorish?” She stepped around him and took a seat. “If you don't mind, *Mister* Fontaine, I'd like to talk business.”

He chuckled and settled into an oversized Empire chair behind the mahogany desk. “Now, what can I do for you?” He folded his hands and glanced down, seeming to admire his reflection on the polished desktop.

“I’ve come about the note on our farm. I’d like to talk to you about modifying the terms.” She sat a little straighter. Her family needed this.

“I see. What kind of modification do you have in mind, *Miss Dabney?*”

“As you know, we haven’t missed a payment in five years on that note. There’s not much more owing, and I was wondering if you would accept smaller payments—or perhaps an installment every *other* month.” Hoping she sounded business-like, she clutched her reticule to steady her quivering hands.

He leaned back into the tufted leather. “That’s quite a modification. It would be highly unusual for me to allow such an arrangement.” He paused for seconds that felt like minutes, tapping a finger on the desktop. “Is there anything of value you can leverage against this loan to lower your balance? Livestock or horses?”

“Not right now, but later perhaps, after the spring calving.” *I will not grovel.* She lifted her head a bit higher.

More tapping. At last, he retrieved a page of paper and blotter from the top drawer and dipped a pen. “Perhaps we can arrive at a solution that would work for both of us—I mean, for your father and the bank, of course. Mmm?”

“I would be obliged. What do you have in mind, Mr. Fontaine?” A crumb of relief. This was going to work. It had to.

“Why don’t we start with an agreement for the bank to accept whatever amount you feel you can afford for now? I will need to draw up a temporary deferment for the full payments. However, you must realize there is still interest. The bank will allow you until August to bring the payments current. Is that agreeable?”

August? So soon. “I appreciate your willingness to work with us, Mr. Fontaine. Might you allow us until the end of the year to bring the note current?”

His bare upper lip twitched into a brief smile. “A shrewd proposal, Miss Dabney.”

The mantle clock's second hand thumped its advance. Her confidence wilted.

He scratched several sentences on the paper before glancing up—all business. “Let us say October, then. Is *that* agreeable to you?”

Did she have a choice? “Yes. It will surely have to be, won't it? Thank you for your time, Mr. Fontaine.” She stood, conscious of every tenacious corset stay squeezing her ribs. Only God knew how they would make this work.

“I'll have the documents for you by noon,” he said, standing.

Her heart clung to a frail hope. She had won only the first battle of the war—a war against a formidable foe. She offered her hand to conclude their business. He looked at it for a moment, chuckled, and clasped it. But when he didn't release his grip, she attempted to pull her hand free—until his eyes pinned her in place.

“I hope to see you soon, then . . . Augusta.” One side of his mouth slithered upward as her heart thundered a warning. Finally, he nodded, releasing her hand.

The air shifted in the room, and she bit her lip. This would've gone so much better with the senior Fontaine.

What had she gotten herself into?

Two



CHARLESTON

James plucked a piece of candy from the tall glass jar, offering it to the timid child. Wide eyes glittered, and her mouth rounded to a perfect *O* as she studied the store-bought confection.

“Go ahead,” he encouraged, ducking his face to her eye level.

The girl’s skinny legs dangled over the edge of the examination table, twin pendulums swinging back and forth. Finally, she reached for the strumpet candy with a Christmas-morning smile sprouting across her cheeks.

James chuckled. The best part of an office call—*after* the unpleasantries.

“Doctor, how can I ever thank you?” The round woman smothered her daughter’s face against an ample bosom, her hand flattening a mass of unruly golden curls.

“I believe the fee for my services today, Mrs. Pratt, is one mincemeat pie. But if you don’t have a whole pie available, I’ll take it in installments.” He grinned at the girl and touched her chin with his thumb. “And no more attempting to eat peanuts through your nose, Beth Ann. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” One hand clung to a tattered doll while the other slipped the candy stick in and out of her mouth. “Can you check my dolly too, Dr. Hill?”

The child had stolen his heart in the course of five minutes. Hazel-gold eyes studied him eagerly, still shimmering from spent tears.

He positioned the end of his stethoscope on the doll's tiny, grubby chest and tilted his ear to the tube. "Sounds healthy as a horse. I prescribe lots of love and attention for your little one."

"Thank you, Doctor." She giggled as he lifted her from the table and set her gently on the floor.

"You are very welcome, Beth Ann." He turned to the mother. "Good day, Mrs. Pratt."

"Thank you again, Doctor Hill. I'll be keeping a closer eye on this one." Rosy cheeks beaming her thanks, she turned, tugging her daughter along behind.

"Mrs. O'Donell, are there any other patients out there?" Some days, the parlor-turned-waiting room sat empty. Today, however, patients trickled in like ants to a picnic.

Mrs. O'Donell's portly figure filled the doorway. Her motherly concern for him, a grown man, never ceased to tug at his senses. Whatever had he done to deserve such a delightful assistant? He was much too stern with her at times. Perhaps because he resented the sad truth of it all—in many ways, she had been more of a mother to him than his own.

Growing up wealthy had its benefits, but the affection of adoring parents wasn't one of them. He could count on one hand the number of times his mother had said she loved him. No appendages needed to tally his father's favorable remarks.

"Well, Mrs. O'Donell? Are there others?"

"Oh my, yes." She wrung her hands, glancing over her shoulder. "Tis Mrs. Taylor, sir. Havin' a bit of the vapors." Her face soured, and she lowered her voice. "So, she says."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Send her in."

“It’s just that—beggin’ yer pardon, James—she’s got a swarm of servants buzzin’ about her. Sure’n, she insists they accompany her, too.”

“She does, does she?” Of all days. First that Dabney woman at the bank. Now this. Obviously, starting his practice on this side of the mountains wasn’t far enough from home.

“She’s bent on the two of ya having tea while *discussing* her *condition*.” Her jowls shook as her Irish brogue coiled around the words.

Was he amused or put out? Indulging the hypochondriasis of Charleston’s upper crust was—among other duties—part and parcel to his station as a physician in this city. And the requisite charge *did* serve to remind him of why he became a doctor.

Mrs. Taylor and the likes of her represented all that was wrong with this country—this world. *His* world. The people who needed him most didn’t have servants to dress them, cook for them, and drive their spit-shined carriages.

Smiling deliberately through his disdain, he instructed Mrs. O’Donell, “Please send her—uh—them in, Mrs. O’Donell. And would you be kind enough to prepare a tea tray for us?”

“Yes sir, Doctor.” She rolled her eyes as she backed across the threshold.

“Thank you.” He sighed, wishing for a quick end to the day.

Mrs. Hamlin Taylor III soon wilted in the chair opposite, a purple feather from her outrageous bonnet drooping over one eye. A white porcelain tea set and six petite pumpkin cakes set on the low table between them. To the right, a slender Negro woman in a crisp-collared black dress and white apron waited. Next to her, a tall, lighter-skinned footman stood at attention, dressed in impeccable black and white livery.

“Really, Mrs. Taylor, your servants can most certainly wait outside. This is, after all, a personal office call. Is it not?” James lifted

a cup to his lips. Addressing the situation seemed pointless, yet he had to try.

“Oh, mine go with me everywhere, Dr. Hill. What would I do without them? They’re no bother, really.” She flipped her hanky at the servants as if batting flies.

Well, he tried. He placed the dainty cup back on its saucer. “What brings you here today, Mrs. Taylor?”

She dismissed the footman with a wave of her hand. When the door clicked shut behind him, she turned to James. “Oh Doctor, I’m just not myself these days.” She brushed at her brow with the back of her hand.

“Please, go on. Can you list your symptoms for me?” He reached for a notepad and scribbled nonsense on the paper while she continued. He chewed the inside of his cheek to affect a sober countenance.

“I seem to be too weary to get out of bed in the morning.” She reached for another cake. “And certainly, I’m finding it most difficult these days to enjoy the company of others. Why, I have not even entertained in a fortnight. What must the ladies think of me?” Wagging her head woefully, she pressed her fingers to her lips. “I confess I find myself more and more relishing the idea of a nap most days—even in lieu of dining at the Kanawha House.

“I fear there are few days in my future remaining. Life as I’ve known it is winding down, and my demise is near. Oh, Doctor, you must do something. I simply am not ready to die. I’m too young.” She dabbed the embroidered hanky to teary eyes. “Whatever would my Hamlin do without me?”

“Mmm . . . I see.” James continued writing for a moment. Rising slowly, he crossed the room to a wall-mounted glass and oak cupboard. He removed ten tiny blue pills from a round tin and inserted them into a small brown envelope.

“Mrs. Taylor, I do believe we can avert this disaster—for the time being. I am prescribing these pills. You will take one upon waking

and another upon retiring for the next five days. I am confident that your symptoms will dissipate after a time.” He handed her the envelope. “I’m advising a particular course of treatment for you as well.”

She straightened, biting her lip, apparently assessing the *grave* situation. “Treatment. Certainly, Doctor. I will follow your instructions in perfect detail.” Stuffing the hanky into her sleeve, she leaned forward, eyes wide.

“Mrs. Taylor, I am prescribing a brisk walk for a twenty-minute duration upon rising each morning. I am also prescribing two teaspoons of cider vinegar in a glass of water before each meal.”

“A . . . a brisk walk, you say? Where would I walk? What if people see me?” Her countenance fell once again as she fidgeted with the cameo broach at her throat.

“Walk where you will, Mrs. Taylor. This is my prescription for you, which, if you want to put off your demise a while longer, you must certainly follow. I’m confident you will feel better by this time next week. Dare I say I do not wish to see you in my office again for such a serious matter?” He forced a smile.

“Oh, I do hope not, Doctor. I will adhere to your course of treatment beginning this very evening. Thank you, Dr. Hill. You’ve been most kind.” She tucked the pills away, and he helped her to her feet.

“Good day, Mrs. Taylor.”

The moment the front door closed behind the woman and her servant, Mrs. O’Donell peered around the doorpost, eyes shifting. “Is the coast clear?” A slice of mirth bespoke her ever-present cheerful nature.

“You may come out now, Mrs. O’Donell. She is gone.”

“Blue Mass?” A knowing smile bloomed across her ruddy cheeks.

“Blue Mass, Mrs. O’Donell. The lovely blue pill for every woman who is her own worst disease.” They shared a laugh as he retrieved the tea tray and carried it to the kitchen.

“Now, James, ya needn’t do that. I can manage it meself.” She shuffled after him.

“Yes, yes, I know. You can *always* manage. And I can always help myself.” He turned and winked to preclude any ruffled feathers. “Have we another patient today?”

“Little Gerald Cooper is coming in for ya to be checking on his splint. But, that’s not until two o’clock, so you’ve a bit of free time for lunch today, ya have. Will ya be wantin’ to stay in or go out?”

The bell above the front door jingled, announcing another patron.

“So much for lunch,” James lamented as Mrs. O’Donell ambled to the parlor to welcome the unexpected visitor.

“Is James busy, Mrs. O’Donell?”

At the sound of the familiar voice, James strode into the parlor. “Austin, what brings you here? Neither for the services of a doctor nor in the duties of a solicitor, I hope.”

Austin Kennedy removed his tall hat and tapped two fingers to the brim. Perfectly waved black hair and an impeccably groomed beard evidenced a recent trip to the barber.

James extended a hand to his friend and raked fingers through his own beard. When was the last time *he* visited a barber?

“On the contrary, I came by to see if you have a break in your schedule and would care to join me for lunch at the Kanawha House?”

“Food sounds wonderful, but what say we sup at Miss Molly’s Eatery? They’ve got the best fried chicken this side of Richmond.” He retrieved his hat and frock coat from the hall tree.

“Always the Puritan, James.” Austin’s mouth tipped in a teasing smirk as he held the door.



Miss Molly's was like an extended family at mealtime. Not that James had experienced anything like this as a boy. The checkered tablecloths, homey atmosphere, and smiling calico-clad waitresses suited him just fine. The simple fare was much more to his liking than the bouillabaisse of the aristocracy or the two-pound steaks of the mining moguls at the Kanawha House.

"I want you to talk to George Patton, James."

Austin directed a flirtatious smile at the approaching waitress, who balanced two water glasses in one hand and two steaming plates of fried chicken and mashed potatoes in the other.

"We've been through this, Austin."

"I know, I know. Just come with me on Saturday evening and talk to him. It's an honor to be invited to be a Kanawha Rifleman. If your answer is still no, at least give the man a reason." Austin winked at the woman as she served their food. She promptly blushed and scurried away.

"Is no woman safe around you?" James shook his head. "I dare say you can't leave your office without dispensing a dose of trifling with some unsuspecting woman."

"God made women beautiful just for the joys and follies of men, wouldn't you say?"

"I can't say I agree with that, old man. In fact, as I recall, woman was made to be a helpmeet for man." *Where did that come from?* He stroked his chin, schooling his expression. Well, of course, he knew *where* it came from, but why did he say it aloud?

One eyebrow cocked, and Austin leaned closer. "Does Victoria know you don't rank beauty above your desire for a *helpmeet* in your quest for a wife?"

“I don’t have a ‘quest for a wife’. I’ve no desire to marry.” Certainly not Victoria Jamison. “Building my practice—that’s what’s important to me. Joining the Kanawha Riflemen is not something I deem productive.”

“But the Riflemen include the most prominent members of the Charleston community. Why, the most highly regarded doctors and attorneys are all members. You’ll be in company, and the connections you make will allow you to advance your practice in more ways than you can imagine. The people of Charleston will look at Dr. James Hill through fresh eyes.”

He wiped the last of the grease from his fingers. Under Austin’s scrutiny, he sucked in a long breath and let it out. He downed a glass of water and tossed his napkin on the table. “Might as well get this over with. I’ll go with you to speak with Captain Patton. But this is the last I want to hear of it. Are we agreed?”

Austin reached across the table and pumped his hand. “You got it. Not another word.”

As they exited the eatery, Austin turned sharply. “Oh, and I *might* have mentioned to Victoria that she would look lovely on your arm at the Pattons’ gala Saturday evening.”

“Austin . . .” He growled, crossing his arms, thoroughly perturbed by the presumptuous intrusion.

Austin whirled and started down the street at a clipped pace. He spun once and waved. “See you Saturday, Dr. Hill.” Laughter drifted behind his words.

James cringed at the prospect—once again roped into one of Austin’s schemes. And his own best intentions entirely dismissed.

Three



FAYETTE COUNTY

Invigorated by the tang of mud and chill, Augusta struck out across the yard. She snuggled the woolen wrap tighter around her shoulders as she made her way across the pasture and over the rise to her special place.

Bare earth poked through the gray-white carpet of snow, melted away in sporadic patches by an unexpected thaw. A raccoon scurried across the field—a sure sign of an early spring. With the edge of her shawl, she scattered icy crumbles of snow from the rough board swing and hoisted herself up.

Here, in her *thinkin' spot* beneath the giant cedar, she could forget about the future, remember the past, and pray for today. Surely her God was bigger than the snarled knot within her heart. And bigger than the fear that peeked around the corner and stared her in the eye. But a feeling she couldn't shake—a shadow of something beyond today—darkened even this sovereign haven beneath the stately tree.

She'd find herself daring to dream. Dream of a family of her own, a husband to love, a future. But it was no use. Her life was here, caring for the young'uns. She'd promised Mama.

“Halloo to the tree!” A familiar voice rescued her from her pensive mood.

Through all her years on this earth, that voice had reproved her, counseled her, and teased her. Ol' Izzy's little cabin at the edge of the grove had ever been a source of laughter and story-telling.

"You in yer thinkin' spot, missy. Something bothering you?" He stooped low and his brown hand brushed snow from a wild crocus shoot. "We gots to help them that needs helping," he said with a snicker. "Not that this here bit o' shoot is depending on Ol' Izzy's help to spring up and blossom. Good Lord see to that."

"Izzy, you always could lift my spirits."

"There's that smile I like to see. I come by to take a look at that new calf I heard tell of."

"Gus! Gus! Where are you?" Will's crumpled slouch hat popped over the hill before the rest of her barreled down to the swing, arms flailing like a baby bird tumbled from its nest. She skidded to a stop, hooking Augusta's arm as an anchor.

"Whoa, there. First of all, a lady doesn't holler like that. And secondly, a lady doesn't run." Augusta used her sternest voice.

"Well, first, I ain't a lady—at least not yet—and second, I'm in a hurry!"

"What is so all-fired important, Willamina?" She hid a smile beneath her *mean face*, as her brother Bertie liked to call it.

"The boys are going twilight huntin'. Can I go with them?"

"And *ladies* don't hunt." She sighed, assenting. "But, yes, you can go with your brothers. Because *ladies* do what needs to be done." Augusta staggered as Will's flannel-clad arms squeezed her middle.

"Thanks. And thank you too, Izzy." Will started a lazy jog up the hill.

"What'd I do, missy?" Izzy shouted after her.

Will spun to face him, continuing up the hill backward. "You always put Gus in a good mood. See ya later—with meat, I hope."

"Heh, heh, heh. Like a rabbit on the run, that one." An impish grin peeked through Izzy's white beard, a striking contrast to his

dark terra cotta skin. He stretched out a wrinkled hand. “Now, what say we take a gander at that calf?”



“Supper’s ready, Pap.” Augusta’s voice was little more than a whisper as she knelt beside the bed. His cough was better today. Didn’t his lungs sound a bit clearer? Jonathan Dabney was a force to be reckoned with just a year ago. Now consumption pitilessly drained him of life, just as it had Mama.

Life hoed a rocky row for him before Mama died—months at the sanatorium up in Grafton, endless trips to the doctors in Wheeling, a bank loan for all the bills. And how he had suffered. Months of grieving even before Mama passed. He told her once that the best part of him had died with Mama.

Pap frowned, gingerly clearing his throat. “Can you get the boys to help me to the table?”

“They’ll be here shortly. It’s been a week since you joined us for a meal, Pap. I’m real thankful you’re up to it tonight.”

Moments later, chairs bumped and scraped on the floor until all the Dabneys and Melinda Jane settled at the table. Augusta scanned the cherished faces. Her flock. And she was the mother hen. Hadn’t she raised Bertie like her own?

If only Mama could see the beauty Will had become—and Zander, practically a man at just sixteen. Not a day went by Augusta didn’t ask God to show her what Mama would’ve done about this or that.

Her gaze moved to Fin. Just a year older than her own twenty years, he stood tall and muscular like Pap. A fully grown man, but she even felt like *his* mother.

“Lord,” Pap began softly, “I thank You for this bounty and the hands that worked hard to prepare it. It is Your gift to us, and we

thank You.” He sucked in a rattly breath. “And Lord, I ask You to take care of this family, whatever may come. We trust You, Lord. Amen.”

“Talked with Jimmy Lee Campbell this morning, Pap.” Fin set a pork chop bone on his plate, wiping at his chestnut beard with a napkin. “He got himself a *Kanawha Valley Star*. Gave it to me to read. News doesn’t sound good.”

“Pap don’t wanna hear no news.” Six-year-old Bertie pushed his straight, blond hair from his eyes. “Ain’t that right, Gus? Ain’t that what you always say?”

“It’s *doesn’t* want to hear *any* news’—and I don’t always say it.” Minding Pap’s schooling gaze, she shifted her attention to Zander, who was already shoveling up second helpings. Hollow legs, that one.

Pap nodded to Fin. “Go ahead, son. Let’s hear it.” His usual smile dipped as he reached down to rub the graying head of the old hound, Coot.

“Well, for starters”—Fin straightened and wedged his back against the chair—“six more states have seceded, and they’ve gone and composed a constitution, calling themselves the Confederate States of America. They even voted themselves a president, Mr. Jefferson Davis.”

“Can they do that?” Will’s glances bounced between Pap and Augusta. “Can they just up and pick a new president?”

Zander halted the bite aimed for his mouth. “I guess they figure they can, ’cause they did.” He turned to his older brother. “Dirch Sizemore says Virginny’s got to choose up sides.”

“He’s right.” Fin rapped his fingers on the tabletop, setting his jaw hard. “They’re choosing up county delegates for a convention in Richmond this month to decide whether Virginia’s gonna stay with the Union or join the Confederacy. I even read the Choctaws and some other tribes are joining in with the South if there’s a war.”

Augusta's stomach quivered at the mention of war. How she prayed it wouldn't come to that. Didn't folks see the horrors it would reap? Surely it would slash a wound through this nation so deep it'd never heal.

Pap combed his fingers through a gray-flecked beard. "Seems to me that nothing's been the same since that John Brown incident up at Harper's Ferry." He muffled a vicious cough with his napkin, then grimaced at the cloth. Stealing a peek at Augusta, he promptly folded it and took a drink. "War is an ugly thing. I don't want my boys fighting some war that's not ours." Furrows piled like storm clouds across his forehead. "*Our* business is our family and our land. The good Lord watches over His own, and He always will. No sense inviting trouble."



Augusta dumped another bucket of water over the boy, sending soapy gray waves splashing over the washtub sides. "Bertram Elikim Dabney! Sure had better be the last time I have to deal with this. Makes two years running that you and Coot got yourselves sprayed by a polecat."

She rolled her stinging eyes at Melinda Jane, who merely grinned, ignoring the foul odor. If only a clothespin on the nose truly did work. Grabbing up the brush again, Augusta rubbed it onto the chunk of lye soap and scrubbed his skin red.

He was surely trying, but how she loved this little brother of hers—his innocent antics and the way he bounded into each day as if all the wonders of the world waited just for him. Likely, Mama was laughing at all this from heaven right now.

She tossed her friend a frustrated look. "Honey, will you please fetch some tomatoes from the cellar?" Sweat trickled from Augusta's hairline, no doubt calling forth the dreaded crimson blotches

on her cheeks. How she envied Melinda Jane's velvety complexion, as flawless as her perfect white teeth. And her hair, a striking mix of wheat, sand, and copper.

Melinda Jane laughed at the shivering boy and flashed Augusta a knowing smile. "Boys will be boys. Isn't that what you're always telling me, Gus?"

Augusta snorted, then flicked water across her friend's apron.

"Hey! I'm not the one in need of a good scrubbin'!" Melinda Jane's doe eyes sparkled with mischief. She made an exaggerated *to-do* over her wet apron before scooting off to get the tomatoes.

Augusta frowned, wishing there was a way around what she had to say. "There's not much can be done for old Coot, Bertie. I am not wasting my tomatoes on him. He'll just have to stay out of the house 'til summer, I reckon."

He scowled, none too happy about the edict. Bertie was more attached to that old hound than a tick to a wildcat.

Melinda Jane emerged from the house; arms laden with canning jars. "I'll do the tomatoes for you Gus. Seems this is usually the part I'm best at."

Bertie gasped, indignation flushing his cheeks and creasing his chin. "Last year you shoved some in my mouth!" He poached out his lower lip. "You know I don't like maters, Melinda Jane. Never have in all my years."

"Hah! In all your six years, you mean. You're an old man for sure."

He scrunched his eyes shut as she dumped the first jar over his trembling, shrinking body. Melinda Jane squished and rubbed the fruit into his now pink hair. Her smile gave way to laughter as seeds squirted through her fingers, splattering Augusta's face.

Augusta dabbed at the juice on her cheek and licked her finger. Bertie's irate scowl ignited a spark of hilarity, contagious and welcomed. Seconds later, she was holding her bouncing middle, tears streaming from her eyes.

She'd forgotten how good it felt to laugh. And how delightful it was to set aside thoughts of banknotes and war and Pap's illness—if only for a short time.



Pressing her head against Daisy's side, Augusta's hands moved with practiced rhythm. This was serenity—the music of the milk striking the tin bucket, the sweet smell of hay, and the occasional lowing of the cows. If she couldn't be at her *thinkin' spot*, she'd aspire to be right here. Here, the world didn't invade. Here, no one cried for attention, or needed to be bandaged, fed, or read to.

She felt fifty, not twenty—already considered an old maid by some. But she didn't need a family of her own. She had this one. The very words she told herself every day. Every time her heart ached for something more than God's chosen portion.

The wide door creaked as Zander pushed through with his back, a saddle hugged to his chest and tack over one shoulder. "Gus, I didn't know you were in here."

"I'm just finishing up. Did you have a nice ride?"

Riding was Zander's *thinkin' spot*. And my, could he ride—bareback like a wild Indian, his straight yellow hair blowing in the wind. Pap always said there wasn't a horse in the county that could throw him. For sure, Zander has a special way with horses—a gift, Pap calls it.

An instant later, Fin burst through the barn door fit to be tied. "I think you better talk to Will. That sister of yours says she's not putting any food on. I've been mending fences all day, and I'm hungry as a March bear."

"That *sister* of mine is your sister, too. I'll be in to deal with her shortly." She poured the last of the milk into another pail and headed for the house.

“Will? Where are you?” Finding the kitchen empty, she traipsed up the stairs. “Willamina Dabney, you open this door right now and tell me why the supper table isn’t set!” Listening at the door, she worried her bottom lip. Would Mama be this harsh? Will was a good girl, just high-spirited. And sometimes she had a habit of kicking against the goads of propriety. She mostly played with just boys at school, sorely lacking the companionship of other girls.

“You can come in.” Will sat on the edge of the bed; a slouch hat mashed tight over her ears. On the braided rug, clumps of hair lay in small heaps. *Her* hair.

“What have you done?” Augusta knelt, looking into her sister’s damp, green eyes. Eyes so much like her own. Seldom did Will let anyone see her cry. She was always strong, so unconcerned about what anyone thought.

“I hate being a girl!” She wrenched off the hat, slinging it to the floor. Uneven hanks of honey-colored hair covered her head like a rag mop.

Augusta fought the urge to scold. This was serious—serious enough, at least, for Will to have done something so drastic. She sat on the bed and folded the young hands into her own. “What caused you to do such a thing, honey? What happened?”

“Leroy Franklin tried to kiss me!” She spat the words like blinked milk.

“Well, I declare. It’s not the first time a boy tried to steal a kiss from a twelve-year-old girl. Why’d you have to go and cut your hair?”

Will harrumphed, crossing her arms over her chest. “Leroy Franklin has stringy hair and smells like year-old butter. Once he was layin’ on the ground, he said he only did it ’cause I was so pretty.”

“On the *ground*? Oh, Will, you didn’t! Did you wallop that poor boy?” She shook her head, dreading what she must do. *Miss*

Norris. This wasn't the first time she would have to deal with the schoolmarm. Oh, no.

Her sister merely shrugged.

"Listen, Will. I was on your side when you caught those boys swiping Bertie's slingshot and made them regret it. And that time you beat the Dorton twins in a foot race and shamed them in front of all their friends—I guess you could've handled that differently—but this!"

Sore losers didn't sit well with Will, and she'd never been one with the wisdom to back down from a fight.

"I only hit him once. Then I ran. I was afraid somebody saw what he did." She hung her head, and a single, fat tear splashed onto her arm.

"Oh, Will. You *are* a pretty girl." Augusta ran her hand through the shaggy hair. Was there a deeper problem here? She lifted Will's chin, searching out the truth. "Is that why you cut your hair? So no more Leroy's will try to kiss you?"

"I guess." Her lips twitched to one side. "I maybe should've waited a spell until I cooled off, though, huh?" She scrubbed her tousled scalp, and a pool of regret spilled from her eyes, snaking fresh tears over her freckles.

Augusta hugged her little sister, and for the first time in a long time remembered what it was like to be a girl on the cusp of womanhood. Before her fanciful dreams had evaporated like morning mist in a holler.

Four



FAYETTE COUNTY

Augusta closed the bedroom door, careful not to wake Pap from his third cat nap of the day. How she wished and prayed things could be different. Wished she could turn back the years.

“Pap’s not joining us tonight,” she told the boys, seating herself at the table. “I’ll give him some broth in a little bit.” She had invited Izzy for supper too, hoping he’d sit a spell with Pap and lift his spirits some. “Fin, will you please pray?” She reached across Pap’s place and squeezed Bertie’s fingers.

The usual chatter at the Dabney supper table warmed the room like a welcomed winter fire. Izzy regaled the women with his habitual compliments as the conversation turned from the garden to the weather to the hubbub of rebellion.

“More news from down at Gauley today,” Fin said, chewing his last bite of shoofly pie. “Jimmy Lee lent me the paper. I thought maybe Pap would like to take a gander at it.”

“Can he read some to us?” Bertie asked, looking to Gus.

“I guess, since we’re pretty much done with the meal.” She stood to gather plates.

“Says here that Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated on March the fourth.”

Bertie tugged on Augusta's work dress, his brows crumpled, lips in a peculiar twist. "What's eggnog-or-ate-it?"

"*Inaugurated*. It means a special ceremony where Mr. Lincoln is now President Lincoln." She patted his shoulder. "Now listen. Go on, Fin."

"This is a portion of his speech printed in the paper here: 'I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists.'"

"So, why's Dirch saying that Virginy's gonna have to set their slaves free if there's a war and the Union wins?" Zander tapped the handle of his fork against the oak tabletop. "Sounds to me like President Lincoln doesn't care about setting the slaves free."

Fin eyed their dear friend. "What do you make of all this, Izzy?"

Izzy pulled wrinkled fingers through his white beard. "Seems to me that what folks be thinking is that since there's no slavery in those states up north—that's where them runaways head to, up north—that things can't stay the way they is less'n the slave states band together."

Will cleared her throat, waiting until all eyes were on her. "Miss Norris taught us that the southern states need their slaves for the tobacco, cotton, and rice crops. And since the North uses those things, the South needs slaves."

"Well then, Miss Norris is teaching nonsense, and I'll have words with her. No one *needs* slaves. They may need human beings for their labor force, but not *slaves!*" Augusta didn't like the sound of her harsh words, but anger could rise so sudden-like when she considered the way some of her neighbors treated their slaves.

A couple of years back, Melinda Jane brought a runaway to their home for doctoring. Pap was strong then. He didn't care they were breaking the law. They were just helping out that poor woman, whose back looked to be but straps of meat.

Augusta doctored the woman for a week, then one day she just up and disappeared. Melinda Jane claimed she didn't know

where the woman could've gone. Augusta knew better. Ever since Melinda Jane was a tot, she could no more lie to Augusta than a stag sidestep Pap's buckshot.

"Jimmy Lee says there's no difference betwixt those factory workers up north and our slaves in Virginny," Fin was saying. "Seems to me the factory workers get paid something for their labor, at least. He says they've got slaves up north, too. They're just called by some other fancy name."

"They're indentured servants, and it's not the same. Jimmy Lee and all those other slave-holders are just looking to find some excuse to justify what they're doing." Augusta frowned and shifted her gaze to Izzy. His head down, eyes closed, a low hum vibrated from his chest. Soon, every eye was fixed on him.

"I'm sorry, Izzy. We haven't been very considerate of our conversation manners tonight." Augusta's irritation melted into compassion. All this talk must bring back memories of his slave days. She loved Izzy and would never want to cause him pain. Catching Fin's attention, she raised her eyebrows.

"You're all excused," Fin said, sliding his chair out.

Her older brother was gradually stepping up to act as head of the family. With Pap's sickness, Fin's workload had doubled on the farm, and he still managed to add to the family's income with his leather tooling business. That boy would make somebody a mighty fine husband one day.

Slumped over the sink and working at a snail's pace, Will scraped slivers of soap into the dishpan as Augusta poured hot water over the plates.

"How about I trade you? I'll wash while you put the food away." Augusta added a dipper of cool water and started washing.

Will straightened as a familiar spark returned to her eyes. "Fair enough." She spun into action like a tornado, gathering the serving platters.

There never was much left after a Dabney family meal. Usually, just a few biscuits they'd eat for breakfast with some lard gravy and bacon. The egg count had been down a bit lately. She blamed that old rooster, Rupert, for that.

Melinda Jane hummed a mountain song, pulling a broom across the floorboards, its strokes keeping time with the melody. Contentment wrapped its powerful arms around Augusta. What a blessing it was to have her very best friend living with them these past few years.

"Gus, can we talk?" Fin pulled on his coat for evening chores as his eyes followed Melinda Jane around the room.

"Of course." Augusta wiped wet hands on her apron.

Melinda Jane flashed a broad smile at first Fin, then Augusta. "I'll finish up here. Go on, you two."

"Thank you, sister."

The parlor's single lantern cast a golden glow over the tasteful furniture. It wasn't a genuine parlor. Just an inviting room to entertain guests and a place for the family to spend their evenings together. Augusta often read books aloud, while Will and the boys whittled a bit or played checkers. Sometimes, Melinda Jane would lead them all in a song or two. Now and then, even Pap was up to joining them in the evenings.

Fin poked at the fire, then motioned for Augusta to sit. She ran her hands along the carved walnut arms of the soft brocade chair.

"What's on your mind, Fin?"

His brow furrowed. "I'm just busting to talk to somebody. If what they're saying is true, a war is coming. It's coming sure as shootin' and Virginny will be smack dab in the middle of it."

"Now Fin, we can't be living our lives according to what might be."

"But folks are talking. They're sayin' Fayette County is siding with the Confederacy. I know how you feel—and how Pap feels. What do I do when I'm expected to fight for the South? Like it

or not, we Dabneys may be the only ones around these parts who don't see this thing so black and white. We've got to be choosing up sides, and I don't expect it'll go well with our neighbors if that side is North."

"I tell you what we do—we pray. Pap says this isn't our war. He says the only thing that concerns us is protecting our land. Right now, I'm more concerned with that land remaining ours to protect."



"Hold him still now, Bertie. This has got to hurt." Augusta pressed the pliers close to the dog's skin and grasped the porcupine quill. In one quick motion, she pulled it through. Coot let out a whimper. But those trusting brown eyes fixed on Augusta's own.

She pulled five good-sized quills from his muzzle and smaller ones from his gums and between his toes, laying each on a rag, spread across the porch boards. She studied her little brother's face, wanting to smooth away the shiny, red furrows in his brow. Was this harder on Coot or Bertie?

"It's okay, boy. Gus'll fix you up good as new. You're the bravest coon dog in the county. There ain't no more skunks or porky-pines ever gonna mess with you again." Bertie swiped at an escaped tear. "Ain't that right, Gus?"

Izzy stood behind the boy, his calloused hand squeezing Bertie's shoulder.

Augusta dribbled honey over Coot's snout, carefully working it into the open pits of flesh left by the barbs. She wrapped a length of cotton around the dog's muzzle. "He'll have to wait until tonight for a drink of water, but at least this'll give the honey some time to work before he tries to lick it off. You keep him around home. I'd hate to see him get in that muddy crick and make matters worse."

“Thank you, Gus.” Bertie looped his short arms around her waist and squeezed.

Love surged like a wave, its force hugging him tight against her heart. She shuffled her fingers through his straw-colored mop, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. Would that she could spare him all the bruises of life.

Turning back to Coot, he smacked his thigh. “Come on, boy.” Minus his usual jog, he led his four-legged companion off to the barn.

“What you won’t do for that young’un,” Izzy said, shaking his head. “The Lord surely blessed you with the gift of healing, missy. He give you the gift of compassion, too.”

“Aw, now Izzy. I recognize your butterin’-up voice.”

Augusta smiled when crinkles sprouted from the corners of his eyes. Long years had carved in him a character of sincerity and goodness—something a soul was hard-up to find these days. Izzy was her reminder of God’s grace and mercy in a world so torn by hatred that it threatened to completely unravel.

“Missy, you remember when I become acquainted with a needy family along about last fall?”

“I do. Are you wanting to help out another family?”

“I am. If you could spare some of them apples you wintered over plus anything else, I’d be beholdin’.” His eyes twinkled above thick, white whiskers.

“Well, let’s just see what we’ve got in the root cellar.” She took his hand, leading him into the house. “The Lord always provides for the hungry. Did you notice? The peas are already sprouting in the garden.” Augusta reached for the heavy iron ring in the floor.

“Let Me.” Izzy pulled on the ring, and the cellar door dropped open with a thud.

Thirty minutes later, Augusta watched as Izzy made his way down the porch steps, a sagging potato sack in each hand. She grinned as he talked to himself, pausing with each measured step.

“Thank Ye Lord,” he whispered. “You just keeps blessin’ and a-blessin’. For everyone who asks, gets. And him who seeks, he finds. And him who knocks, it opens. This son of yours asks for bread, Lord, but you done blessed yo little ones with corn and beans and flour and maters and apples. Lord, You good to yo children! Bless this food, Lord, to fill bellies that soon be free.”

His voice faded as he shuffled off. It was just his way, always communing with the Almighty. And one of the many things she loved about him. Drawing her work apron ties into a bow, she pushed through the kitchen door and started for the garden. She halted at the edge of the large plot, her cheerful mood scythed and trampled.

Instead of rows with tender green pea shoots, the ground along the fence-line looked churned as if someone had just worked it. Only a few feet of peas remained and there, snout to the ground, was the culprit. A wild sable sow raised its head and looked square in her direction.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Augusta hitched up her skirt, and ran back into the kitchen. She lifted the Belgian shotgun from its place on the wall and snatched two percussion caps from a leather possibles bag on a peg.

She strutted out the door, but her prey wasn’t where she’d left it.

By now, the sow decided an audience did not bode well and had sauntered off toward the trees. Pulling the hammers to half-cocked, Augusta settled a cap on each of the nipples. She bit her lip, her thumb pulling hard against first one hammer, then the other.

With only the sow’s backside in her sights, Augusta aimed and fired. When its hind legs dropped, it turned just enough, and she emptied the other barrel into the pig’s neck.

“That’ll take care of you *and* our Easter dinner.”



Fin glanced around the main street of the small town of Gauley Bridge, then secured the buckboard to a post in front of the blacksmith shed. He dipped a wooden bucket into a water barrel just outside the door and watered the horses.

Hauling a wheel out of the wagon's bed, he rolled it around to the back of the building. When he didn't see his friend, he leaned the wheel against the woodpile. "Hey Tiny, you about?"

"I's here, Fin. What you needing today?" Tiny wasn't so tiny. He stood a head taller than Fin's six feet. Black skin glistened over bulging muscles that might have been hidden by sleeves, if there'd been any. A sweat-drenched homespun shirt clung to his mounded chest. He dragged a rag across his face with one hand and extended the other to Fin.

"Howdy, Tiny." Fin shook his hand. "Keeping real busy, I see."

"Busy is a blessing from the Lord, friend. Yo family doin' well?"

"We're all about the same."

"How's Ol' Izzy? I owe my life to that one."

"Izzy's doing fine, too."

"And that fine granddaughter of his?" Tiny sure could push his buttons.

Fin shuffled his feet. "Melinda Jane is *very* fine."

Tiny roared, kindling a rush of heat that scaled Fin's neck and blistered his ears. He glanced around to make sure they were alone. Seemed his friend just couldn't pass up a chance to tease him—not when Tiny was the only one privy to the truth.

"So, what you got for me, Fin?"

"This wagon wheel is outa-round. I tried to fix it, but I'm thinking it's in need of a forge." Fin hefted the wheel onto an old

table. Covered in burn scars and gouges, the table looked to carry a hundred tales of hard work.

An hour later, the repaired wheel sat in the back of the wagon. Fin gathered the reins to head out.

“Fin. Wait up!” Jimmy Lee Campbell trotted his black gelding up to the wagon. “I was just thinking on heading up to your place. Mind if I tag along?”

“Sure. Tie Midnight to the back and climb on up here. I’m heading straight home anyways.”



Just as Fin pulled the horses to a stop in the yard, Zander rounded the corner of the house. Gus followed close behind, a shotgun in her hands and a smile on her face. *What . . .* He shook his head and set the brake. There was definitely a story to be had here.

Jimmy Lee aimed a toothy grin at Gus and doffed his hat. “Well, now. I don’t suppose you heard I was coming and felt the need to arm yourself against my charm and good looks?” He winked and bolted from the wagon seat.

“It’s not your charm she needs protecting from,” Fin grouched. “It’s your tomfool blatherin’.” He eyed his brother and sister. “What’s going on?”

Zander headed for the barn. “Gus shot a sow in the garden. I’m gonna go finish what I was doing.”

Fin hollered after, “You best get back up to the house as soon as you can so we can gut that sow. Gus shot it. The least we can do is clean it if we want to eat it.” That brother of his always had a way of disappearing when there was game to be dressed.

“Why, that’s proper kind of you, Fin.” His sister smiled sweetly, tipping her head.

Jimmy Lee placed his hat over his heart. “When you smile like that, Gus—why, you just set my heart a flutter.” Sweat flattened his mop of brown hair as he lifted his chin in the air like he was reciting in a school pageant. “Would you consider taking a stroll down the lane with me, Miss uh . . . Gus?”

“Thank you for the compliment, Jimmy Lee—and the offer. I’m sorry to disappoint, but I have work to do. Good day to you.” She whirled and walked to the house, soundly shutting the door behind her.

Fin thumped his friend on the back. “Jimmy Lee, I told you—you’re barking up the wrong tree and there’s not a coon around for miles. I know you see the two of you sparking, but it just ain’t gonna happen.”

“Aww. She’ll come around. Just give her time.”

“*Time*? Gus has known you all her life. I think it’s the *time* thing that’s got her convinced otherwise.”

“Whose side you on anyway, Fin?”

“That’s something I’ve been thinking on, Jimmy Lee. Something I’ve been thinking on.” Fin led the horses to the barn, his mind a mishmash of notions. A heaviness weighed on him, an uncertainty that clamored for attention, for decision.

Five



CHARLESTON

James slowed his horse, wending unnoticed among meager dwellings. Coal fires burned in pitted buckets as blackened pots steamed above their glowing heat. He pulled to a stop, eyes fixed on a tiny Negro woman, her face awash in the rain of cruel years. She squatted low, stirring the contents of a pot with a broken wooden spoon. Dried Virginia mud caked the edge of her faded homespun skirt.

He dismounted and untied his black bag from the leather thongs.

The old woman looked up. “Glory be!” The Good Lord knowed we was in need of a doctorin’ visit today. He surely did draw you to come by here today, Dr. Hill. You be the Lord’s servant. That what you be.”

“Good morning, Hanna. How is everyone?” James reached to help the woman as she painstakingly rose from her position.

“I be good today, Dr. Hill. Ain’t no rain today. These creaky bones don’t be shoutin’ at me so much less’n it be rainin’. I’s sure frettin’ over Olive, though. She been off her feed nigh on three days now.” The old woman clutched her skirt, using it to grab hold of the hot pan. “She in there.” She motioned toward a ramshackle hut.

Hobbled-together broken bricks comprised the bottom of the dwelling's walls, and mud-chinked stick bundles made up the upper part. The withered sod roof dipped here and there, no doubt a poor hindrance to rain. James followed Hanna into the house, ducking his head to clear the threshold.

The musty air reeked of sweat and sickness. In the corner of the one small room, a slight form lay wrapped in a tattered quilt. Hanna lit a tallow candle and set it on a roughhewn stool beside the pallet.

"She been feverish off and on, too." The old woman's trembling hand brushed at something unseen on the girl's forehead.

James knelt, pulling the stethoscope from his bag. "Would you please fetch her a cup of water, Hanna?"

"Yessir. I be right back. Gots a bucket from the crick this morning that I boiled up."

When Hanna returned, James was already closing up his bag. "This is quinine, Hanna. I want you to give her a few drops in water three times a day." He pulled the cork from a small green bottle. "Like this." He dripped a couple of drops of the liquid into the cup. The woman nodded, her serious eyes bouncing from the bottle to the cup.

He lifted her leathery hand and set the cup in it. "I'll be back to check on her in a few days. If she's out of her right mind or goes into fits, please send someone for me right away."

"Is this here medicine gonna get her well?" The old woman stared at the bottle. "I been givin' her some fever root tea, but it don't appear to be doing her no good."

"You keep giving her the tea, it may still help. You're taking fine care of her, Hanna. If you can get some soup and this medicine down her, I think she'll pull through." He clasped her shoulder, taken aback by the sharpness of her bones and the yellowness of her eyes. He smiled his most reassuring smile for this angel in her

disguise of rags and neglect. “You be sure to boil the drinking water real good in that black kettle you’ve got out there, you hear?”

“Yessir. I’s goin’ to do everthin’ I can for this po child. She got no one but Ol’ Hanna. The Good Lord and me watch over her day and night.”



The bank teller laid a small stack of bills on the polished counter with a smile. “Thank you for your business, Dr. Hill.” James didn’t return the smile, his mind already on his next mission of the day. Retrieving the leather wallet from his inside coat pocket, he promptly stashed the money and turned to leave. Just as he exited the bank, a familiar voice caught his ear.

“James?” A dainty hand captured his forearm, and he turned.

Victoria Jamison, daughter of Charleston’s wealthy steamship mogul, Phillip R. Jamison. His vessels cruised the Ohio, transporting the cotton and tobacco of the South and human cargo. Part of that cargo didn’t wear the striped vest of a dandy, but the iron manacles of a man, woman, or even child, considered human chattel by some. The familiar gall scraped at his senses, but with practiced control he gathered the fowl lesions in his fists and calmed his voice.

“Hello Victoria.” He just couldn’t do it right now. He couldn’t paste on a smile and be polite. But he was still a gentleman—so he forced an ambivalent expression.

“James, dear. I’ve not been formally asked, of course, but I assume you are simply so caught up in your duties to the fine people of Charleston that you are dilatory in your invitation. We *are* going to the gala at the Patton’s tomorrow, are we not?” She pooched her lower lip out beyond the plane of her nose—most unattractively—and batted her eyes.

Victoria was not a plain woman. She was beautiful. It was the young and wealthy part of her vitae that he found most distasteful. She was much too young. Her feigned knowledge of current affairs only proved she valued her latest choice in yard goods more than news of a country on the verge of war.

Her father—men like him had surrounded James the first twenty years of his life. As far as the wealthy were concerned, the world was their footstool, and the common populace was an insult to their sense of rectitude.

James cleared his throat and bowed, bringing her gloved hand to his lips, kissing her knuckles. “I’m sorry, Victoria. I’m rather in a rush. And yes, I’ll be by to collect you for the gala tomorrow at eight.” He hoped this exchange would be sufficient as to allow him to continue with his agenda for the day.

“Oh James, dear, I know just what to wear. You won’t be disappointed.” She batted her eyes again. “Will you spare a moment to walk me to the Kanawha House? I’m meeting Papa there for a quick bite before he is off to Parkersburg.”

“Certainly.” He’d been hooked. There was no escaping. He offered his arm in escort and steered her toward the large brick hotel one block farther down Back Street.



“I’ll have my boy load your wagon, Dr. Hill.” The squat mercantile owner pulled on a ribbon, ringing a bell somewhere behind a curtained doorway as his face plumped up like a ripe, red tomato. James wondered how long it would be before the man succumbed to apoplexy.

“Thank you, sir, but I believe I will load it myself.”

James hoisted a flour sack onto his shoulder just as a Negro boy, about ten years of age, walked through the faded curtain.

“But . . . but, Doctor. There’s no need. This boy will do that for you.” He aimed the boy toward the stack of goods on the counter, shoving him roughly. “See what happens when you’re too slow, boy? Now get this—” The front door slammed, halting the tirade.

“Sir, I will tend to my purchases.” With that, James lifted a smaller bag of cornmeal to his hip. Mrs. O’Donell opened wide the door she’d let *slip* from her hands, smiled at James and followed him out.

“Mrs. O’Donell, your timing is impeccable.” He offered her one of his rare, sincere smiles, then settled his load into the carriage. “I’ll just be a moment. Only a case of canned goods is left.” He turned and strode back into the mercantile.



James eyed the dark clouds off to the west as he and Mrs. O’Donell made their way to the outskirts of town. While he was without opinion on the subject of weather, today he’d certainly opt for sunshine.

The carriage rolled to a stop, continuing to rock from the rutted road that led to Kanawha County’s poorhouse. James helped Mrs. O’Donell down, then proceeded to unload the food stuffs he’d purchased.

Big-eyed children, flocked to him, their calloused feet bare and their clothes resembling rags. He patted one little fellow on the head and looked around for another familiar face.

“Doctor Hill, yer a sight fer sore eyes!” The slight, gray-bearded keeper shook James’s hand. The mountain man’s stature reminded him of a leprechaun—or at least what he fancied one would look like if they existed.

“I’d like to make my rounds, if you don’t mind, Mr. Howard. Mrs. O’Donell will see to the food distribution.”

“You go right ahead, Doc. You might wanna start with Stubby over in the first cabin. He feathered into a soul, and his eye’s so swelled-up he cain’t see nothin’.” The old man winked at Mrs. O’Donell. “Good day, ma’am.” His smile was broad and several dark gaps betrayed his long, simple life.

“Giddyay to ya, sir. Now, if you’d be getting outa me way, I’ll be seeing to the needs of these growling stomachs.” Mrs. O’Donell busied herself with the cargo as an animated audience surrounded the carriage.

James pulled a handful of licorice sticks from a bag, stuffed the candy into his shirt pocket, and headed off toward the far cabin to check on Stubby.

By the time James finished with his patients, a single piece of licorice peeked out of his pocket. He snapped his medical bag closed in the dusky room, amazed at how fast his time always seemed to pass when he was here. This was where he was truly needed.

“Doctor Hill! Doctor Hill!” A woman’s panicked screams sounded outside the cabin. He snatched up his bag and charged out into the road. A young woman ran toward him, sand-colored tangles matting her cheeks and a child’s limp body in her arms. “My baby! My baby!” She choked out the words, gulping air as she staggered the last few yards.

James rushed to meet her, taking in the child’s face—an angelic face. Wet blond locks lay across full cheeks. Pale cheeks. And blue lips.

His heart sank.

“Here, let me take her.” It was too late. Misery struck with such force his nose stung.

“I was doing the washing at the crick. Lost track of her just for a minute. I called to her . . . and . . . and she didn’t answer.” The mother’s hiccupped sobs came faster. “Tell me she’s gonna be all

right. Tell me my baby's gonna be all right, Doctor." She fell to her knees, clutching her belly.

"I'm sorry." He knelt beside the woman with the girl's body in his arms. An old ache clenched his gut—a helplessness swollen by a fury that simmered nearly unchecked. He waited for the mother. He'd wait as long as necessary.

After a time, she lifted her head. Her swollen eyes took in her daughter's form.

He gentled his voice. "Do you want to hold her?"

She nodded, the utter agony in her gaze wrenching him as he tenderly transferred the girl to her mother's arms.

It's not fair! He ground his teeth to slake the urge to scream. To cry out. But he'd learned over the years that no amount of cursing or tirade could speak to his weighted spirit. Only silence could do that. And he'd learned to do silence well. He rose from the dirt, willing each movement, willing every step forward.

The woman rocked on her haunches; the body of her precious child wrapped in her embrace for the last time. A mother's fierce keen arose, and a miasma of grief permeated the air, settling on everything it touched, drawing the mourners. Ragamuffin children. Grannies toting babies. Hobbled old men in oakum-hung overalls. They all came.

A single voice raised heartfelt words to a familiar melody, garnering hums and sobs and *amens*.

*While I draw this fleeting breath,
when mine eyes shall close in death,
when I soar to worlds unknown,
see thee on thy judgment throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee.*



Faces. A dark face, runnels of tears down dusty cheeks, stark eyes, glistening wide in terror. A pallid face, small and angelic, curly amber hair. Blood. Dirt. The crack of a whip.

A mother's wail split the room, and James bolted upright, heart pounding against his ribs, limbs tangled in sweat-soaked bedding. He clenched his eyes as the wraiths of his memory receded to the tombs where he had locked them away. Heaving, he fell back to his pillow. A pillow now wet by tears whose only escape was the blackness of his dreams.