

**Are You Really Qualified? Overcoming the Challenges of Authentic Voice in
Characterization Across Race and Gender.**

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By
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For my amazing wife Sarah who challenges and encourages me every day.

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Abstract

This thesis challenges the idea that writers lack the qualifications to write in authentic voice across race and gender. The artist's statement explains the origin of the novel and the driving forces that contributed to the creative manuscript. The desire to develop a piece of historical fiction with characters of different races and genders necessitated an in-depth critical analysis. In the analysis of the obstacles associated with writing across race and gender, the thesis identifies challenges, the psychological aspects of character development, and the solutions to overcoming inherent problems. God's Word and unwavering love is woven throughout the work to emphasize His role in everyday life. Finally, the first ten chapters of *Bonnie Buckshire*, a historical fiction novel, demonstrate the ideas shared in the critical analysis.

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Artist Statement

Opening Remarks

It is difficult to know what is right but simultaneously be powerless to change what is wrong in society. The struggle against injustice is not a new concept and is not exclusive to any group or individual. My creative manuscript, *Bonnie Buckshire*, is a historical fiction novel that depicts an era in American history where injustice was law and inequality was the standard by which people lived. The manuscript will tackle issues of oppression, racism, sexism, and distorted faith. Bonnie's Christian faith propels her to challenge the laws of the land and traditions of her family. Determined to be an example of Christ's love, she endeavors to break the bondage of the oppressed.

Bonnie's zeal to help the downtrodden risks ruining everything despite her best intentions. Unsure who to trust, Bonnie searches for allies in a new environment but quickly learns that good and evil can hide in plain sight. Interpersonal conflicts and prejudices are illuminated throughout the story as national conflict looms in the background. Bonnie uses an endless supply of faith, persistence, and compassion to fulfill her missionary calling in the building tension.

Introduction to the Manuscript

Bonnie Buckshire is a historical fiction novel that takes place between Clarksville and Nashville, Tennessee, in the months leading up to the American Civil War. Bonnie is a seventeen-year-old Baptist preacher's daughter who lives in very humble conditions until circumstances cause her and her father to relocate to her uncle's plantation. Bonnie is a strong

female character driven by her understanding of the teachings of Jesus Christ. Her mother was taken by cancer before the story began, and her father, a Southern Baptist preacher in Clarksville, Tennessee, lost his congregation for preaching against slavery.

Her story starts when Emmitt Buckshire, her father, bursts into their small cabin in the middle of a stormy October night in 1860. Bleeding profusely from the leg, Emmitt leans on Ruth, a young woman escaping from slavery. With no time to spare, Emmitt tasks Bonnie with helping the young woman on the next leg of her escape. Bonnie flies into action and escorts Ruth to her next hiding place. Once at the hiding place, Bonnie leaves Ruth to find Doctor Bagwell for her father. It is uncertain if Doctor Bagwell will prove to be a friend or foe as Bonnie dodges questions about how her father was shot. Bonnie's position gets even more precarious when they encounter Elisha Montgomery, the slaver catcher, chasing Ruth.

After a hurried procedure by the doctor and an unexpected visit from the sheriff's son, Bonnie has no choice but to uproot and move with her father to her uncle's plantation. Bonnie quickly finds herself at odds with her Southern aristocratic family. Struggling with a societal structure that goes against everything she knows is right, Bonnie attacks the system but sees only setbacks. In her endeavors to help, she runs the risk of exposing an escape ring that has ushered numerous slaves to freedom.

Despite difficult positions with unfavorable odds, Bonnie manages to fight through adversity for what she knows is right. A host of characters with different values and agendas help or impede Bonnie at every turn, giving the story a steady rise and fall in tension. Regardless of setbacks or successes, Bonnie puts her faith and gratitude in God to sustain her and guide her in

all endeavors. She is ever mindful of the grace and mercy God has given her no matter what challenges she faces.

Impetus for the Work

The story of Bonnie Buckshire was born out of a challenge, a walk in the woods, and an old rusty horseshoe. On a beautiful spring day in 2021, my wife, our three kids, and I set out to hike in a local park. We hike often, but I wanted that day to be a little different, so I challenged everyone to find something on our hike and to tell a story about it over ice cream later. In true pre-teens fashion, the kids sometimes searched for treasures in the woods but mostly chased each other around like the grey squirrels that watched us curiously.

In their zeal to match the wild around them, they were too excited to see anything more than the opportunity for chaos and adventure, which, in their case, usually go hand in hand. They climbed trees, swung on vines, and bounded over dried creek beds, searching but never taking the time to see. I noticed a reddish-brown arch protruding from a creek bed's smooth, washed stones. When I pulled up the rusted metal, I found a well-worn but still intact horseshoe. I knew instantly that I had my object, but now I just needed to come up with a story to fit my lucky horseshoe. Through the rest of our hike, I wove together the details as they unfolded in my mind. I used the park as my setting and pulled elements from recent conversations we'd shared about history.

At home, we sat on the back porch to share our stories. The kids regaled us with stories about fairies, an acorn, and a tree that eats people. It was an excellent exercise for them to stretch their minds and share their creativity, even if they did not love having to tell a story. When I revealed the horseshoe to them, they were mesmerized and utterly shocked that I had found such

a treasure. I did not have the heart to tell them they had all stepped over it as they searched for anything they could use.

I told the story of Bonnie Buckshire speeding through the very trails that we walked on to help an escapee flee to the North in the months before the Civil War. The idea was to spark their interest in history, fight for what is right, and help others whenever possible. I crafted the story around Bonnie to give my daughter a strong female character to associate with, and the beautiful horse she rode was a bonus. When the quickly constructed story finally drew to a close, I got immediate responses of, "Is that it? Is there more?" That is when I knew Bonnie Buckshire was a story I had to tell. The story needed to be fleshed out, but the time period felt right, and the overall theme seemed appropriate. I wanted the story to be local so my kids could read it and see the places around them. Historical fiction gave me the opportunity to tell the story in a setting that people are familiar with and the story could be paced off actual events.

Process for the Work

After ice cream, I immediately typed out all the details I could remember from my hastily told story. It was not much, but I had a setting and a main character with a purpose. I had never really plotted as a writer, but I had never undertaken such a monumental task either. Bonnie's story needed to be a full-length novel, and I was ill-prepared for that challenge. Fortunately for me, I was at the beginning stages of this degree. I used Bonnie as my writing project for every class I could, building her story and plotting her adventure one class at a time. Eventually, I stopped plotting twenty pages at a time and drew out the timeline from start to finish.

I had an idea and a rough timeline but lacked the in-depth knowledge to tell a story set in 1860 Tennessee. I visited historical plantations in Nashville and the surrounding areas. At each

location, I read about plantation life for enslaved people, poor whites, and wealthy plantation owners. With each visit, I was able to build my settings with more detail. Additionally, the voices of characters started to echo in my head as I could see and hear a host of individuals spill onto the page.

I tried to overlay Bonnie's life geographically on old maps I dug up online or in the local library. The boundaries of her world took shape once I knew the roads, trails, rivers, and railroads that connected the short distance between Clarksville and Nashville, the two cities in Tennessee. I researched steamboat speeds, the range of a well-kept horse, railroad routes, and speed in 1860 to determine how fast parts of her story could move.

I read nonfiction books by formerly enslaved people detailing tragic lives and miraculous escapes. Consistent themes started to repeat themselves, and I pulled them to help shape the story. The most consistent and essential theme was about faith in God. In a true demonstration of the duality of humanity, faith in God permeated the stories of enslaved people and enslavers alike. Because it was a complicated concept to reconcile, of course, I decided to include it in the book.

Vision for the Work

My vision for Bonnie Buckshire is that it becomes a novel people use to discuss the glory of God. Readers will encounter different viewpoints and arguments throughout the story about the Bible and God's infallible word. Bonnie's uncle will argue that the Bible supports slavery, and, of course, Bonnie will vehemently argue against that fallacy. I desire to write both sides of the argument with skill and authenticity. I feel comfortable taking on that challenge without concern about lending credence to the uncle's argument because it is profoundly wrong in every

way. However, I want to cause a visceral reaction in readers as they encounter the negative side of the arguments. The more a reader detests the words and thoughts of the enemy, the stronger the Gospel resounds.

The story will demonstrate layers of conflict between characters. In addition to fighting with her uncle, Bonnie will struggle against her aunt and the preconceived notions of how a "lady" should act. Additionally, her cousin and his friend group will show the difference between the Southern aristocracy and the humble life Bonnie was used to living. Despite Bonnie's best intentions, her personality and beliefs will clash with a young female slave she hopes to save. We live in a fallen world, and conflict is an inevitable part of life that I want to address in layers throughout the story.

I do not underestimate the challenge of the setting and the era in which the story takes place, given societies' desire to bury history and cancel anything that differs from the mainstream narrative. Considering the timeline and the location, it will be difficult to write situations, dialog, and general atmospherics without using language that is largely considered taboo in literature today. I envision writing in a way that many things are implied but not said and using alternative language that still conveys intent without employing traditional hateful wording.

I want to demonstrate that everyone has a missionary calling, whether it is sharing the Gospel in their school or traveling to distant lands. Making the protagonist a teenage female was not by accident. I created Bonnie specifically for my daughter to see a female character of strength and faith willing to share the Gospel even during an era when women had very few rights. It would have been much easier for me to write a story from the point of view of Billy Buckshire, but I do not think the message would have been as strong.

Despite the era and the locale, I do not envision Bonnie Buckshire as a novel about slavery. I will attempt to write that side of the story with integrity and candor, but in reality, the story is about the Gospel being delivered at a time when it was desperately needed. If Elisha Montgomery is the human antagonist, then slavery is the true evil that poisoned the minds and hearts of people who saw themselves as Christians. Conversely, if Bonnie is our heroine, she is really just the voice and demonstration of the Gospel, the true protagonist.

Literary Context for the Work

Historical fiction is an extremely popular genre without any signs of slowing down. Furthermore, there are novels that take place in the Antebellum South and carry a theme of Christianity and viewpoints on slavery. Bonnie Buckshire will fit into the genres of historical and Christian fiction.

The literary context of historical fiction is easy to envision. Bonnie's story takes place in Tennessee between 1860 and 1861, and it is mainly set on her uncle's plantation. There, Bonnie will struggle against what she knows to be wrong with all the chaotic events leading up to the Civil War playing out in the background. Although all my characters are fictional, they will have traits commonly identified in research of actual people. An example would be plantation owners in the greater Nashville, TN, area during the years leading up to the Civil War.

Christian concepts will be easy to see in the manuscript. I will play on man's fallible interpretation of God's infallible word to build tension in the differing sides of the story. It is not difficult to find examples of man's misrepresentation of the Bible to justify wicked desires. It is also not difficult to find examples of enslaved people leaning heavily on their faith in God to sustain them. Faith in Jesus Christ will be the underlying theme of the story.

A strong female character that breaks the typical mold of the era she is written in is not a new concept. Louisa May Alcott gave us Jo March in *Little Women*, in which “women around the world cite *Little Women* as the most treasured book of their childhoods” (Ross). I did not read *Little Women* until I begrudgingly acquiesced to my wife’s insistence, but I quickly recognized Alcott’s work as a masterpiece in characterization. Scout Finch from Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a great example of a young female character who breaks traditional expectations for the time and setting. I felt like Scout’s role played out beautifully in a setting where she could not possibly understand the immensity of the events happening around her. Margaret Mitchell’s beautifully written personality disorder, Scarlett O’Hara from *Gone with the Wind*, is almost the antithesis of Bonnie. Still, there is no doubt that Scarlett is a phenomenally written character. No other literary character has made me vacillate so much on my views toward them.

It is not lost on me that all my examples are written by female authors. Men have written many great female characters in literature as well. Donald McCaig wrote *Ruth's Journey: The Authorized Novel of Mammy from Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind*, which provides a great backstory of a beloved character. Pulitzer Prize winner Geraldine Brooks's review of *Ruth's Journey* states, “Exquisitely imagined, deeply researched . . . brings to the foreground the most enigmatic and fascinating figure in *Gone with the Wind*.” McCaig's depiction of Ruth continues Mitchell's great work but gives the character even greater depth and personality. In 2014, Anthony Doerr published *All the Light We Cannot See* and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. His novel takes place in France during World War II and follows Marie-Laure, a blind French girl, and Werner, a reluctant German soldier. Colson Whitehead blended historical fiction and fantasy in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Underground Railroad*. Colson adeptly crafted the story around a young female slave named Cora. All three of these male authors had well-crafted

female protagonists. The stories and characters that these authors wove together serve as inspiration for my story. The authenticity of their characters gives me a base of traits and flaws that I can emulate to add depth to the various people I am crafting.

The Significance of the Topic as a Christian Scholar

Bonnie Buckshire is extremely important to me as a Christian scholar. I want to write in a way that I can use my faith and knowledge as a centerpiece for engaging fiction. The themes I will draw on for the story are courage in the face of overwhelming adversity and trust as a biblical imperative.

Bonnie will demonstrate courage in the face of overwhelming adversity throughout the story. She outruns slave catchers, outwits her peers, and goes toe to toe with a domineering uncle. I want Bonnie to be the embodiment of Moses words before Israel crossed over the Jordan, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you" (New International Version, Deut 31:6). As a father, I want to craft Bonnie into a strong character that my teenage daughter can admire.

Trust is always essential and present everywhere, even if we do not think about it. When we step onto a plane, we trust that the pilots are qualified and capable, but more importantly, that we are in God's hands. We may trust a coworker to complete their task so that we can complete ours. We trust that our food will be safe from our favorite restaurant. In Bonnie's case, trust is just as prevalent, although it is demonstrated in different ways. She must trust her father when he gives her a task she does not fully understand. She must trust a slave-owning doctor will save her father's life and not turn him in for helping a runaway slave. She must trust an aunt that she does

not really like. Bonnie is continuously put into positions where she must trust someone else, and she can do so because she trusts in God. Throughout the story, Bonnie will lean on Proverbs 3:5-6, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." Courage and trust are extremely important to me as a believer, and I will integrate those biblical concepts throughout the book.

Critical Analysis Paper

Introduction

It is common for authors to be asked if they are qualified to write about a character of a different race or gender. Invested readers and publishers have little patience for authors who depict a character poorly, especially if the author is believed to be writing beyond their personal experience. Rightfully so, the publishers and literary agents are seeking marginalized authors to represent the voices of their communities, and they are encouraged to publish so the industry can mirror current/contemporary societal diversity. At the same time, authors who do not come from marginalized communities are questioned and even discouraged from having characters that differ in race and gender. Some of the common concerns over characterization manifest as male authors' objectification of female characters or female authors' depiction of male characters as unidimensional. In the case of writing across race, authors are frequently criticized for a lack of sensitivity, a superiority complex, or stereotyping. However, there are plenty of examples where authors understood the importance of authentic voice and overcoming their biases to create multidimensional characters, avoid stereotypes, and accurately represent the dynamics of real people. This paper will analyze and address common pitfalls that contribute to failures in characterization specific to race and gender. In addition, it will make recommendations to contribute to the discussion of characterization and how authors can improve their unique perspectives when writing. Authors of both genders and any race should strive to achieve effective characterization regardless of the character they are creating. To do so, authors must understand the challenges of authentic voice in characterization across races and genders.

What is Authentic Voice

To write with an authentic voice, authors must truly understand what an authentic voice means. Every writer, editor, literary agent, avid reader, and backseat driver has a different way of explaining what it means. Despite endless opinions, it does not mean one is correct and all the others are incorrect. Author, editor, and story consultant Peter Gelfan argues, "Even if readers

know nothing of the author's background, they feel they're listening to someone who knows what he's talking about, and that even if the story is fiction, it's true to life" (par. 5). Gelfan is clear that the writer's background should not be a deciding factor in the authenticity of a character's voice. In a *Writer's Digest* article, Brian Klems describes voice as "your personality coming through on the page, by your language use and word choice" (par. 1). In contrast to Gelfan, Klems sees authentic voice as focused on the writer and not the character. Similarly to Klems, K. M. Weiland states, "Your writing voice should be an honest representation of you." However, if an author writes a character completely different from themselves, Weiland's and Klem's explanations no longer apply. Gelfan's thoughts work better because they focus on the writer's ability to characterize effectively. His idea does not say that readers trust the piece of writing because they know the author is precisely like their protagonist or has something in common with every character they've created. Definitions of authentic voice are unclear or, at the very least, muddled, contradicting, and opinionated. The concepts of style, authentic voice, authorial voice, and characterization bleed over each other often.

The first step that authors must overcome is the realization that an authentic voice should reflect the character, not the author. For the purpose of this paper, authentic voice is defined as the believability of a character's actions, diction, accent, and mannerisms based on their cultural reality, completely independent of the author's personal experience or background. This assertion has the potential to rub advocates of "write what you know" the wrong way. If all writers were limited to writing what they know from their personal experience, the literature landscape would be as interesting as salt flats. Writers should be encouraged to get away from what they know and write what they can discover. That is not to say a writer should not write about a character that mimics them or their experience, but they should not be confined to that limitation.

An authentic voice does not reflect the character's integrity in the story but the believability of their mannerisms, dialogue, and actions for their age, education, setting, era, and so on. It is not the author's sameness with the protagonist that makes the character believable, but

the author's ability to effectively create. The key to effective character creation is by doing homework to discover what is realistic. An author can look at a believable character through what is probable and possible. Probable will take an author close to stereotypes but in a purposeful way. A middle-aged man in 1860 Tennessee probably thought and acted this way. The "probable" assessment can be based on societal norms and expected trends. In contrast, this middle-aged man in 1860 Tennessee possibly saw things differently and acted against normal behavior. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a great example of the probable versus the possible is Lee's character, Atticus Finch, set in 1933-35 Alabama. Finch, a well-meaning white lawyer, defends a black man named Tom Robinson, accused of the rape of a white woman. In real life, a lawyer named Samuel Leibowitz defended the "Scottsboro Boys," a group of nine African American teenagers accused of raping two white women in 1930s Alabama. What separates the probable from the possible? In the Scottsboro trial, no Southern white lawyers wanted to represent the young men or managed to withstand the pressure from their neighbors when they were appointed; Leibowitz was from New York. Lee examined the possible by making Finch a Southern lawyer who stood on his principles to defend Robinson regardless of the pressure and backlash that he faced. There are additional cases where white Southern lawyers defended black men or women in 1930s Alabama irrespective of the outcome, but it is not seen as the most probable situation. Is Finch any less believable because the author chose to break from societal norms? If Finch was not written effectively, the answer would probably be yes. However, Lee's characterization of Finch in dialogue, mannerisms, and dictation demonstrates her ability to write from a man's perspective.

Framing the Basic Problems

Margret Mitchell was not the swarthy Charlestonian blockade runner she adeptly crafted in *Gone with the Wind*. Likewise, Nathaniel Hawthorne was not a woman branded for adultery like Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. Harper Lee differed greatly from her docile Southern male lawyer in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Despite these authors being dissimilar to their characters, they created literary masterpieces. Similarly, Alex Haley created a litany of white characters in

Roots that were not dispelled as unauthentic. S.E. Hinton delivered a host of teenage boys in *The Outsiders* with accuracy. More recently, Kathy Wang resisted encouragement to make all her characters Asian in her book *Imposter Syndrome*. These authors strayed out of their race or gender with undeniable success. However, there are a few basic reasons why authors are unwilling to cross racial or gender boundaries in current literature.

It could be self-imposed imposter syndrome that results in a mindset that the writer cannot write something so different or possibly anything at all. Imposter syndrome is not unique to writing characters with authentic voices dissimilar to the writer, but it could still be a factor. An idea that feeds the imposter syndrome is the concern that if people look too closely, they will see the author does not match the character and could not possibly know how to write from that point of view. The internet abounds with suggestions on overcoming imposter syndrome: just write, believe in oneself, keep trying, be in a writer's group, and so on. However, if the feelings of imposter syndrome are related to the disparity between the author and their protagonist, what would the recommendations be then? The suggestion should be to continue to do research. Like anything else an author aspires to write, research is paramount. In *The Art of Creative Research: A Field Guide for Writers*, Gerard opines, "One of the great advantages of writing from research is that it frees us from the burden of our own self-consciousness" (16). Gerard inadvertently gives great advice for overcoming imposter syndrome. Conducting in-depth research should free the writer from the feelings of inadequacy in their knowledge and understanding of the character they are developing. In this context, the burden of self-consciousness is the feeling of being an imposter.

In close relation to imposter syndrome, a writer could be petrified by fear. Fear of rejection has been a dragon to slay since the dawn of publication. The fear of "cancellation" is the newest dragon to pop onto the scene. A segment of society today seems to believe the way to tolerance for all is to be intolerant of anyone who does something they do not like. CEO of Intrepid Literacy Lauren Shute penned an article acknowledging a few authors that have faced cancellation in recent years. Shute states that "author Amelie Wen Zhao was all set for her debut

novel, *Blood Heir*, to be published but withdrew the work just months before publication after critics who read the book pre-release called her depiction of slavery blatantly racist.” The dragon of cancel culture breathed a firestorm of negativity on social media in an attempt to burn *Blood Heir* and Zhao to the ground. To her credit, Zhao reevaluated her manuscript and made only minor alterations that she believed would improve the novel. She did not quit or relinquish her authority to the cancel culture mob. Despite the pushback and because of her ability to authentically create characters and situations, Zhao has published several books after *Blood Heir* and has seen significant success in the Young Adult genre.

In the last ten years, there has been a concept about who can write what in literature specifically, “author Corinne Duyvis began #OwnVoices to promote marginalized authors who were often incorporating their own realities into their books” (Raughley). This hashtag quickly worked its way into being a common publishing lexicon. The idea is that only marginalized authors should be allowed to write about marginalized characters. At the same time, nonmarginalized authors, who are primarily considered white, most likely heterosexual males, were condemned for not being diverse enough. This paradox still plagues the publishing world. Diversity is extremely important in literature, but authors should be evaluated by their writing, not their physical description.

There is an endless supply of issues associated with writing characters of diverse backgrounds that every writer must face. Imposter syndrome, cancellation, and the idea of benefiting from someone else's suffering, just to name a few. So, is it worth tap dancing on eggshells or, to be a little closer to the truth, land mines? That all depends on how much work the author is willing to put into the writing and how determined they are to tell the story. These struggles are not exclusive to writing characters of different races but also appear when writers create protagonists of the opposite sex.

Failures in Writing the Opposite Sex

There are plenty of examples of male and female authors writing a protagonist of the opposite sex successfully. Unfortunately, there are plenty of examples when opposite-sex characterization is done poorly as well. Male and female authors can focus on appearance over personality or fall prey to stereotypes. Any writing is subject to debate as to whether the author got the details correct when writing the opposite sex. In an essay on Men and Women Writing Women, researcher Cheryl Lange notes, "Men are capable of writing from the female perspective in a way that is accurate, respectful, and progressive. These male authors have strived to diminish gender roles and stereotypes by showing the ways in which women can be damaged by patriarchal societies and by creating positive female characters" (6). It is important to note that from Lange's perspective it is not only important to avoid stereotypes but to also combat them. Male authors that simply write around sensitive subjects are likely to be seen as avoiding issues and inadvertently condoning them. Male or female authors writing across genders must be cognizant of how their work will be perceived by either gender. It should go without saying, but it cannot, that regardless of gender, an author should be able to write from any perspective or point of view. However, there seems to be a plethora of pitfalls for a writer who does not do their homework when it comes to opposite-sex characterization.

The most common mistake male authors make when crafting female characters is overemphasizing physical descriptors. Male descriptors of women often translate as breast size, curvature of hips, waistline, or anything that can be written about a backside. These areas of overemphasis are not limited to romance novels but seem to work their way into every kind of story. An opinion piece by author Savannah Cordova states, "A lot of male authors seem to think that if they do not emphasize these things, the reader will forget that the character in question is female." The overuse of physical descriptors can be intentional or unintentional. A quote from Courtney Grable gives a reason for intentional objectification, "Humanity looks to the humanities to catch a glimpse of hope in the darkness of the human soul and what could be darker than the objectification of a person?" Grable's comment does not condone objectification,

but it does highlight why some male authors write female characters in an objectifying way. Male authors may use objectification purposefully because they have a specific target audience in mind or want a character to be seen a certain way. That is not to excuse the objectification; on the contrary, it is meant to call it out. Effective writers should recognize what they are writing and the impacts of their writing. Female authors can make errors in the same way, but they are usually presented differently. Male characters are often written with chiseled abs or a beer belly, piercing blue or soft brown eyes, and other cliché bodily descriptions. Generally, female author characterization based on appearance does not invoke the same level of ire as male-to-female objectification.

Stock characters are common in literature and other mediums of entertainment. The Oxford Reference Guide defines a stock character as "a stereotyped character easily recognized by readers or audiences from recurrent appearances in literary or folk tradition." Stock characters are generally background characters that fill secondary or tertiary roles or possibly the antagonist. However, the antagonist can be typecast as the quintessential "bad guy" but should also be nuanced in specifics of character development. Writers can start with a stock character strawman but must craft unique characteristics for originality. The real problem is when authors of either sex replace personality with appearance. A common complaint about poorly written characters is the lack of arc or simply being one-dimensional. Male authors write female characters as overly emotional; in contrast, female authors make male characters too emotionless.

Failures in Writing a Different Race/Ethnicity

Similar to writing characters of a different sex, creating characters of a different race can be problematic. There are reoccurring themes when authors fail to write a character of a different race or ethnicity effectively. A few areas are stereotypes, selecting the audience negligently, or following tropes generically. Maddie McCarthy, a staff writer for the *Minaret*, states, "Negligent writers can fall into writing stereotypes instead of writing some of their characters as actual human beings." McCarthy points out the fallacy of stereotypes that writers must understand, a

stereotype does not equal a human. Audience selection is an interesting challenge when writers want to market a book. Authors should seek an audience but must be careful not to be too narrow. Tropes go hand in hand with stereotypes and frequently cause issues for writers. These issues create problems when writers of one race cross over to develop characters of a different race.

A discussion about writing across races would be incomplete without addressing the concept of the "White Savior Complex." The idea of the "White Savior Narrative has been an ongoing trope in literature and film, featuring a heroic white character that swoops in to save a POC [Person of Color] from their circumstances" (Boyle). The Goodreads website has a "White Savior Books" list. A few novels listed are Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*, and *Wade in the Water* by Nyani Nkrumah. White female authors wrote the first two examples; the third is by an African American female author. In an interview about her debut book, Nkrumah states, "I wanted to make it less obvious about color — so we do have 'good' people across the board." There are white and black characters in *Wade in the Water*, and Nkrumah does an exceptional job of writing people despite some traits being recognizable as stereotypes. Despite the book getting a white savior narrative label, Nkrumah uses the trope effectively to propel her story but ultimately turns it upside down. Kathrine St James was the would-be white savior and seemed to be doing things with altruistic intent, but late in the book, Nkrumah revealed flaws in St James that stifled the trope. Nkrumah succeeded in developing authentic characters because she made them dynamic but true to speech and mannerisms for the location and time.

If an author is writing for a specific audience, they are choosing to set a condition where they could create friction with people outside that audience. That does not mean a romance novelist should not write to the reader who favors romance novels, or a fantasy writer should not write to fans of that specific genre. The problem occurs when a writer intentionally or inadvertently writes to an audience based on race. Writers are trained or encouraged to write for a specific audience all the time. In a Masterclass article, the website states, "When reflecting on

your intended audience, consider factors such as age, geographic location, culture, and education.” In other words, an author should identify the demographic that will consume their writing. In all fairness, the article references writing articles, research papers, or books. There is nothing wrong with an author knowing their audience and writing to a specific age or reading level. If writing a middle school book, the author should use appropriate words for that age level. However, using "culture" as a deciding factor for an audience is dangerous. Webster's dictionary defines culture in this context as "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group" ("Culture"). In social sciences, culture can be defined in many ways to fit the associated study, which can cause it to be misleading as a measure for writing. It is unlikely that Masterclass encourages writers to select their audience based on race, but the vagueness of the advice in "Write to a specific audience" is dangerous. Selecting a target audience based on that criteria fuels the debate that one race should not write another. Character development must expand beyond a specific target audience because the material is not limited to the strawman reader identified in the writer's head.

It is important to recognize speech patterns when writing characters of different races or backgrounds. An author's attempts to write the colloquial, conversational tones they perceive as indicative of a certain race in a specific time period or location can be extremely detrimental to their credibility and highlight racial undertones in their work. However, writing every character with impeccable grammar and elocution would be bland and unauthentic. In a study on *Dialect and Narrative in the Victorian Novel*, the author, Susan Ferguson, points out another issue. "There is no denying that there are insoluble technical problems in using any kind of non-standard orthography in a novel; literacy dialect can, at best, provide only a rough approximation of the sounds of actual speech to the reader, and efforts to capture a precise idea of the sound through extensive use of non-standard spellings may frustrate, rather than inform, readers" (Ferguson 4). Authors want to be authentic without coming across as racist and without frustrating their readers. There is no clear-cut answer on how to achieve success. However, all things in moderation could be a start. Again, research is the key to authentic writing, especially in dialogue and dialect. Books or newspaper articles written during the selected era and location

are a start, but they will lack the diversity of dialect needed for a host of characters. If the era is before voice recordings were available, then personal letters or accounts unchanged by editing or paraphrasing is essential. Having examples of the targeted dialect is the starting point, but it should not be the license to mimic exactly. The author should use colloquial spelling to denote the difference in speech but not to the point it is overwhelming. Additionally, authors must be careful not to fuel stereotypes by making all characters of a certain race speak in a degrading manner. Authors can inject colloquial speech intermittently without making it overwhelming.

Instead of an author deciding what their audience should be, they should attempt to build characters that fit into the demographic that the character belongs to appropriately. Writers can and should do extensive research to understand what and who they write about. Additionally, they should build a character's traits off a real person to avoid stereotypes. After the author believes they've created the perfect facsimile of a real person, they should hand it to a sensitivity reader. The concept of sensitivity readers is not new, and the professional services are not cheap. Sensitivity readers are used to catch material that could potentially be considered offensive, so they go beyond your average beta reader. A sensitivity reader should be a professional versus a beta reader friend to prevent feedback from returning as a personal attack.

The Psychology of Building Characters

Writers are human (artificial intelligence is not a writer but a program) and are subject to how the human brain works. Individuals make quick decisions and methodically thought-out decisions every day. In his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman defines two systems of thinking, “System One operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control” (20). For example, if a person sees a picture of a woman screaming, mental shortcuts allow the viewer to quickly assess that the person in the picture is angry or belligerent. Thinking quickly is a normal part of any person's daily activities; these mental shortcuts prevent paralysis by analysis as the brain operates promptly without unnecessary delays. Kahneman continues, “System two allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations” (21). The second system operates when the viewer examines

that same picture of the woman screaming and searches for details. The background of the picture is the nuanced details in the woman's eyes or the curvature of her facial muscles. This way of thinking takes longer and requires more processing power and time. The details could confirm the system one belief that she is angry or reveal she is at a sporting event and screaming for a different reason. Both systems are a necessary part of life, but system one is a matter of mental heuristics that can lead writers down a dangerous path. Psychology Today states, "A heuristic is a mental shortcut that allows an individual to make a decision, pass judgment, or solve a problem quickly and with minimal mental effort." Writers generally understand this failure as stereotyping a character. However, that is an oversimplification and much more dangerous than one expects. All writing is rewriting, and authors frequently go through many drafts before they come to a finished product. Stereotyping a character is obviously bad unless the author wants that character to be the stereotypical representation of their desired target. Stereotyping ancillary characters is not uncommon and is generally designed to fill space and move the story forward. Writers get into trouble by stereotyping primary characters or, even worse, entire people groups.

Writers who stereotype characters are acting off a bias about what that character represents, whether it is based on gender or race. Writers must work to identify their biases and understand where the biases come from to address them effectively. In the book *Lives Across Cultures*, the authors explain human development as "changes in physical, psychological, and social behavior as experienced by individuals across the lifespan from conception to death" (Gardiner and Kosmitzki 4). Understanding their "human development" is essential for any author to see where they have developed biases. Anyone who fails to admit they have biases should probably not try to write a character that differs from them in gender, race, or age.

As mentioned, Kahneman's "system one" leads to quick decisions generally based on biases from an outside perspective because the author's human development is entirely different from the character they are writing. Authors are typically great observers and will study a subject extensively before they try to write anything down. The problem occurs when the author fails to

understand that they are observing based on different developments, and regardless of intent, they are seeing things through "me" colored glasses. The author sees the situation the only way they can, through their eyes, with their own experiences influencing what they see.

So, if an author can only see something through their biases, how are they supposed to write a character of a different race, gender, or age? The author must stop worrying about what they see and start thinking about how people see themselves and what other people see. Characters should always be based on individuals and not groups or types of people. That does not mean characters should be exact replicas of an actual person, but characteristics should come from real life. If a male author is writing a female protagonist, who is he using as the basis of the character? If the answer is "general knowledge" of women or "personal observations," then the characterization will inevitably display that author's biases.

Conclusion

Writers of any race or gender should not be limited to their own human experiences. There is no magic formula to writing that will make everyone happy all the time. However, there are ways writers can and should improve in authenticity. Research is the crucial element to authentic writing, not sameness. However, a writer crossing a boundary of race or gender will have to invest more time and energy into research to ensure they effectively characterize their protagonist or antagonist. Authors should understand authentic voice as the believability of a character's actions, diction, accent, and mannerisms based on their cultural reality, utterly independent of the author's personal experience or background. With that definition in mind, developing a character with an authentic voice becomes a challenge to the writer's creativity versus a challenge to the writer's racial or gender reality. Imposter syndrome is a condition of self-confidence and less of a matter of ability for new and seasoned writers. The only way to overcome imposter syndrome is to conduct extensive research on the subject matter to build the self-reassurance they are qualified to write. The acute stress response, also known as fight or flight, "refers to a physiological reaction that occurs in the presence of something that is terrifying, either mentally or physically" (The American Institute of Stress). Cancel culture is the

faceless mob that rails against anything it does not like and attempts to ruin people from all walks of life, including authors. It is natural for writers to fear this bully, but when the acute stress response is triggered, it is better to fight versus flee. If allowed to be a bully, the mob will continue to bully whenever possible. Often, the bully invokes the "own voices" movement and bemoans appropriation, but in the next breath, will condemn for a lack of diversity. Male writers must avoid objectifying female characters, and female authors should avoid making the men they write unidimensional. Both male and female authors can be successful by avoiding stereotypes, not replacing personality with appearance, and making characters dynamic instead of flat. Writing characters of a different race requires similar attention to detail. Stereotypes frequently present as an issue and should be avoided unless the author wants to represent a trait of the character purposefully. A character that is a complete stereotype will likely not be received well, but a character with some stereotypical behavior can represent social norms. Writers should write what they have the talent and capacity to research and mold into authentic characterization regardless of their differences.

Successful characterization across race and gender depends mainly on research, but it does not end there. Authors can do extensive research and still use commonly observed themes to stereotype any race or either gender. In addition to research, authors must move past system one thinking and create from a system two point of view. To work from a system two mindset authors first must acknowledge biases. They must recognize the biases of the material and their biases in reading the material. Each person has a collection of life experiences that will shade their view on subjects. It would be ridiculous to argue otherwise. At first glance, the personal lens or biases can make authors stereotype as a part of system one thinking. Authors must interpret how characters are viewed from different perspectives. If they are modeling a character from a historical figure, authors should examine how opponents and supporters viewed that individual. Only by recognizing the complicated nature of human perceptions can authors develop well-rounded, dynamic characters. A 2022 study on bias in creative writing indicates that "biases are often implicit and unconscious and difficult to wheedle out even for the best and most self-reflective of authors (Hoque et al. 2). The authors of the study developed a visual text analytics

program to help writers identify biases; however, the AI program is not yet available and has no known release date. Currently, writers must acknowledge their biases and ensure they search for them in their writing. Sensitivity readers can also help writers identify issues before they go to publication. If authors conduct in depth research examining situations and characters from multiple perspectives, they can mitigate some biases. Unfortunately, human nature is inherently flawed, so research and good intentions will not resolve all instances of bias. Writers must analyze how characters fit into the story, what role they play, the descriptors used for the character, and the characteristics in diction, mannerisms, accents, and dialogue. These things are common for skilled writers to examine; however, the writer must conduct this analysis with their biases in mind. Only by accepting and addressing biases can authors overcome the challenges of authentic voice in characterization across race and gender.

Bonnie Buckshire

Chapter 1: The Long Night

Bonnie never slept well when she was alone in the small two-room cabin. Her prayers for sleep usually went unanswered until late into the night. It's not that she was afraid; not much scared her, but she missed her father greatly when he was away. It was just the two of them, and life felt harder over the last few years.

Bonnie thought about her mother and tried to picture the bright, smiling face that always warmed her heart. No matter how hard Bonnie tried, all she could see was her mother's pale blue eyes struggling against the cancer that withered her away. Bonnie's cheeks flushed in anger despite the chill in the air. Sleep lurched further and further away as the feeling of being powerless nagged at her.

Reverend Emmitt Buckshire took the loss of his wife extremely hard. Many of the townspeople thought that was why he gave up his congregation and started to serve as a minister to families farther away. Bonnie knew that wasn't why her Papa didn't have a congregation anymore. Anger crept over her like descending darkness as she pictured all the faces that forced him out. She could see the sweat and anger on Emmitt's face as he preached against the sin of slavery. The thought of the silent congregation still gave her chills. No one said a word, nothing. They just left him standing at the end of the sermon, unsure if anyone had heard him. She felt that loneliness now as she kicked her quilt off the bed and pulled herself to a seated position. As quickly as the moment she first closed her eyes, sleep had slipped away. Resigned to getting up, she grabbed her leather bond bible and rolled out of bed.

The fire crackled as she tossed on another log to rekindle the dying embers. A chill filled the cabin as she prodded the burning logs. The sound of the stoked fire echoed in the small space as the autumn wind seeped through every crack in the cabin walls. She enjoyed the noise of life and nature but could do without the silence.

As she pulled her chair closer to the fire, the door to the cabin burst open so hard it rattled everything in the small space. Bonnie grabbed the iron poker for the fire and swung it around to fight whatever she saw. A single monstrous silhouette crowded the doorway against the fire's unsteady light. Bonnie's heart pounded from shock as her eyes focused.

"Bonnie!" Emmitt's ragged voice called out.

The light caught up to sound as Emmitt stumbled into the cabin, supported by a dark-skinned woman. Bonnie's surprise was painted all over her face as she tried to make sense of the scene. Emmitt's windblown hair jaunted off in every direction, and his tattered coat looked like it had been dragged through a pasture. He grimaced as he tried to stand erect. Bonnie stared at Emmitt's face and the young woman who held him upright, unable to notice anything else.

"He's been shot," said the woman as she struggled to bear his weight.

Bonnie rushed forward to grab Emmitt's free arm as they lowered him into an old, rickety chair at the table. Bonnie looked down to see his lower leg soaked with blood.

"Bonnie, get the bandages." Emmitt's voice seemed steadier now. His hand shook as he pulled a small clasp knife from his pocket. "Miss, I'm going to need you to cut the pants down the side, please."

Bonnie was back with the bandages by the time the young woman had cut the trousers open.

“Well, that’s not good,” Emmitt tried to smile through the pain.

Bonnie looked at the wound and saw a small opening in the back of his leg, bleeding steadily. "Not good! You’ve been shot." Bonnie railed, "And all you can say is it's not good!"

"It didn't come out, so it's still in there. I think it shattered the bone." Emmitt tried not to grimace, but his face was awash with pain.

"Papa, what’s going on?" Bonnie's voice trembled as she asked. Her brow furrowed as she focused on the scene. Her father shot, a scared black woman, and blood. So much blood. A thousand assumptions raced through her head, and her body began to tremble. Bonnie hated to display emotion, but she could not control it, which made her mad.

"Alright, Bonnie. I’ll talk while you wrap that wound up. Tightly, if you please,” said Emmitt.

Bonnie looked at their pitiful bandages, used for blisters on their hands or minor cuts gained during the harvest. She grabbed the pocketknife off the table and raced back to her room. She hesitated only a moment before she snatched the dress from the hook and slid the knife through the fabric. Bonnie could see her mother’s pale blue eyes smiling. Bonnie remembered twirling in the beautiful dress just two years ago as her mother watched. The dress wasn’t important. The memory of her mother would endure without the white cotton dress. She walked toward her father as she cut more strips.

“Start talking, Papa.” She watched his face as she poured clean water over the wound.

"When I told you I was ministering to the needy, I've been helping runaways make it to the north," Emmitt said.

"You've been lying to me!" The tone of her voice was sharper than she'd ever spoken to her father. Bonnie felt betrayed, and anger boiled just under the surface.

"Of course not. Can you think of anyone needier than someone running for their life?" The question hung in the air. Bonnie's shoulders dropped in shame.

"Your mother and I joined a group of like-minded people that know slavery is a sin," he continued. "We could not stop it, but we could fight against it. Your mother was actually the catalyst for the whole venture. Before she died, she made me promise not to stop until the world came to its senses and every man or woman could enjoy the freedom the Lord intended."

Bonnie stared dumbfounded at her father. She tried to imagine her sweet mother being the ringleader of anything other than a sewing circle. It didn't fit, but Bonnie wanted to know more. She needed to know more; if there was more to her mother, she had to know it. She wrapped Emmitt's leg as tightly as possible while he talked occasionally. She glanced at the young woman who paced back and forth from the fire to the door.

Bonnie focused on her father as he spoke. The cadence of Emmitt's voice wavered as he winced in pain. She tried to imagine her mama and papa sneaking off in the middle of the night to help runaways. She didn't dare let her imagination roam too far as she soaked in everything Emmitt said. She knew slavery was wrong; her mother ensured Bonnie knew how awful it was as far back as she could remember. She realized how dangerous it was to act on that belief as she wrapped the wound on Emmitt's leg.

"Papa, I need to go get Doctor Bagwell." Bonnie's voice regained her usual confidence.

“No, my dear, not yet. I need you to get Ruth to the cave just south of Wickman's farm. You know the one. Get her there to hide out during the day. I need you to saddle up Sango and take her now.”

“She’s too young,” Ruth said. “I can't wait. I will go on my own.” Ruth's voice trembled. “I can't stay here any longer. I need to go. I have to go.”

“Bonnie is the best rider in the county,” Emmitt said. “And she can do it.” He sat up straight while he spoke. “If you set out on your own, they will catch you. If they catch you, and they will, then they'll catch me, and I'll hang. If that is what the Lord has in mind for me, then so be it. But that will leave Bonnie all alone.” Emmitt glanced at Bonnie. “I'd rather not have that just yet. I need you to trust me a little longer.”

Bonnie watched as Ruth continued to pace between the fire and the door. The young woman's eyes were wide, and her jaw clenched. Bonnie knew Ruth was scared and had every right to be terrified, but there was work to be done. Bonnie nodded at Emmitt as she went into her room long enough to slip out of her nightgown. She emerged wearing old trousers and a dusty, long-sleeve shirt. Bonnie grabbed her boots and headed for the door, sliding them on as she reached the threshold.

She almost ran into Atlas, her father's tall white horse, as she turned the corner toward the barn. Bonnie grabbed the reins and pulled the giant beast into the barn. Her breath billowed in the cold air as she opened Sango's stall.

"Let's go, boy. We've got work to do." Bonnie tacked up the black colt and led him out of the barn. She didn't bother to close Atlas' stall fully in her hurry. She wrapped the reins around the post at the front of the cabin.

Ruth jumped when Bonnie burst back through the door. Bonnie didn't slow down as she strode across the floor. She ducked into the small side room for a split second before emerging with a jacket in hand.

"Put this on. It's cold out there." Bonnie said as she tossed the jacket to Ruth and squared up in front of her father. "Papa, I'll get her there, and then I'm going straight to Doctor Bagwell."

"You have about three hours before sunrise. Don't get Bagwell until the sun is up. You tell him I hurt my leg badly, and it's bleeding. If he asks questions, just tell him you don't know anything else." Emmitt left no room for questions. "Now come here, the both of you."

Ruth eased over beside Bonnie.

"Lord, please grant your servants traveling mercies and a hedge of protection," Emmitt prayed. "Now go. Take the backtrails and stay off the main road."

Bonnie kissed her father on the forehead and turned for the door. Ruth was two steps ahead of Bonnie and looked like she wanted to run off into the darkness.

"This is Sango. He'll get us to the cave." Bonnie said as she mounted the colt and pulled Ruth up behind her.

Bonnie was surprised at how little Ruth weighed. Ruth looked to be in her early twenties, but she was only slightly taller than Bonnie and weighed less. Despite Ruth's gaunt physique, her calloused hands felt like two vises on Bonnie's arms. Ruth squeezed as Sango turned away from the cabin.

Bonnie put her heels to Sango, and the colt started to trot. "We have about four miles of back trails to get near the cave, then another half mile of brush to get to the cave. Anyone not

from the area will stick to the main road. If we avoid that, we'll be okay." Bonnie tried to convince herself as she spoke to Ruth.

Ruth's grip on Bonnie's arms said everything that needed to be said. Bonnie decided to keep her further reassurances to herself.

Early autumn clouds covered the sky and spread darkness over everything. Moon rays occasionally found gaps to cast light onto the landscape, but it was sparse at best. A dense tangle of trees shadowed the narrow trail and kept out what little light made it through the clouds. Bonnie slowed Sango to a walk as they made their way onto the narrow trail and into the darkness.

Ruth's grip tightened at the change in pace. "Why are you slowing down?" Ruth said in a hoarse whisper. "Don't slow down. We have to go." Ruth squeezed tighter.

"If I run Sango now when we can't see, he'll throw a shoe, or worse, throw us. This trail is not the main way for a reason. There are logs, roots, rocks, and every other obstacle to hurt a horse. If he gets hurt, we're as sure as caught."

Bonnie and Sango navigated the trail more by memory than sight. They moved in unison through the narrow turns and slowly negotiated every obstacle on the path.

"Who shot my father?"

Ruth's grip loosened as she took a deep breath. "Catchers. They started chasing me before I made it to where I was supposed to meet your father. They must have been waiting for me or someone else to run. I didn't make it far before I heard the horses behind me. They started

shooting at me before I crossed an old fallen tree over the river to get to your father. A few men on horseback shot at us.”

Bonnie felt the circulation return to her arms as Ruth relaxed behind her. She wanted to say something to comfort Ruth but couldn't think of anything helpful. Bonnie couldn't know what Ruth's life was like, and to assume would have been a great insult. Bonnie had minimal contact with slaves, except the few times she visited her aunt and uncle many years ago in Nashville, long before her mother got sick. She wanted Ruth to be comfortable with her but knew the terrified woman had no reason to trust her. As Sango slowly moved forward, Bonnie realized she was really just trying to make herself comfortable. Nothing made sense. She had imagined her family helping runaways before, but never imagined so much blood.

Bonnie turned her attention back to Ruth as the young woman broke the silence. "Your father is a kind man," Ruth said. "When I was told I could escape, I didn't want to believe it. Having hope is dangerous. It hurts more when things don't change."

Silence settled between them, which made the night feel colder to Bonnie.

“When I found out I was going to be sold to another plantation. I had to run,” Ruth’s voice burned with anger. “Just meat. That is all I am to them—meat to be traded, sold, or given away. I know what happens on that plantation, and it won't happen to me. I'll kill myself before I let that happen.”

Bonnie felt warmth on her cheek, but the tears quickly cooled in the October air. She raised a hand to wipe the tears away, but it was no use as the steady flow ran down her face. Bonnie felt sick to her stomach as she shifted in the saddle.

"When I was told someone would help me escape, I didn't believe it," Ruth said as her voice seemed less tense. "I was afraid it was a trap, but someone I trusted promised it would be okay."

Bonnie could tell Ruth chose her words carefully. "Who came to you about escape?" Bonnie asked.

"No. I won't tell you or anyone else that ever. I made a promise, and I'll keep it until I die." Ruth took a deep breath. "I was told to meet a man north of the plantation where the river bends like a snake. I was terrified no one would be there, but he was there with that big old white horse."

Bonnie listened as she navigated Sango down the narrow trail. Her attention split between Ruth and the darkness. She tried to imagine the fear Ruth had to overcome to trust a stranger. Much less that there would be another stranger there to help her.

"How did my father know to be there?" Bonnie asked.

"I don't know," Ruth replied. "Even if I did know, I wouldn't say. If I did, I could ruin the chances of anyone else escaping, and I won't do that."

Bonnie was grateful for the dark night, but it forced her to go much slower than she wanted. She needed to know more, so much more. She had to know how her papa knew to be there. Papa. He was back in the cabin, a bullet in his leg. He needed the doctor, and there she was going painfully slow down the trail. She redirected her focus on the path and kicked Sango a little to speed him up.

Bonnie rode this trail so often that she knew every twist and turn. In daylight, she and Sango would be at a steady gallop. The south side of the Smith cornfield would appear soon, and she could make up some time in the open field, but something didn't feel right. Something was off.

"Do you smell that?" Ruth asked in a hushed tone, her words barely audible over the wind.

A fire. The scent of burning leaves was in the air, but Bonnie could not tell where it was coming from at first. Then she saw the soft glow of light in the distance. There was definitely a fire up ahead. Sango eased to a halt as Bonnie pulled on the reins. She couldn't see the fire directly, just the light it cast on the tree branches above. It had to be a small fire, but it was there.

"We need to get down quietly and walk him until we can see what's ahead," Bonnie said as she twisted in the saddle to help Ruth down. To her surprise, Ruth didn't protest and eased off Sango as quietly as she could. Bonnie stepped down and rubbed Sango's nose as she led him forward.

As they crept along, the light increased a little through the thick trees. The wind carried voices between the rustle of dried leaves. Bonnie stopped and stood perfectly still as she tried to hear the conversation.

"We wasted too much time," Ruth said. "The catchers have gotten in front of us. I can't. I won't..."

Bonnie placed a hand on Ruth's shoulder and pulled her close to her face. Bonnie looked at Ruth and whispered, "Shhh, we must know what is out there." Bonnie continued to listen as the voices chattered in the distance.

"I know those voices," Bonnie whispered. "They're local boys a little older than me. I imagine they're out for a hunting trip. This cornfield was just harvested, so deer will be coming around for the corn that's left. They're not catchers, but we can't let them see us, either."

Bonnie knew the boys wouldn't hesitate to chase them down if they saw someone on the Smith farm. There was no way to explain why she was out in the middle of the night, much less with a slave they knew she didn't own.

"We can't go any further this way," Bonnie said as she turned Sango around.

"Can't we just go around them?" Ruth asked.

Bonnie thought about her options. Regardless of how she skirted the cornfield, the boys would see or hear them. The woods around the field were too thick to walk Sango through. She didn't like it, but she knew it was their only option.

"Beside that great big oak we just passed, there is a small trail that leads out to the main road," Bonnie said. "It is..."

"No! No, your daddy said not to go on the main road for any reason..." Ruth protested.

An uproar of laughter came from the boys. "I done told you. I'd whip Dewey any day of the week. He ain't nothing without his badge," a twangy voice boasted.

"Shoot, you couldn't do no such thing. Besides, Dewey's ain't so bad," replied a second voice.

"Dewey's a mutt, and you're an idiot if you think you could take him. He's got 40 pounds on you. Now, Giv'me that bottle," bellowed a third voice.

"We have to go that way. If Papa were here, he would make the same decision," Bonnie said and hoped it was true. All she knew was they couldn't go straight, and the woods were too thick to go east. "If we take the main road, we will get around this farm and across the river, which would be a problem anyway. There are no houses on this stretch of road, and we can use the Pierson Bridge. We can turn onto the back trail again when we're over the bridge. Plus, we can make up time on the open road."

"I don't like it," Ruth whispered.

"Me either, but it is our only chance of getting you to the cave before sunrise." Bonnie stepped carefully over branches and fallen leaves. Ruth followed reluctantly.

Bonnie led Sango back to the giant oak and turned onto the tiny trail that cut west. It was barely wider than a deer trail. Branches from both sides of the trail stretched over to obstruct their progress, but she knew the main road wasn't far. So, they pressed on.

Bonnie glanced through the canopy of branches above her to locate the cloud-covered moon. Its faint glow showed it would set soon, and then the real dark of night would arrive before dawn. *Lord, please disperse the clouds and give us light to guide our way. Please show me the path so I can lead Ruth to safety.* No stars broke through to light the path. Bonnie lowered her head to focus and pushed forward on the overgrown trail. Bonnie pulled Sango along as she pushed branches aside so they wouldn't hit him in the face. Every now and then, she looked around Sango to make sure Ruth was still followed safely behind the colt. Bonnie tried hard not to picture her papa covered in blood alone in the cabin, but that seemed to be the only thought available. She focused on her task to no avail and always came back to the thought of the pain in his eyes. No matter how many times she shook the thought off, it returned.

Bonnie followed the trail around a sturdy cedar and found herself beyond the edge of the wood line just off the road. She stopped and tried to back up to the cover of the cedar. A burst of fear hit her then she was flush with irritation. She had let her mind wander and walked into the open without a thought. "Stupid," she chided herself as Ruth stepped next to her.

"What is it?" Ruth asked.

"Nothing, I just wasn't paying attention," Bonnie whispered as she tried to calm herself. "We're at the road. We just need to saddle up and head north. But first, I want to listen for a minute."

They stood silently in the bows of the cedar. They listened to the wind blow through the leaves. The trail came out in a small dale nestled neatly in a saddle of the road. The incline of the road obscured her line of sight to the north and the south. Minimal light escaped from behind the clouds and gave the terrain an ominous look.

"Alright, let's go," Bonnie said. "We can make up some time and duck off the road as soon as we get across the bridge."

Bonnie didn't give Ruth time to respond as she swung her leg over Sango and adjusted herself in the saddle. Bonnie pulled Ruth up and turned the colt north. She started Sango at a trot. She could only push him so hard before he became exhausted. The young colt was sturdy but could be temperamental when tired. She needed Sango to have enough energy to make the entire trip. She still had to get to the doctor and back to the cabin as soon as possible. She had never asked so much from the colt.

Bonnie focused on the road ahead as they crested the first hill. An endless supply of rolling hills stretched out in front of them. Bonnie knew the road would be easy to travel and

faster than the back trails, but they were exposed. Bonnie fidgeted in the saddle; the fear of catchers behind her drove her to look over her shoulder every few steps.

Ruth's hands rested on Bonnie's waist as Sango trotted. "We need to get off this road," Ruth said.

"The bridge is still a ways ahead of us, and if we can make it there, the rest of the way is easy," Bonnie replied.

She eased back on the reins to let Sango walk up the next hill. Clouds dissipated, and stars started to dot the canopy of the dark sky. The stars didn't provide much light, but Bonnie was happy to see them. Her body eased in the saddle as Sango reached the top of the hill. Bonnie loved Sango's easy gait; she was more comfortable on his back than anywhere else in the world.

Bonnie flinched as a flash of pain against her ribs took her breath away.

"Bonnie, torches!" Ruth rasped.

Bonnie turned Sango to get a look. Two hills back, she could see several torches moving quickly over the top of the hill.

"Hold on tight." Bonnie swung Sango around and pressed herself forward in the saddle. The heels of her boots thudded into Sango's side as the colt took off. She could feel Ruth's cheek against her back as Sango built up to a full run.

There was no way the riders didn't see them; she had allowed herself to be silhouetted against the sky at the top of the hill. "So stupid," she muttered through gritted teeth. She couldn't turn to look, but she knew the riders would be running as well.

Bonnie thought about the distance to the bridge and knew they would never make it. Full-grown stallions or mares would run down a colt with two riders any day. Turtle Creek trail was her only hope.

She could hear the hoof beats of their pursuers when she turned off the main road. With any luck, the riders didn't see them turn and would continue toward the bridge. Turtle Creek trail wasn't as narrow as the backtrails but wasn't as open as the road. More importantly, the path was clear so she could run Sango, but someone unfamiliar with the area would have to go slow.

Bonnie kept Sango at a steady run on the trail, taking turns as fast as she could. Ruth's grip made it difficult to breathe, but Bonnie asked, "Did they follow us?" She could feel Ruth's head lift off of her back.

"I can see the torches," Ruth said as she returned her face to Bonnie's back.

What do I do? I can't outrun them; even if I could, it would be in the wrong direction.

Bonnie pictured the trail in front of her and all the possibilities. Eventually, the trail would run parallel to the river, but then it turned southeast. *The river is our only chance.*

She needed more separation to make it work. The reins slapped against Sango's neck as Bonnie leaned as far forward as she could. The sandy trail almost glowed in the starlight. Sango's hooves beat the trail faster than she ever pushed him at night. She knew every turn before they reached it. The ability to anticipate the twists gave her the upper hand she needed.

Bonnie glanced over her shoulder to see their distance from the torch lights. She couldn't help but grin at the separation Sango created. Her grin quickly disappeared as she turned just in time for a low-hanging branch to slap her across the cheek. Her head jolted back and almost dislodged her from the saddle. Ruth's head pressed firmly against her back was the only thing

that kept Bonnie on the colt. Bonnie shook her head to clear the fog and pulled herself upright in the saddle. The night's cold air could not quell the heat she felt on her cheek. She shook her head again.

Bonnie closed her right eye to fend off her blurred vision. Her eye watered, and she dared not reach up to wipe it away; she needed both hands on the reins. The right side of her face pulsed, the throbbing stretched from her jawline all the way above her eye. Bonnie gritted her teeth and tried to ignore the pain.

Sango slowed his response to her commands for turns, but they stayed on the trail, and she hoped ahead of the torches. She gripped the reins tighter as she tried to turn the horse, but he resisted for a second before he responded. She knew they were in trouble if she was out of rhythm with Sango, but the horse kept them on the trail.

“Can you swim?” Bonnie asked over her shoulder.

She knew their only opportunity to get away from the catchers was coming soon, and she needed to know if it could work.

“Yes,” Ruth replied.

“Crossing the river is our only chance,” Bonnie said. “When we get in the water, we'll just float so we don't weigh Sango down. Just hold on tight to me, and I'll hold on to the saddle.”

“No... No, I can't,” Ruth's voice trembled.

“We have to. You have to trust me. We can do it.” Bonnie shot back over her shoulder.

A fog hung over the river as the trail turned parallel to it. Bonnie could see the river about six feet below the bank but couldn't see the far bank in the dark. She hoped the torches wouldn't make it any easier to see the far side.

The trail dipped into a ditch, and Bonnie eased up on the reins. Sango slowed to a walk as she turned him off the trail toward the river. Within a few steps, the horse was knee-deep.

"Hold on tight and close your eyes. And no matter what, don't make a sound," Bonnie said. She looked back down the trail as they walked into the river. The glow of the torches still lit up the trees down the path, but they weren't close yet.

Bonnie gasped as the water hit her legs—a wave of cold shot through her body. Between the cold and Ruth's grip, she could barely breathe. The cold crept up her legs and made her forget about the pain in her cheek. Sango hesitated until she squeezed her legs tighter around him. They pressed forward into the river.

Bonnie could feel Ruth struggle for breath against her back. The water washed over the saddle and submerged them from the waist down. Sango kicked furiously as he lost traction on the muddy river bottom. The black colt thrust forward. His strength jerked the two riders along with him. Sango's hooves touched the bottom again as they cleared the center part of the river.

Bonnie glanced down the path. The torchlight glowed brighter against the trees, and if it weren't for Ruth's panicked breath, she would have heard the horses' hooves on the trail. They made their way toward the bank. Every step took them further out of the cold water into the frigid night air. Bonnie managed to get herself in the saddle and pulled Ruth up behind her again. Bonnie slapped the reins to get Sango to the shoreline. She just needed a few steps more to be in the brush. The torchlight lit up the far bank.

The flames flickered over the bushes between the trail and the river. Bonnie watched as she reined Sango to a halt up against the brush. The torches descended into the ditch. Bonnie held her breath and prayed her ruse worked. It was dark, so maybe they missed Sango's prints. Lots of people use this trail, so perhaps they'll follow some old tracks. Surely, no one would be stupid enough to turn into the river; she willed them to believe.

The torches started up the incline and continued down the trail. The light faded into the distance, and she gasped for fresh air.

“It worked,” Bonnie said. “You can loosen your grip.”

The pressure on Bonnie's ribs eased as Ruth sat up straight. The cold rushed in to fill the void where Ruth had been pressed against Bonnie's back. Bonnie watched the torchlight fade into the distance.

As her teeth chattered together, she reined Sango onto the trail that led up from the riverbank. She could feel Sango's muscles tremble beneath her. She had to get him moving to stay warm.

“Bless you,” Ruth's words trembled.

Bonnie kept Sango at a walk on the narrow trail. Her body shook furiously from the cold and uneasiness. She had almost drowned them both, and Ruth was blessing her. She didn't know what to say, so she just pressed on.

The predawn light began to glow in the distance. The woods were still dark, but they would be lit up soon. Bonnie looked for landmarks as they made their way down the trail. Then she saw what she wanted. A half-burnt hickory that marked the small path to the cave.

“We have to walk him from here,” Bonnie stopped Sango.

Ruth slowly slid off the colt's back and exhaled loudly as she hit the ground.

Bonnie's muscles didn't want to obey as she tried to dismount the horse. Her legs felt like two unbendable branches unwilling to yield to pressure. When she finally managed to slide off of Sango, a jolt of pain ran the entire length of her body.

“You, okay?” Ruth asked.

“I'm fine, just saddle sore,” Bonnie said as she rubbed her legs. “We'll walk him for a while. The brush is too thick to ride. Besides, he needs a break. The cave isn't far.”

They walked in silence side by side into the trees.

Chapter 2: The Cold Morning

The predawn light cut through the trees, but a heavy fog still owned most of the terrain. A rocky outcropping jaunted lazily from the hillside as if some great monolith had been buried over the centuries. It looked like a pile of rocks surrounded by thorns and brambles that crept over the hill. As they waded their way through the brush, an opening could be seen in the rocks. It wasn't large or inviting, but it was hidden well from anyone who might venture to pass by.

Bonnie couldn't see much of the sky through the thick trees but could feel the storm coming. Trees creaked as they swayed in the wind. She tried to peer through the trees again, but the evergreen pines were packed too closely together to see much.

"This is it," Bonnie said. Her limbs were stiff in the crisp morning air. "I guess you just wait here until someone else takes you the rest of the way to the North." Bonnie could see the fear in Ruth's eyes.

Ruth stuck her head between the rocks and noticed it opened up after the first few steps. Drips of water echoed from the cave's depths. "How deep is it?" she asked.

"Deep enough to get lost in," said Bonnie. "It goes back and down pretty steeply, so don't go back any further than the first camber unless you have to."

"What if no one comes?" asked Ruth. "How am I supposed to know if they're here to help or take me back? I won't go back. You hear me? I won't."

Ruth's emphatic response snapped Bonnie out of the daze that had enveloped her during the walk from the river. "Look, I don't know who will come or when. You heard everything my father said last night," Bonnie snapped. "But if he was waiting for you where you

were told he would be, I imagine he had a plan for you from here. I wish I knew, but I don't. My guess is slave catchers won't bother to be polite. Just hide in there for now and wait." Bonnie pointed toward the blackness of the cavern. Stillness filled the air as the drips echoed from within. "Look, someone *will* come. You just must have faith. I have to get the doctor for my father. I'm sorry, but I must go."

"Wait, you're just gonna leave me?" Ruth's voice trembled with fear. Her eyes darted around the forest. She expected to see hidden enemies behind every tree as she gripped Bonnie's arm. "You expect me to just live in the woods?"

"Look, if I don't leave now, my father will bleed to death," Bonnie replied as she peeled Ruth's fingers from around her arm. "There are still some blackberries on those bushes, and there is a small stream of water in the cave. I don't know what is next for you, but I do know my father is going to die if I don't leave." Bonnie searched for something to reassure the terrified woman. "Do you believe in God? Do you know the Bible?"

Ruth turned her scared eyes to Bonnie. "How is he gonna help me now?"

"Take what King David said when he was running from Saul," Bonnie said in a firm voice. "*What time, I am afraid, I will trust in thee.* Trust in God now more than ever because you are in his hands, not mine or anyone else's. Not even yours." Bonnie's blue eyes dripped tears as she squeezed Ruth's hands one last time before she turned and walked back down through the scrub brush.

Bonnie pushed through the quarter mile of brush to where Sango chewed on small patches of grass. She ran her hand down his neck and leaned against him for just a moment. The reins were ice cold when she wrapped her fingers around them and guided Sango down the thin

trail. It felt good to walk despite the sharp coldness of the morning air. She needed to warm up the horse before she remounted. He needed the circulation just as much as she did. As she stepped onto the hard-packed trail, rays of sunshine slipped through the clouds.

"Let's go, boy, we've got the sun and a clear trail. Just a few miles into town," Bonnie said as she stroked the colt's mane. Her legs felt heavier than normal as she heaved herself into the saddle. "Just an easy ride."

The rain did not start with a drop but immediately fell in a torrent. Bonnie had never stood under a waterfall before, but she imagined she knew exactly what it felt like. All light from the early morning sun disappeared, and sheets of rain cut visibility to just a few yards. Her breath didn't even have time to billow as the heavy rain washed it from the air.

"Well crap," she exclaimed as water sprayed from her lips. She quickly followed with, "Sorry, Lord."

Bonnie flicked the reins and heeled into the colt's side, but Sango stayed at an easy walk. She tried again but knew the colt had no energy to run. She leaned her head down on the colt's neck. "Come on, boy, Papa needs us. Just a little bit longer," she said. Cold chills shot through her body in the cold morning. Slowly, they walked down the muddy trail.

Ruth sat at the mouth of the cave and watched the rain pour down. Over-ripe blackberries squished in her mouth as she did her best to ignore the texture. She pulled Bonnie's coat tight around her as she tried to fend off the cold air. So much had happened during the night that she couldn't process it all, and the unknown future terrified her. She wished she had a fire to warm herself but wouldn't start one even if she could. The light or smoke would bring evil men

to drag her back to bondage. Her finger ran through the dirt at the cave entrance. Dots in the dirt took shape into a constellation. Then, she measured five lengths in a straight line from two dots and drew a star. She smiled as she remembered the lesson on how to find the North Star. The smile faded quickly as she brushed the dots away.

Ruth picked up the branch that rested against the cave wall. It felt heavy in her hands, and she swung it. She couldn't stop the swing's momentum, and the stick bounced off the stone wall. The crack echoed through the cave and seemed to carry on forever. She dropped the stick and peered out into the rain. Panic crept into her heart as she waited for white men to burst through the brush. None came, but she wept anyway. Great panic-stricken tears poured down her face just like the rain poured outside.

Panic gave way to anger. It burned inside her. Trapped between a pit and a storm, chased and abandoned. The only refuge allowed to her was the mouth of the earth waiting to swallow her. Anger seethed inside her at the plantation, the men that chased her, Bonnie, and against God for making her. She gritted her teeth and screamed in her mind, afraid to let it out. She crumbled to her knees and cried. She was powerless. No matter what she did, she would suffer. She folded her hands and began to pray.

Sango slowly sauntered down the muddy street into the outskirts of Clarksville. His hooves sloshed mud with every step. Bonnie draped over the horse's neck, barely awake as they passed dark houses. Only a few showed smoke from the chimney or any light from lanterns within. Bonnie wanted to go faster, but neither she nor Sango had the energy. She had been awake since dawn the previous day and had not eaten since the early evening. Her stomach

rumbled as she thought of food, but everything was muddled. It was the cold that sapped her energy. The river and pounding rain combined with the rain to kill her. She raised a hand to wipe the rain from her eyes as a large white house came into focus. She glided Sango to the base of the steps and patted him on the neck. Her body, stiff from the cold, was slow to obey her wishes as she swung her leg over the saddle. Fatigue and frozen fingers gave way to her weight as she toppled from the saddle. Mud splattered Sango's flank when she landed full force on her side. Dazed, she struggled to breathe. She looked up the steps to the beautiful white door. Her knees ached as she crawled up the stairs before she pulled herself upright.

"Oh! Go down, Moses. Away down to Egypt's land," sang Mrs. Lanny's husky contralto voice as she kneaded dough. The pot-belly stove had burned long before daybreak, and its glow covered the room in warmth. The aroma of breakfast filled the room and seeped out of every crack in the whitewashed walls. Flour drifted in the air as the middle-aged woman wiped the sweat off her forehead on the arm of her dress.

Bang-Bang-Bang echoed through the house.

"Sweet Jesus!" Lanny screamed as she jumped, knocking a pair of tongs on the floor.

Bang-Bang-Bang resounded the front door again.

Lanny wiped her plump hands on her apron just before she snatched the lantern off the wall mount. Her large dress swished back and forth as she made her way down the hall. "Lord help'em," she muttered. "Come banging on the door in a storm, ain't got enough sense to come to the back door. Gotta know the doctor ain't gonna be up already." Lanny set the lantern on the

entryway table so she had both hands to admonish the poor white that delivered chopped wood to the house. She slapped the bolt open and wanked the door with one hand in righteous anger.

Lanny let out a little yelp as a mud-soaked creature fell forward onto her chest and slipped through her grip before she had time to react. Bonnie's head bounced off the hardwood floor as Lanny stood, holding only air and mud.

“Lord have mercy,” Lanny screamed as she realized the body was a girl. Her knees thudded on the wooden floor as she dropped and scooped up the body. She rolled Bonnie onto her lap and began to wipe mud and blood away with her apron. The girl was soaked and cold to the touch. Blood oozed out of a cut across her cheek. “Reggie! Reggie, you get on in here!” Lanny yelled.

A teenage boy in an oversized servant's jacket rubbed sleep from his eyes as he rounded the corner. He stopped mid-step when he saw the door wide open and his aunt on the floor. Then he noticed the two mud-covered legs that stuck out to the cook's side.

"Don't just stand there. Shut the door and go get the doctor. Go on now." Lanny never bothered to look up. She just wiped mud off the face and held the girl tight against her body. Reggie paused when he shut the door and took too long of a look at the muddy mess in Lanny's lap. "Get! Before I bust yo head," Lanny said, as she glared at him long enough to make her point. He shot up the stairs and headed for the third floor. Lanny began to rock back and forth, "*What a friend we have in Jesus.*"

A tall, lanky man with disheveled white hair followed Reggie down the stairs. He moved gracefully but in no rush. His nightshirt bulged out of his hastily thrown-on trousers. He glared at the scene on the floor. The overweight cook hummed softly as she sat in a puddle of

muddy water and rocked a prone figure back and forth. Reggie stopped at the bottom of the stairs and pointed toward Lanny and the mud-covered figure.

"Stop pointing, Reginald, and get the lantern off the table so I can see," said the doctor. He knelt beside the two figures on the floor. "Stop that noise so I can hear." He put two fingers on Bonnie's neck. "Oh, stop crying. She's alive," he said in a kinder voice.

"She?" questioned Reggie.

"Yes, it's a girl Reginald. Albeit a mess of one," said the doctor as he pushed muddy hair from Bonnie's face. "The cut on her face is superficial, Lanny, so stop fretting over it." He gently rolled Bonnie onto her back, letting her head stay on Lanny's lap. He felt down her arms and legs for additional injuries. "Reginald, go get a wash basin and a clean cloth."

The tall, gangly youth rushed off and returned with a wash basin with barely any water. "I spilled it," he confessed sheepishly.

"Yes, I see that. Go get a pitcher of water and walk back here with it so I have some to work with," the doctor said.

Bonnie's eyes fluttered open as she tried to adjust to the light. A blurry figure loomed over her as she recoiled. She ached all over and tried desperately to wipe mud from her eyes, only to smear more across her face.

"Easy, child, you're safe here. Do you know where you are?" asked the doctor in a kindly resonant voice.

The world started to come into focus as she looked from the doctor to the teary eyes of Mrs. Lanny. The night flooded back into her memory the rain, the chase, Ruth, and her father. Her father bleeding. Bonnie's head almost collided with the doctor as she bolted upright. "Doctor, we have to go now. My father needs you," she blurted out in a single breath.

"Easy now, who is your father, and what has happened?" asked the doctor.

"Emmitt Buckshire and..." Bonnie's mouth gaped as she tried to find the right words. Her neck cracked as she turned toward Lanny and then back to the doctor, but no words formed in her mind.

"Go'on child, tell the doctor," Lanny encouraged.

Bonnie's lips moved, but no words came out. She pictured her father in a pool of blood. She looked at Lanny with tears in the corners of her eyes.

"Girl, I cannot help him if you don't tell..." said the doctor before he was cut off.

"He's been shot," she exclaimed. "I mean, he accidentally shot himself in the leg," she knew that she had made a mistake, but the doctor would find out it was a gunshot eventually. Right now, the only important thing was getting the doctor to him. She stared at the doctor and prayed he wouldn't ask any more questions.

The doctor looked doubtfully at Bonnie. His gray eyebrows furrowed in a questioning angle. The few seconds seem like an eternity to Bonnie. Slowly, he released the probing gaze and wiped his hand on the rag Reginald had brought him.

"Reginald, prepare the carriage and bring it around front," said the doctor. "Lanny, dry her off as best as you can. Give her an overcoat and a hat. I'd rather not have to treat pneumonia.

I will get dressed, and we will leave momentarily." He turned and walked to the stairs but paused at the first step. He turned a harsh countenance toward Bonnie. "You, young lady, will give me more details on the way." He turned and walked up the stairs.

Lanny helped Bonnie to the basement, which served as the servant's quarters in the large white house. Bonnie struggled out of the wet clothes as globs of mud fell in all directions. Over a curtain that divided a portion of the room, Lanny hung a ragged sackcloth so Bonnie could dry herself. "Don't worry about the mud, child. You can scrub it off later," said Lanny from the far side of the curtain. Come on out here, and I'll help you get dressed."

Bonnie slowly came around the curtain with the sackcloth wrapped around her. She assumed she looked like a swamp creature but didn't care. Lanny's eyes widened when she saw all the scratches and bruises on Bonnie's arms, face, and legs. Bonnie tried to turn so the marks would be less noticeable, but it didn't matter. No matter which way she turned, she just exposed new marks. Bonnie didn't realize how hard the ride was last night. Lanny handed Bonnie a shirt and trousers that were two sizes too big. Bonnie took the clothes quickly and ducked behind the curtain.

"Don't you worry, Miss. Those is white folks' clothes. I do laundry for the Harpers next door. Mister Harper Jr. ain't much bigger than you," Lanny said as she tried to sound cheerful. "I'll s'plain to the doctor about the clothes, he'll take care of it." There was a distinct pause as Lanny shuffled her feet. "Child, I don't know what's happened to you, but you can tell the doctor. He a respectable gentleman, and he can help you."

Bonnie bolted from around the curtain, white knuckles held up the loose-fitting pants. Still chilled to the bone, she felt warmth in her anger. "Someone that thinks they have the right to own another person is not respectable to me. Gentlemen or not," Bonnie said.

"Hush your mouth, child," Lanny fired back. "Don't let nobody hear you say that." With worried eyes, Lanny looked over Bonnie's shoulder to the door at the top of the stairs. She shifted her eyes back and forth as if she expected something different in the split second it took her to refocus. "I knows who your daddy is and what he preach. Every soul wait'n for Jubilee know who your daddy is. So does every white whether they own people or not, and they ain't too kind in their thoughts about him. The doctor don't know you, but he sure know who your daddy is," Lanny paused to shift her eyes up the stairs again. "The doctor might not agree with the Preacher, but he'll treat him all the same. Don't you go provok'n him with talk you can't do nothing bout."

"Time to go, Miss Buckshire," resounded the doctor's voice from beyond the door.

Lanny jumped and quickly pulled a rope around Bonnie's waist to tie up the pants. "You mind what I told you," she said authoritatively. Then, in a much softer tone, with her hands cupped on each side of Bonnie's face, she said, "Bless you and your daddy."

Lanny wrapped an oversized coat around Bonnie as they stepped over the mud-streaked floor to the front door. Together, they stepped onto the porch, Lanny's round arms wrapped tightly around Bonnie. The big woman radiated the heat of motherly love. Bonnie felt at peace in the woman's arms, as if she had cared for her since birth. Doctor Bagwell handed an oversized medical bag to a soaked and bedraggled Reginald. The youth struggled to get the bag under a

tarp in the back of the carriage. The doctor paid no attention to the youth's struggles. His breath puffed white plumes from under his wide-brimmed hat. "Lanny, mind you clean up Miss Buckshire's mess before Mrs. Bagwell wakes up," he said, then paused to cast a sideways glance at Reginald. "I don't need to hear her fussing over it when I return. Tell Mrs. Bagwell I will be home by lunch. Let's go, child," He motioned for Bonnie to get in the carriage.

Bonnie looked at Sango. The half-dazed horse stood right where she had left him, his breath puffed out from his nose. "What about Sango?" she asked firmly.

The doctor looked at Sango and sighed. "Reginald, tie that poor animal to the back of the carriage," he paused and looked back at Bonnie. "You should get a more reliable animal, Miss Buckshire. Now let's go."

Bonnie tensed and inhaled deeply as she leaned forward, ready to unleash a tirade at the doctor. Lanny's grip squeezed her tightly. "You keep quiet and remember your daddy," Lanny whispered.

The rain still fell steadily as Bonnie climbed into the carriage. Mud dripped off her chin as she scowled at the doctor. She looked over her shoulder as the carriage started to lurch forward. Lanny stood at the top of the stairs in her mud-soaked apron as Reginald tried to pull her back inside the house.

Chapter 3: The Ride Home

Clouds covered the sky, but the rain slacked to a little drizzle. Bonnie ached every time the carriage dropped into a hole. She tried to put as much space between her and the doctor as possible, but the bench was small, and she seemed to slide back and forth easily. The great white house was out of sight, but she continued to look over her shoulder to check on Sango.

"You really should consider getting a better horse if it is that exhausted," said the doctor conversationally. He didn't look at her or Sango. He kept his eyes on the mare as it pulled the carriage through the mud. "You live just south of the Smith farm, correct?" He asked nonchalantly. "That can't be more than five miles or so."

"He's a good horse. It was just a long night," she fired back without a thought. She realized she had said too much and added in a more subdued voice, "Yes, the cabin is just south of the Smith farm. I'll tell you when to turn off the trail." She turned away from the doctor and hoped he would not inquire about the long night.

"Tell me about your father's injury," said the doctor as he lightly flicked the reins. "How did it happen? What does the wound look like? How long ago did it happen?" he questioned in rapid session.

Bonnie crossed her arms over her chest and pulled in tightly. White puffs of breath decreased as her posture tightened. "He shot himself in the leg," she paused longer than she meant to. "By accident."

"So, you've said," the doctor replied earnestly. "I'll need more information than that, Miss Buckshire."

He continued to face straightforwardly. Bonnie wasn't sure if she preferred that or not. She knew he could tell she was holding back but didn't know how much to tell him. His tone was kind and direct, but she didn't like him. He represented everything she knew to be wrong in the world. Suddenly, she pictured Mrs. Lanny on her hands and knees scrubbing the mud-covered floor she had caused. She grew angry with herself and the doctor. "I'm not sure how it happened," she snapped. "I wasn't with him. I was asleep, well, mostly asleep, when he came in." She remembered what Mrs. Lanny had told her and tried to change her tone. "I don't know how it happened."

The doctor sat quietly for a minute as he squinted his eyes in the misty morning gloom. "Riders out there," he said matter-of-factly. "What was he doing with a gun in the middle of the night? Hunting possum?" he asked the questions as if he didn't expect an answer. "Tell me about the wound."

Bonnie looked into the distance and saw four riders on tall horses. Her stomach turned as she recalled four torches on Turtle Creek trail. "I don't feel well, Doctor," she said. She wasn't sure why she said it. She definitely felt it but had no reason or right to say it out loud.

"I expect you don't after ruining the rug in my foyer," he said sarcastically. "However, I cannot drive this carriage, tend to you, and help your father simultaneously. So, if it all the same to you, I would have you toughen up for your father's sake." His tone was sharp, but he kept his eyes on the silhouettes on the road ahead of them.

The riders continued toward them, still out of earshot but closer. Bonnie shifted in her seat. She leaned toward the rail, then leaned back toward the doctor. The carriage shifted slightly

as she fidgeted. "The bullet went into the back of his leg just below the knee," she said, knowing that her voice sounded off but unable to control it.

"And the exit wound?" asked the doctor.

"There was no exit wound," she replied.

The doctor reined in the mare and turned sharply toward Bonnie. His eyes were more animated than she had noticed before. "The bleeding. Tell me about the bleeding. Now, child!" he said angrily.

"I don't know. It was a lot, then not as much," she replied as she shrunk away from his stare.

"Did you tie a tourniquet above the wound?" He asked as he lowered his voice.

"A what?" she responded. "I wrapped it up tightly."

"When? When did it happen, child?" His voice carried in the morning air. The four riders perked up in their saddles as they were only ten yards away. "For heaven's sake, how long has it been, girl?"

Bonnie's eyes were on the riders but bounced back to the doctor after his sharp words. "Midnight, since about midnight," she said in defense. The doctor's eyes widened as he drew back from her.

"Good heavens," was the doctor's only response.

"Good morning to you," rasped a voice.

The doctor turned his gaze from Bonnie to three riders that blocked the road.

"I said good morning to you, Sir." The raspy voice was even more distinct the second time.

The doctor returned to his ordinarily rigid posture. "Pardon my delay," he said as he straightened up. "Good morning to you, Sir. It is queer weather for an early ride." The doctor's voice was calm again.

The lead rider was just to the side of the carriage. He looked massive, but Bonnie realized he was quite thin and sat on a huge chestnut stallion. She and the doctor both had to look up to see the rider. Water rolled off his black hat and ran down his black suit. Bonnie looked to the riders in front of the carriage. They all slouched in the saddle. Mud covered each of them and their horses. They looked tired and angry as their horses' heads hung low from exhaustion.

"It is, indeed, Sir," rasped the dark rider. "My name is Elisha Montgomery, and we are out this fine morning looking for a runaway."

Bonnie leaned in toward the doctor to conceal her face from Elisha, even though she knew he never saw her up close. Something about him terrified her. Her mind went to Ruth in the cave, and she quickly pushed the thought away, afraid she would give something away.

"I'm Doctor Benedict Bagwell, on my way to see a patient," said the doctor as he tightened the reins in his grip. "I wish you well in your endeavor, Mr. Montgomery. You will find the Sheriff's office straight down that street. If he is not there, one of his deputies will be able to find him."

"Thank you, Doctor," said Elisha as he started to pull his horse away. He paused when he noticed Sango tied to the back of the carriage. He looked back at the bench seat of the

carriage. "And what is your name..." he paused as he tried to make out what was sitting next to the doctor. "Youngster."

Bonnie's hands wrapped around the doctor's arm as she pulled closer to him. "Mr. Montgomery, if I had felt it proper or necessary, I would have introduced my charge to you," said the doctor. "As it is, you have detained me long enough now. Kindly tell your men to move out of the road."

Water poured off Elisha's hat as he tipped it to the doctor and nodded to the men to clear the path. The doctor lashed the carriage horse, which caused it to jolt forward. The unexpected movement startled the last rider's horse. The half-awake rider cursed the doctor as he regained control of his horse. The doctor flicked the reins until the mare picked up a cantor on the hard-packed road.

"I do detest that breed of men," muttered the doctor.

Bonnie eased away from the doctor and looked over her shoulder. The three riders walked their horses toward town, but Elisha Montgomery sat in the same place and watched the carriage. Bonnie turned forward and silently prayed that Montgomery didn't follow them. "What kind of men do you mean?" Bonnie asked.

"Those mean, Miss Buckshire, are slave catchers. A necessary evil, I admit, but generally evil nonetheless," replied the doctor.

Bonnie slid farther away from the doctor on the bench. "Men like that would not be necessary if no one owned slaves," said Bonnie.

The doctor's gaze stayed forward, and the corner of his mouth turned downward. "Miss Buckshire, I know full well your father's views, and I can easily discern that you share his seditious beliefs," said the doctor in a flat tone. "I will say this, and then we will speak no more about it. If it were illegal, I would not do it, but it is perfectly legal, so I am just in what I do. Furthermore, I do not need or appreciate the views of a discredited preacher or his progeny as they concern what a man has the right to do or not do."

"I would not have thought that someone as educated as you would believe that just because something is legal, it is also moral," Bonnie said just as evenly.

The doctor turned to look at Bonnie, his face contorted in anger. She could tell he was about to respond in a fury. She knew she had overstepped and instantly feared he would change his mind and turn the carriage around. He would either kick her out or hand her over to Elisha Montgomery and his thugs. She thought about Mrs. Lanny's warning and knew she had risked her father's life just to be right. Despite the panic she felt, she would not let him see it. She stared right back at him.

The tension in the doctor's face eased as he turned back toward the road in front of them. "We have both spoken our minds and seem unswayed," said the doctor. "There is nothing else to say."

Bonnie let out a fear-filled breath as the carriage didn't turn around.

Chapter 4: The Surgery

Clouds peeled back as the first beams of sunlight lit the path leading to the cabin. Puddles of water covered the yard like spots on a newborn fawn. The yard was a mess of broken branches and scattered leaves. Piglets gnawed on broken corn stalks and squealed out of the way of the carriage as it bounced through the mud. Atlas, Emmitt's horse, still saddled, stood in front of the cabin with his head hung low. It wasn't much of a farm, but now it was a disaster of one. The barn stood untarnished, and the cabin was intact.

Bonnie's eyes raced around the scene as the carriage rolled forward. The open barn door, Atlas, piglets, chickens, and then she noticed the door to the cabin wide open. The doctor reined in the mare, but Bonnie's feet splashed in the mud before the carriage stopped.

"Papa. Papa!" Bonnie yelled as she ran toward the open cabin door. Pain shot through her body as she bounced off the door frame. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness inside the cabin. The final embers of fire shed no light in the cavernous room. The sparsely furnished cabin was in disarray, and Emmitt lay on the ground beside an overturned chair. "Papa," she cried out again. She paid no attention to the soaked floor as she slid to his side.

Doctor Bagwell walked into the cabin with his medical bag in hand. "Open all the windows and start a fire," he said. The heavy bag thudded as he dropped it onto the table. Bonnie sat frozen as she watched the doctor check Emmitt's pulse. "Do as I tell you, child, and do it quickly," he said.

Bonnie looked up, jarred out of her stupor by the doctor's resolute voice. She focused weary eyes on his face. Despite the forceful tone, he wasn't angry. He looked blank, completely emotionless, as if he had everything under control. Bonnie wasn't sure why she felt relieved he

wasn't angry, but she was. She lifted herself from the floor and rushed out of the cabin. She pulled open the storm shutters and peered inside every time to see the doctor. The fog of the night still clouded her thoughts as she fumbled to open the shutters. Her body felt heavy but lightheaded, as if she was only half awake. Her stomach rumbled as her body shivered. She pinned open the final shutter and rushed back into the cabin. The morning light made the scene look even worse than it had looked before.

The pooled water had a rose tint on the white oak floor. Bonnie tried not to think of all the blood her father had lost through the night as she rushed to the fireplace. A few embers still smoldered beneath the ashes. She pulled a dried corn stalk from a box and tried to shred it into tender, but her fingers struggled to manage the task. Finally, she tossed the stalks onto the embers and fanned the fledgling flame. She continued to fan as she looked over her shoulder toward the doctor. The quick burning sensation in her hand snapped her back to her task. The tender flared, and she fed it kindling from the dry box.

"How did he manage to shoot himself in the back of the leg?" asked the doctor.

Bonnie turned to see his stare fixed on her. "I... I don't know," she replied hoarsely.

"Where is the gun?" he asked before she could add anything else to her statement.

"What?" she asked reflexively.

"The gun he managed to shoot himself in the back of the leg with, Miss Buckshire." His tone was stern again, and his face showed frustration. He glared at her for a few seconds and then relaxed his expression. "I guess he dropped it in the woods where it happened. Now come over here." After a short pause, almost as an afterthought, he followed with, "Please."

Bonnie poured oil from a lantern over a couple of split logs and tossed them into the small fire. The logs blazed and crackled. She rushed across the room and knelt beside her father. In his pale complexion, she saw her mother in the final stages of death—any warmth the new fire gave her drained away as she quivered out of fear.

“I will need your help getting him onto the table,” said the doctor. “I will lift him underneath the arms, but you will need to lift his legs. Do you understand?”

Bonnie nodded, but she didn’t take her eyes off her father. The doctor moved behind Emmitt’s head and gently leaned him up. The doctor’s long arms slipped under Emmitt’s arms and clasped together. Bonnie didn’t move.

“Wake up, girl!” the doctor thundered. “We don’t have time for you to be afraid.”

Tears streamed down Bonnie's face as she turned toward the doctor. She knew he had told her something before but could not recall what it was.

“Bonnie,” he said as he recovered his composure. “I need you to grab his legs and lift him. The only thing that can hurt him right now is to delay. I cannot lift him alone. I need your help.” He nodded toward Emmitt’s legs.

Bonnie's eyes focused on the doctor as she tried to wipe the fog from her mind but only managed to smear bloody water across her face. She moved to Emmitt's feet and wrapped her hands under his legs. When she gripped his legs, terror washed away, and she felt stronger. "I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me," she muttered. The helplessness that consumed her abated, and she lifted at the count of three.

"I will need him on his stomach to see the wound," said the doctor. Get a blanket to rest his head on, but do not cover his face so he can breathe." The doctor held Emmitt's head to the side as Bonnie rushed across the room and grabbed a quilt.

Bonnie returned with a blanket and gently tucked it under Emmitt's head. She felt the warmth of his skin when she placed her chilled hands on his head. She stroked his hair and felt the sticky mixture of sweat, mud, and blood. She managed to hold back tears but could not stop the steady flow from her nose no matter how many times she ran the rough sleeve of someone else's shirt across her face. The doctor pulled scissors from his bag and cut away the rest of Emmitt's pants leg. The strip of bandage Bonnie had tied around the wound hours before no longer resembled the beautiful white cotton dress her mother had given her. She wished she had her mother's strength. The sound of the blood-soaked bandage as it plopped onto the ground brought Bonnie back and turned her empty stomach. She didn't know what to expect when the bandage came off but felt relieved when the wound only oozed light blood. Her relief disappeared quickly when the doctor sighed.

"What? What is it?" she asked.

The doctor examined the wound as he reached into his bag and pulled out a small bottle of clear liquid. Bonnie wanted to ask again, but panic stifled the ability to make words. The wound bubbled when the doctor poured the liquid out. Emmitt's body twitched, but he didn't open his eyes. Bonnie wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. The doctor continued to pour small amounts over the wound. Bubbles washed away and immediately popped back up with each pour. Doctor Bagwell wiped a clean cloth from his bag over the hole in Emmitt's leg and cleared away the last bubbles and small bits of mud or blood. Bonnie couldn't tell the difference at this point.

"Why does it look like that?" she asked. She knew the answer wouldn't be good. The area around the gunshot wound was black and oozed deep crimson blood. The black faded into circles of purple, then deep red for several inches. Emmitt's leg below the knee looked pale white, but above the knee, the skin was reddish and very swollen.

"Miss Buckshire, I want you to listen to me very carefully," the doctor started after he had gained eye contact with Bonnie. "The bullet has severed the blood flow to his lower leg and shattered at least one of the bones, possibly both." He paused to take in a deep breath. "He will never walk on that leg again, but that is not really the problem at this moment. Do you know what gangrene is?" He waited until she shook her head. "That's ok. It is an infection of the tissue where the body can no longer circulate blood. In this case, his leg below the knee. The tissue will putrefy without blood flow, and the infection will spread. If we allow that to happen, there is nothing that I can do for him. His leg must come off, and the blood vessel be cauterized." Again, he paused to let the bedraggled girl's mind catch up.

She heard the words and knew what they meant but couldn't process them. Mucus dripped from her nose into Emmitt's hair as she struggled with the weight of her body. The world was too still as if stuck in a moment in which she couldn't move forward. Everything felt heavy. Even the air was heavy with the smell of blood and the hickory log fire.

"Bonnie?" the doctor asked to see if she was lucid.

"You're going to cut his leg off?" she said in a dreamy state as the world started to move again.

"No, Bonnie, we are going to amputate his leg together. I cannot do this alone." He looked at her and nodded his head to ensure she knew it was going to happen. "I will not lie to

you, Bonnie. He may not survive the procedure, but I can promise you that he will most certainly not survive if we do nothing.”

Bonnie’s head nodded in unison with the doctor. She shook her head vigorously to break the hypnotic spell and focused on the doctor. “What do you need me to do?” she asked.

“Start some water boiling in a clean pot,” said the doctor as he pulled his bag across the table. “Then we will need some rope.”

Bonnie looked at Emmitt briefly, turned toward the bucket by the door, and stopped. “Rope?” she asked.

“I’m afraid we will have to tie him down for the procedure,” said the doctor as he pulled a canvas roll from his bag. “We do not have time for questions. I need you to do just as I say, right when I say, without hesitation.” He looked up as he unrolled the canvas to reveal shining instruments. “Can you do that? Your father’s life depends on it.”

Bonnie nodded her head and grabbed the pot sitting close to the door. She almost fell going down the stairs. Two spotted piglets squealed away as she rumbled toward them. The cold morning air shocked her. She hadn’t realized how much the fire had done to warm her body. It hurt to breathe the chilly air, but it didn’t matter because everything hurt. She did feel more awake, and she tried to hang on tightly to that feeling. She knew that she would need it. The wooden bucket dropped it down the well. She heard the splash, gave it time to fill with water, put both hands on the crank, and worked harder than she ever had before to raise the bucket. She pulled the bucket from the well and started to carry it back to the cabin. Bonnie wanted to scream when she realized she had taken the cast iron pot out of the cabin for no reason. With a cast iron pot in one hand and a bucket of water in the other, she shuffled her way back to the cabin. The

doctor looked up to see her grumbling under her breath as she bounced off the door frame. She poured water into the pot and hung it over the fire. She still grumbled about stupid pots and buckets as she passed the doctor on her way back out the door.

In an angry daze, she fell forward off the stairs and landed in the soft mud. On her knees, she pleaded, "Lord, please give me the strength to see this through." She had no energy left, but one leg moved, and then the other. In the span of a deep breath, she stood and strode on with a purpose. She entered the barn and went straight for the workbench. She tossed bridles, hand tools, and wooden crates out of the way until she found the rope. Without a thought, she scooped up a piece of leather and made her way to the door.

A collection of metal instruments sat on top of the canvas in a chair beside the table. The doctor stood over Emmitt with his sleeves rolled up when Bonnie entered the cabin. "Will this work?" she asked as she held out the rope.

"That will be fine," he said as he took the rope from her hand. "Grab something to act as padding. I will have to bind his hands as well."

"I don't understand why he has to be tied down," she said as she returned to the table with bedding in her hands.

"I do not have chloroform to sedate him, and he is not conscious for whiskey to work," said the doctor as he gently rolled Emmitt onto his back. "When I start cutting, he will wake up. You will not be able to hold him, and I cannot hold and cut." He looked at her to make sure she understood this time. "Run the rope under the table."

The doctor tied Emmitt's hands to his side while Bonnie adjusted a blanket to serve as padding where the rope ran over his chest and thighs. The doctor pulled the rope to ensure it was

tight enough all over. He stepped near Emmitt's head and turned it to the side. The doctor paused as he looked around the room. "He will bite down hard from the pain... I need," his words tapered off as he scanned the room.

Bonnie felt warmth in her hand and looked down. "Will this work?" she asked as she raised the thick leather strap.

"Yes, yes that will do nicely," he replied. He took the strap and placed it in Emmitt's mouth. "Bring water in a basin and some soap."

Water splashed over the basin's edges as the doctor scrubbed his hands. He nodded his head for Bonnie to do the same. He took a deep breath. "I need you to listen very carefully. The damage is all in his lower leg, so I will not have to saw through the bone, which is good for recovery. However, it will not make this any less messy. I need you to prepare yourself for a lot of blood and tissue. You can look away, but I need you to hold his leg as steady as possible. It is tied, but you cannot let him move it." He nodded in encouragement and repeated, "he cannot move, Bonnie."

"I can handle it," she lied. She knew full well that at any minute, she would collapse from exhaustion or terror.

"Ok, let's get started," he said.

"Wait, shouldn't we pray first?" Bonnie asked.

"Child, I've been praying since we walked in the door," replied the doctor. "You can start now if you want to catch up, but do it over here." He didn't look up as he tied a tourniquet around Emmitt's thigh.

Bonnie shook herself from the fear that held her in place and moved to her father's side. Her hands trembled as she looked at the ropes that secured him to the table. It was like nothing she had ever seen before.

“Grab his leg at the ankle and hold tightly,” said the doctor. “Look away if you must.”

She locked her hands around Emmitt’s ankle. His skin was cold as ice, much colder than a person’s skin should feel. She knew that feeling, the cold emptiness of death. Bonnie had held her mother’s hand for hours after she died. The warmth of her beautiful mother had slowly ebbed away along with the pain of this world. Bonnie knew without a doubt her mother was in a better place, but she wasn’t ready for her father to join his wife. The sight of blood that ran down Emmitt’s leg as the doctor cut into the soft tissue drew her back into focus. The doctor paused as Emmitt stirred.

“Ok, no more pausing,” the doctor whispered. “We have to go now.”

The blade of his knife cut deeper, and Bonnie felt the first spasm of Emmitt's leg. She pulled tightly against his ankle. Her father's head started to move as the doctor drew his blade from side to side. His left hand pulled back skin and muscle as he worked the knife back and forth quickly. Emmitt's head shook back and forth as he writhed in pain, a muffled scream from beneath the strap tied across his mouth. The doctor leaned his weight onto Emmitt's thigh as he switched knives and started to cut more than flesh. Bonnie turned her head when she saw Emmitt's bone. Emmitt's foot was limp, but his whole body convulsed as he turned to pull away from the pain.

“Keep holding, Bonnie,” screamed the doctor. “Don’t let go!”

Bonnie turned her eyes to the open door. The wind blew brown leaves across the small porch. She ignored the splashes of blood that fell onto her face and watched two piglets run into the wind. She felt the weight of her father pull against her hands as the sunlight glistened off puddles of water. Chickens pecked the muddy ground, searching for grain or bugs. She pulled back against the weight but felt the warm blood ooze between her fingers. She tightened her grip but felt Emmitt slip further away. She pulled harder as if she pulled against death itself. Her stomach turned, the room blurred, and leaves blew in the door. Focus on the door. Focus on the door, Bonnie told herself. Her fingers slid on his cold skin. Her legs felt weak. The light through the doorway blurred as pain shot through her body. Her eyes flared with panic as she realized she had fallen backward. A wave of horror flooded over her. Then she felt the weight in her hands. Her grip was still firmly locked on Emmitt's leg. The leg that sat in her lap. Her eyes fluttered, and then everything went dark.

Chapter 5: The Morning After

"Bonnie. Wake up, Bonnie," came a voice from a thousand miles away.

She opened her eyes, but nothing came into focus. Her hands flexed and felt tight, as if pine sap had dried on her skin. The straw mattress crackled as she shifted her weight. Walls came into focus, but the light was wrong. A tall figure stood over her. He stretched out a cup of something hot. Steam slowly curled upward from the cup. Her mind started to clear. In a panic, she looked at her empty hands.

"My father!" she screamed.

"He's alive and resting," said the doctor. "You did very well, Bonnie."

Bonnie's hand trembled as she took the cup of hot tea from the doctor. She looked around him to see her father still lying on the table. The ropes that secured him the night before were removed. He lay so motionless she couldn't tell if he was breathing or not.

"Will he survive?" Bonnie asked as she pushed the doctor to the side. Her hot tea poured down the front of his shirt.

Doctor Bagwell jumped back as the hot liquid soaked through his shirt. He just had time to catch the cup that Bonnie dropped without a thought.

"I will make no guarantees about the longevity of his life," the doctor said. "I have done everything that I can for him at this time. However, he needs medicine that I do not have here, and, eventually, he will wake up in a tremendous amount of pain."

Bonnie took awkward steps across the small cabin to avoid the overturned chair and scattered papers that littered the floor. Every step smacked as her feet peeled up tacky blood from the small pools that soaked the wooden planks.

“Will he survive?” she asked again. She placed a hand on his head to press down the wild stringy hair.

“Don’t touch him, my dear. The last thing we want right now is to wake him,” the doctor said in a hushed tone.

Bonnie’s hand slowly moved away as she took a half step back.

The doctor rummaged through his bag again. He pulled out bottles, instruments, and bandages. Bonnie heard him cuss under his breath. He looked up sorrowfully and said, "I have nothing to give him for the pain, so the best possible thing for him is to stay unconscious. I do not know if he will survive. As I said, I have done everything I can. The rest is up to God."

Bonnie felt warm tears roll down her face and then the bitter cold as they dripped from her chin. She raised her hand to wipe the tears away but stopped. She rotated her hands back and forth. Dried blood coated every piece of skin below her elbow, and her fingernails were black.

"Bonnie," said the doctor.

Her hands turned over slowly. She saw nothing else, just the blood-stained hands.

"Bonnie," repeated the doctor.

In a dream-like stance, she turned to face the doctor.

"Bonnie, I need you to step outside with me so we can talk," the doctor said.

“But I can’t leave him,” she said more as a reflex than a thought.

“He’s not going anywhere, and I need to tell you what to do if he wakes up while I’m gone. Bonnie, I need you to lower your hands and follow me outside,” said the doctor.

Bonnie’s hands still rested ten inches in front of her face as the doctor gently put his hands on her forearms and lowered them.

The air outside was crisp but not cold. Remnants of dew hide from the afternoon sunlight and glistened in the shadows. Broken branches lay across the yard and an old broken fence. The doctor led Bonnie to the well and cranked the handle as he watched the girl examine her hands. Water spilled over the side of the trough as he upended the bucket.

“Bonnie, I want you to wash your hands,” said the doctor as he pulled her closer to the water.

Bonnie flexed her fingers and felt the tight, tacky movement of her knuckles. "How is my father?" she asked absently.

Blood dripped off her fingers in a steady stream as the doctor washed her hands. Bonnie watched her father’s blood run through her fingers to the ground at her feet.

“Seek the LORD and His strength,” said the doctor in his best sermon voice.

Bonnie blinked several times and looked at the doctor. The fog rolled out of her mind, and everything came into focus. She pulled her hands from his grasp and wrung them so roughly that her fingertips turned white.

"Yes. Yes, he will be my strength." Fresh tears rolled down her cheeks as shame took the place of shock.

"No tears now. You've been braver than most could hope to be, and I need you to be a little bit longer," said the doctor. "Can you manage that?"

"Yes, Sir," she replied as she wiped her hands on her shirt.

"Good," the doctor took a deep breath. "I must leave now to get supplies and find someone to help you. Do you have any family close by? Any relation that I can send word to? Anyone that will come?"

"No, we have no one," Bonnie answered.

"I'm sorry child. I will see what I can do," said the doctor. "I will go straight home and get all the supplies I need to keep your father comfortable. Bonnie, if there is anything you want to tell me. I want you to know I will listen without judgment." The doctor's kind face turned stoic and might as well have been chiseled from stone.

"What do you mean?" asked Bonnie.

"How did your father get shot, Bonnie?" the doctor asked.

"I told you. It was an accident," Bonnie stated as she rubbed her hands faster. "He didn't mean to do it. It was just an accident."

"Bonnie, I unsaddled your father's horse and put it away while you were asleep. There is a slight wound on the animal's side, as if a bullet grazed it. Where was your father when he was shot?" The doctor replied to her firm tone as he rubbed his hands together.

Bonnie gazed at the older gentlemen as the previous night ran through her mind. She wanted to trust him. He just saved her father's life and had been so kind, but she knew he would tell someone about Ruth. After all, he was a slave owner. She hated lying, but she had no choice.

“Doctor, my father stumbled into the cabin around midnight. He was bleeding all over the place. I did not ask him for details about what happened,” Bonnie said politely.

"Okay, Bonnie. I will not ask any more questions for now," The doctor said. "However, I will make a few statements I want you to think about before anyone else starts asking questions. It is very difficult for a man to shoot himself in the back of the leg with a gun that cannot be found. Plus, he managed to do this while out for a ride in the middle of the night just before a storm. A storm that his teenage daughter took about six hours to get through. On an open stretch of road only five miles long, that should have taken no more than an hour. Apparently, a stretch of road so perilous the poor girl falls at the doctor's door looking beaten and half-drowned. You need to consider those things very carefully. As for your father, don't let him move if he wakes up. You can give him water but no food. I will be back in a few hours."

The doctor brushed a piglet away from his carriage before he paused with his foot on the step. “Regardless of what did or did not happen last night, you handled yourself quite well. I know I haven’t been in town long, but you can trust me.”

Bonnie watched as the doctor’s carriage rolled over branches and through puddles before it disappeared around the corner of the barn. She filled her lungs with a deep breath and turned toward the cabin. Her hands no longer felt like sticky gloves of sap but like two blocks of ice. She rubbed them together to regain the feeling in her fingers as she approached the door. She stood in the doorway and watched her father breathe very slowly. Bonnie dropped to her knees and prayed fervently.

The doctor didn't wait for his carriage to roll to a stop. Mud splashed around his boots when he hit the ground. His quick steps boomed on the stairs as he rushed inside.

"Lord, help me!" screamed Mrs. Lanny as the door swung open, barely missing her face.

"Sorry, Lanny. Please fetch Reginald for me." The doctor called out as he bounded up the stairs.

Mrs. Lanny stood in shock at the doctor's blood and mud-soaked clothes. She turned to the muddy footprints across her freshly cleaned foyer and up the stairs and took a deep breath. "Reggie! Reggie, come on out here."

The doctor burst into his bedroom, "Mary dear, why are you still in bed?" He asked as he went to his bureau and pulled out a set of keys.

"I have a terrible headache, my love," Mary replied in a languid voice. Her hand slowly traced circles in the air.

The doctor looked at his wife briefly and left the room.

"Reginald, go to the sheriff and ask him to come here," the doctor barked as he descended the stairs.

The doctor blew past Mrs. Lanny into his office. His fingers fumbled as he unlocked his medicine cabinet and reached for a bottle. His hand fell upon his desired target, and he lifted a small empty bottle labeled morphine. He sighed, moved to another locked drawer, and pulled out a bottle labeled — *Μορφεΐς*. He placed the bottle and syringe on his desk.

"Lanny!" he called out.

"Yes, Sir." Came the reply from the hallway.

"I must get back to the Buckshire farm. Please pack some food for the girl and lay out a change of clothes for me," the doctor said as he packed a small leather bag with bandages.

A stout, overly mustached man filled the doorway to the office. "Good morning, Doctor. I was just on my way to see you when your boy burst out of the house," said the rough-looking man with his hat in his hand.

"Ah, Sheriff, I will need your assistance," said the doctor as he stretched out his hand.

Chapter 6: The Doctor's Not Alone

Bonnie felt the warmth of the fire behind her as she sat next to her father and watched him sleep. She knew each slow rise and fall of his chest was a blessing from God. Her leather-bound Bible felt heavy in her lap as she read passage after passage. Outside, a cold wind and a clear starry sky overtook the warmth of the day.

Emmitt's arm shifted as his hand slowly curled into a fist. Bonnie laid her Bible on the chair and stood as she held her breath. Emmitt's breathing quickened. His head rolled away from Bonnie toward the closed door. He unclenched his fist and gripped the edge of the table until his knuckles turned white.

Bonnie stepped forward but paused as a floorboard creaked. Reflexively, she gasped for air. Emmitt slowly turned his head, and his eyes fluttered open. Bonnie knew pain and suffering. She had watched her mother wither away for over a year as cancer ate through her, but she was unprepared for the look in her father's eyes. Emmitt's usually pleasant face was gray and ashen. Streaks of red flamed across the whites of his watery eyes. She could barely recognize her strong-willed father.

"Bonnie," Emmitt groaned.

"Papa, I'm here, Papa!" she cried as she gripped his white knuckles.

Emmitt closed his eyes.

"Papa?" Bonnie whispered as his breathing slowed down. The tension in his body relaxed, and the white flushed out of his knuckles as he drifted out of consciousness.

She stood over him, uncertain if she felt better when he was awake or unconscious. She pulled a blanket from across a chair and gently laid it over him. The jingle of a harness caught her attention, and she walked around the table toward the door.

The cold of the night hit her hard as she stepped onto the short porch. Doctor Bagwell had just stepped down from his carriage.

“Where have you been?” Bonnie asked as she approached the doctor. “My father just woke up!”

“Miss Buckshire, contrary to what you may believe, your father was not the only medical emergency today,” Doctor Bagwell fired back as he pulled his medical bag from behind the seat. “Is he still awake?”

"No, he was only awake briefly," Bonnie stood with her arms folded across her chest. "You said you would be right back. What could be more important than a man lying on the kitchen table with his leg cut off?"

“Perhaps a first-time mother going into labor four months too early.” The doctor's tone was firm but not angry as he walked past her. "I believe you know the Sheriff's son, Deputy Hobbs."

Bonnie looked from the doctor toward the yard as a tall teenage boy stepped around the carriage and took off his hat. The boy was a taller, more youthful version of his father, with broad shoulders and the look of unlimited strength. Yet he stood sheepishly as if he didn't know how to present his imposing frame. His large hands fidgeted behind his hat as he avoided eye contact with the furious Bonnie.

"Evening Bonnie, I'm... umm sorry about your father," mumbled the boy.

"Dewey, please wait out here," she said as she turned and walked back into the cabin.

Dewey sighed with relief.

Inside, Dr. Bagwell stood with his stethoscope pressed against Emmitt's chest.

"Why—" Bonnie started.

"Shhh," the doctor hissed.

Bonnie stood silently as the doctor moved the stethoscope from place to place. Finally, he removed the device and dropped it into his bag.

"Did you think about what I told you before I left?" asked the doctor.

"What?" Bonnie replied.

"Your story, Miss Buckshire," said Doctor Bagwell. "The details of how your father was shot. I did ask you to think about that before I left. Did I not?"

Bonnie scrolled through the fog of memory that covered the last thirty-six hours. Images rushed through her mind of her father busting into the cabin bleeding, the chase with Ruth on the back of Sango, crossing the river, Mrs. Lanny telling her to keep quiet, and finally, the horror of holding her father's severed leg.

"I can see you put no thought into it. I don't think it matters right now. That poor boy is no match for you," said the doctor. "He is here to help with anything I need tonight and to help transport you and your father in the morning."

"Transport us where?" asked Bonnie.

"I sent a telegraph to your uncle in Nashville. A wagon will be here at sunrise to take you to his plantation. Why didn't you tell me you had an uncle?" said the doctor as he drew into a syringe a clear liquid from a bottle with writing that Bonnie didn't recognize.

"You sent a telegram to my uncle?" Bonnie blurted out louder than she intended. Her face contorted with rage as she covered her mouth.

"I've given him morphine. You will not wake him," said the doctor as he set the syringe on the table. "And yes. The sheriff told me that your father's brother owns a large plantation on the north side of Nashville. Is there a reason you chose not to inform me that you had an uncle so close?"

"You had no right to contact him!" Bonnie shouted.

"No, right?" Bagwell fired back. "No right, indeed! I have every right as your father's physician. Did you save his life? Are you going to provide all the care he needs in this two-room cabin? Are you going to keep the well-wishers away in a town on the verge of a cholera outbreak?"

Bonnie's body pulsed with fury. Her nails dug into her palm as she clenched her fists. Her light blue eyes burned hotter than the sun. The wave of anger that welled up inside her reached its boiling point as she stepped forward.

"Before you say anything you might regret, it is unkind to leave that poor boy just standing like a fool in the mud," the doctor said to bring the room back down to a simmer.

Bonnie did not attempt to hide her indignation as she took a deep breath. She unclenched her fists and turned toward the door without a word. She felt anger cascade down her limbs with

every step, leaving scorched earth beneath her. With three times the strength required, she yanked the door open and stormed out. The door slammed behind her as the cold air seemed to retreat from her.

Dewey stood exactly where she left him, his hat still in his hands. He wore a mix of fear and shock as she reemerged from the cabin. "Evening Bonnie, um, I'm sorry about your father," he stammered.

"You said that already, Dewey," she replied as she folded her arms across her chest.

"Oh, I guess I did." Dewey fought hard to recover. "Well, I am sorry."

"You should put the horses in the barn since you'll be here all night. You and the doctor can stay out there, too." She looked over her shoulder toward the cabin and muttered.

"I'll put them away." He stepped forward for the first time since Bonnie's stare froze him in place earlier. "Bonnie, it was Mary Tilden Doc had to tend to."

Bonnie knew the young woman but, at this moment, didn't care about her, her husband, or any child they shared. The cold air had not cooled the furious flames that seethed inside her. She tried not to glare at Dewey but could not soften her stony expression.

Dewey led his horse around and took the reins of the carriage horse. With his eyes averted, he spoke, "Doc tried real hard. I was outside and could hear her hollar'n. It went on for a really long time. Longer than it shoulda, I think. It musta been hours he was in there. Then, after a while, the hollar'n stopped, and everything was real still for a minute or two. Then I could hear Thomas Tilden scream. Their servant girl came out crying, her frock covered in blood. Doc came out next with ole Thomas cussin' him. Thomas' Pa and brother were holdin' 'em back as he

screamed and said unthinkable things. Well, Doc just stood at the bottom of the steps and let Thomas say everything he wanted. Finally, when Thomas couldn't scream anymore, Doc just said, I'm sorry, then turned and walked away, his head held high."

Dewey looked up at Bonnie on her high post. Her hands cupped in front of her face as tears welled up in her eyes.

Dewey continued, "I only tell ya because Doc's had a pretty hard day, and I know you wouldn't wanna make it worse by yell'n at him. Anymore. Well, I'm gonna get along to the barn now." He tipped his hat as he turned the horses away.

Bonnie wiped tears from her eyes and took several deep breaths. Her hands trembled as she tried to stem the flood of tears that poured down her face. Puffs of white rolled out with every exhale. The sea of fire that consumed her abated, and for the first time since she stepped outside, she felt the cold air. After another deep breath, she turned and lifted the latch to open the door.

Wooden planks creaked as she stepped through the door and softly latched the handle behind her. She paused with her back to the doctor, both hands resting on the handle. Bonnie let her chest swell with a deep breath of the cold air seeping through the door's frame. She could feel fiery hate and fury leave her body with every exhale.

"Doctor," she said just above a whisper. "I'm really sorry for being angry with you. I didn't know what you went through."

Doctor Bagwell's sleeves were rolled up as he started to unwrap the blood-soaked bandage that covered Emmitt's half leg. He looked up at Bonnie, "Miss Buckshire, in my line of

work, people are frequently unhappy with me. But now we need to get this bandage changed. Will you please wash your hands and assist me?

"Yes," Bonnie said as she sighed in relief. She splashed water everywhere as she washed her hands. The doctor gave her instructions as they worked together to remove the bandages. The smell of blood overpowered the hickory logs in the fireplace; the room was saturated with it, and everything else was drowned out. Bonnie had slaughtered pigs before, and blood was just a byproduct of work, but now it was different. Now, the smell of blood was personal, and it attacked her senses. The scent revolted her and it took everything she had to hold down the nothingness in her stomach. Her body shuddered every time she touched the crimson-stained bandage. Finally, the bandage fell away from the swollen red stump, and Bonnie could not hold back anymore. She turned and vomited on the floor.

The doctor waited until the sound of retching stopped. "Okay, you've gotten it out of you. Wash your hands and face and come back over. I still need you for this."

The water felt good on her face, and Bonnie washed quickly to return to the table.

"I will need you to hold his thigh up so I can examine the wound. You don't have to look if it will help, but I recommend you do. You will need to strengthen your constitution if you are going to help your father." The doctor motioned where she should put her hands.

"Will the young deputy come in here?" the doctor asked as he sponged blood off the wound.

"Dewey? No, he will not come in unless I tell him that he can," Bonnie replied, thankful for something to talk about.

“No, I imagine he wouldn’t, would he,” said the doctor with a smile. After a few moments of silence, he spoke again, “Bonnie, you need to have your story straight about how your father was shot. I am not prying into your personal affairs, but it is unreasonable to think a grown man shot himself in the back of the leg. That boy is so scared of you that he will not ask. Even though I know his father told him to find out what is going on out here. I sent Reginald to fetch the sheriff so I could ask if he knew of any relations that could help take care of your father, but the sheriff was already on his way to see me. He wanted to talk about the men we saw on the road as we were going out of town. He reminded me that it is illegal to assist runaway slaves.”

Bonnie watched the doctor’s hands move over the wound as he closely examined the line of stitching.

When she didn't respond, the doctor continued, "As you know, the men were slave catchers looking for a young female runaway who was assisted by at least two people. They shot at them during the night but could not be sure they hit anyone. Ultimately, they lost the trail somewhere south of town. The sheriff asked if I had treated anyone that had been shot. I'm new to this town, but your father’s reputation travels quickly."

Bonnie’s eyes filled with tears, “What did you tell him?” she asked.

The doctor softly patted the leg dry and applied a greasy substance over the wound. He wiped his hands and started to rewrap the leg. “Well, I told him that I had spent the entire morning amputating your father’s leg because of an infection.”

"You lied to him?" Bonnie shouted before she could help herself.

"I did no such thing," replied the doctor indignantly. "Did I not tell you that your father's leg would get infected, and did I not thereafter remove the leg?"

"Well, yes," Bonnie said.

"Then I did not lie. I just simply left out what caused the injury, and he failed to ask. Then his son arrived to inform me of the young woman in labor."

"Mary Tilden." Bonnie supplied.

"Yes," replied the doctor softly. "So, I excused myself and did everything I could for her. However, I do not believe the sheriff was satisfied with my response. I avoided him after I left the Tilden house. Young Deputy Dewey mentioned that you had an uncle, so I sent him to find out where, and then I sent the telegram."

The doctor slowly wrapped fresh bandages around Emmitt's leg as he watched Bonnie. She avoided his glances as she watched her father sleep.

After long contemplation, Bonnie broke the silence. "I haven't seen my uncle for a long time. He does own a large plantation and many slaves that he inherited from my grandfather, who died before I was born. Actually, the land and all holdings were supposed to be split evenly between him and my father. But my father insisted that all the slaves be set free, and my uncle refused. Ultimately, my father freed all the slaves that were willed to him, and he walked away from everything else. After that, he went into the ministry."

"I can appreciate your father's convictions, but why not maintain the plantation and make all his servants' lives easier?" asked the doctor as he secured the final bandage.

"Because Jesus did not die on the cross so *some* people could be free," Bonnie said.

Doctor Bagwell wiped his hands on a rag and dropped it over his leather bag. He started to speak but stopped and headed toward the hearth. The soles of his boots stuck to the hardwood floor with every step. Bonnie watched as he placed one foot on the hearth and moved the kettle over the fire.

"Bonnie, if we don't send your father to your uncle's, he will die," said the doctor.

"I understand that now. I know you are only trying to do what you think is best," replied Bonnie.

"Good, but now we need to come to an agreement on what we are going to tell that young man outside. I am sure he is here to find out whatever he can and report to his father," the doctor said.

"I'll take care of that. I've known Dewey all my life. Our mothers were best friends, and they got sick at the same time. His got better, mine didn't." She turned and walked out the door.

The frigid night air washed over her as she took a deep breath. All the heat of her fury was gone, and the cold bit at every inch of her exposed skin. She looked up at the stars, and for the first time in hours, she felt a calm come over her. She focused her eyes on the lantern light that crept through the boards of the old barn.

The barn door creaked as she pushed it open. Dewey was brushing his tall chestnut-colored horse. He nodded at Bonnie and continued his task.

"Dewey," The tone of her voice cut through the still air of the barn.

Dewey looked up again and stepped around the backside of the mare. He peered over the horse from the safe side. His eyes were a mix of excitement and terror.

“Dewey, I want to ask you something, and I want the truth,” her words were firm but not angry. “Did your father send you out here for any specific reason?”

Dewey stepped over to a table and set the brush down. “My Pa thinks your father had someth’n to do with that runaway them fellas were looking for. He thinks the Doc is hide’n someth’n about it. He wants me to find out if’n he’s right.” For the first time, Dewey looked Bonnie directly in the eyes.

“*Something*, Dewey, *something*, for the life of me, I’ll never figure out what you have against the letter G,” Bonnie teased with a half-smile. Just as quickly as it appeared, the half-smile melted away. “I helped her get away. It was me those men were chasing. I don’t care one bit what the law says. I pray to God that she has already made it through Kentucky and is somewhere safe in the North. So, now you know. What are you going to do?”

Dewey tipped his large black hat back as he wiped a hand across his forehead. “Doggone it, Bonnie!” the boy exclaimed. “What in the world are you think’n? Do you know how much trouble you can get in? It ain’t just against the law. It’s—”

“It’s what Dewey?” Bonnie fired back. “It’s the only decent thing to do. That’s what it is! I know for a fact you don’t believe in slavery.”

“What I think or feel doesn’t matter a lick.” Dust kicked up with every step from the barn floor. “The law is the law, and I am the law, Bonnie!”

“Don’t you yell at me, Dewey Hobbs!” she responded with an accusing finger pointed at him.

“I’m sorry!” he retorted just as hotly. “Bonnie, you’ve put me in a spot. Why would you do that?”

"I know I have," Bonnie replied. "You can't turn my father in without turning me in as well. So, what is it going be, Dewey?"

“You’re the most aggravatin’est girl I’ve ever knowed,” Dewey groaned. He slapped his hat across the palm of his hand.

“I’ve ever known,” Bonnie corrected. “Come on inside and eat *something*.”

Chapter 7: The Road to Independence

Every jolt of the wagon shot new discomfort through Bonnie's body, but she knew it was nothing compared to what her father felt. They had left the cabin just after sunrise. She didn't have much to pack, so there was no need for a long delay. Dewey would collect the hogs and chickens and take them to the Smith farm. Then, he would check on the cabin every few days until she returned.

The trail was soft and smelled of muddy earth. The moisture in the air made every breath a miniature puff of smoke that evaporated within seconds. The tiny billows of breath gave a distinct contrast to the rainbow of color from the leaves. The sycamore trees were already bare, but the oaks, maples, ash, and elms fought for the dominance of different colors. It was a beautiful display of God's tapestry and a harsh reminder of everything's transitory life.

She looked ahead of the wagon to see Dewey on his mare. He rode far enough ahead of the wagon to tell the doctor how best to avoid ruts on the trail. It didn't matter. Every acorn they ran over might as well have been a boulder. The wagon creaked and groaned just as much as her father as it lumbered down the trail. She held her father's hand, but the doctor kept him so heavily dosed with morphine that his eyes were glossy oceans. Bonnie knew he didn't really see her when he was awake, but he also didn't scream in pain.

Reginald sat beside the doctor on the wagon bench. The doctor quickly removed the reins from Reginald after the boy had let the wagon drift into a ditch, leaving the farm. Reginald sat quietly, watched the trees pass, and avoided all eye contact with Bonnie. Reginald was fourteen but looked younger, except he was just as tall as the doctor. He looked innocent as if he knew nothing of the world or his position in it.

The sun crept below the western landscape as the wagon bounced down the trail cut through the wilderness. Bonnie knew it was pointless to try to get Emmitt's hair to stay in place or restore any order to the wild mane, but she patted it down anyway. She smiled when she thought about the regular disorder and chaos that was her father's hair.

"Bonnie, are we getting close?" asked the doctor.

Bonnie's smile faded as she raised her head. She hardly noticed that the trail had emerged from the woods. She looked out over the rolling fields of dirt. She could see row upon row of furrowed earth, but the crop was already harvested.

"We're not far," Bonnie replied. "Just look for the wrought iron irony, and you'll know you're there." The doctor looked over his shoulder but said nothing.

Bonnie reflected on her childhood visits to the plantation. She could only remember a few visits over the years. She knew there were more visits, but they were from when she was very young. Her uncle always gave her sweets and had a laugh that boomed. He would tell her and her cousin stories about Andrew Jackson. She couldn't remember the stories just that they happened. He always smelled of licorice and tobacco, and she'd associated those scents with him since she was little. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remember seeing more than one or two slaves on the plantation.

Bonnie thought back to the last time she had traveled the dusty trail. She could see the care and compassion of her mother's face, but she could also see how angry her father was as they headed north on the trail. Bonnie tried to remember how many years had passed since she last saw the plantation. It had to have been at least eight years. The short visit was for her uncle's wedding, but it wasn't a happy event. Her mother tried to keep her from seeing her father and

uncle argue, but there was no hiding it. As the argument cascaded into chaos, Bonnie's mother tried to keep the peace and comfort Elle, the young bride. Bonnie could picture her new aunt's teary eyes. Sad and beautiful were the only thoughts Bonnie could associate with the woman. She lingered on that thought. What was she like? The sad bride was barely older than Bonnie was now. Bonnie had spent all her time with her cousin but thought he was a spoiled brat. She imagined nothing had really changed.

“That makes sense now,” came the doctor’s voice.

Bonnie looked up and saw the wrought iron arch over the gate to the plantation. Rust showed on the edges, but the rest was just as she remembered it. The cold black iron had beautifully wrought tobacco plants on the vertical posts. At the top, an arch stretched side to side with *INDEPENDENCE* carefully cast in iron.

The doctor stopped the wagon before the gate and cleared his throat. Then he cleared his throat again a little louder. Bonnie twisted to see over the edge of the wagon. She noticed the donkey tied up to the stonework of the gate. It wasn’t until the third time the doctor cleared his throat that she could see the two bare feet that protruded from behind the stone pillar.

“Reginald, please get down and wake up the sentry,” said the doctor.

“The who?” asked the boy.

“The fellow sleeping behind the pillar, Reginald, please wake him up,” the doctor motioned toward the bare feet. “I imagine he was sent here to wait on us.”

Bonnie looked from the bare feet to Reginald and could see the apprehension in the boy's eyes. He looked terrified. Reginald looked from the feet to the doctor and back again. The doctor sighed. "Dewey, would you mind?"

Dewey steered his chestnut mare toward the prone figure. "Hey there," said Dewey. "I said, Hey there, fella." Dewey looked back at the doctor when the figure didn't move.

"I guess we should just leave and pass on by," said the doctor.

"No," Bonnie interjected. "Dewey, get down if you have to, but wake him up."

Dewey stepped down from the mare and tapped a bare foot with his boot. The body stirred but didn't wake up. Dewey looked up at Bonnie and the doctor. He took a few steps to the side and pushed the push with his boot. "Hey there, fella, wake up!" Dewey shouted.

A skinny boy of ten shot up and backed away from Dewey. "I sorry, Master, I weren't sleep'n," the boy shouted in fear.

"Watcha sorry for if you weren't sleep'n," asked Dewey sardonically.

"Dewey Hobbs, don't you dare," chided Bonnie. "What's your name?"

The terrified boy looked from the tower that was Dewey Hobbs to Bonnie. He looked emaciated, with wild eyes and sunken cheeks. His coarse, long-sleeve shirt was too short for his arms but not nearly as short as his pants for spindly legs. "I Pip, Ma'am," said the boy.

"Pip, were you told to wait for someone at the gate?" asked Bonnie calmly.

"Yes'em." Pip looked from Bonnie to the doctor and then to Dewey. "Is you them?"

"Yes, Pip," Bonnie smiled. I imagine you were told to let the big house know we were on our way so they could prepare for us to arrive."

Pip nodded at Bonnie but still looked terrified.

"I thought so," Bonnie said. "We'll rest the horses for a few minutes, so you should head up to the big house and let them know we'll be there soon." She nodded and watched the boy to see if what she said registered in his mind. Pip stood still and nodded his head in unison with Bonnie. "Pip, run along now." The boy jolted from his stupor and ran to his donkey. It took three attempts before he was able to mount the animal. He slapped the donkey on the haunch to get it to increase from a casual walk to an angry walk.

"What was that all bout," asked Dewey as he walked toward the wagon.

"He's a field hand tasked with a job," Bonnie paused to swallow anger. "What do you think will happen to him if he fails to do his job and embarrasses his *Master*?" She stressed the last word with sharp disdain. Reginald looked at Bonnie with wide eyes full of fear. "Doctor, please give Pip a couple of minutes and then start down the road. The *big house* is not far past that grove of pecan trees."

As the wagon came out of the pecan grove, the dirt road changed to a small pebble path lined with ornamental grass. The large plantation house stood atop a small hill silhouetted against the dark sky. Gas lanterns illuminated the front of the beautiful two-story white mansion and made it glow against the stary backdrop. Eight round white columns lined the front of the house in the Greek style. Two staircases bowed upwardly from the center entrance and curved toward the second-story wrap-around porch. The pebble path circled a marble statue of a half-dressed woman holding a pitch. The whiteness of the statue and house radiated elegance in the darkness,

just as the owner intended. It seemed bigger than Bonnie remembered. She felt an instant spasm of disgust at the opulence. Anger welled inside her, and her face felt warmer than it should have been in the cool night.

As the wagon drew closer, the illuminated house became the backdrop to the forty plus well-dressed servants that stood shoulder to shoulder around the pebble path. The men wore deep red or blue jackets with white pants. All the women wore similar red or blue dresses with their hair neatly bundled up. Then, three white faces came into focus.

Richard Buckshire stood in the center in a white suit and wide-brimmed planter's hat. He stood taller and larger than his brother Emmitt, but they favored each other in the face. Bonnie could picture sitting on her uncle's knee as a child. The kind way he always lifted her and spun her around. Then, the thoughts of him yelling at a slave who dropped a platter at the wedding resurfaced. His up-raised hand and the force of his slap across the girl's face. She couldn't remember a time when her father was more upset. Emmitt yelled and pushed his brother out of anger, which was not something she had ever seen before or since.

On Richard's left stood his son Jasper in a velvet navy blue suit. A carbon copy of his father in build, looks, and demeanor, Jasper was just a few months older than Bonnie. As a boy, he would be mean to her. He whined and cried whenever he didn't get his way. Then Bonnie remembered she had no recollection of his mother. She had died when they were very young. She felt ashamed that she never really thought about him losing his mother at such a young age.

On Richard's right stood his second wife. Elle was only twenty-six and looked the picture of youth and elegance. Her crimson hoop dress swayed in the evening breeze, and Bonnie could see her effervescent smile reflected in the gas light. Elle was just as beautiful as the one and only

time Bonnie had ever seen her, but the sadness was gone. The woman's smile looked like she was expecting a parade. Bonnie tried not to be angry about the woman's joy but couldn't help it. This wasn't a time to be happy.

The doctor reined in the wagon in front of the Buckshire family. "Evening, Mr. Buckshire," said the doctor. "I'm Doctor..."

"Bagwell, yes, I assumed so," Richard cut in. "How is my brother?"

The question felt compulsory to the doctor, especially since Richard didn't move from his place on the step while his wife and son moved immediately to the wagon. "Reverend Buckshire is resting," Bagwell responded. "I have kept him sedated for the trip. Otherwise, I fear he could not have handled the pain."

"You underestimate my brother, Doctor," said Richard. "After all, he is a Buckshire." Richard's smile widened maliciously.

"Bonnie, my dear." Elle's accent was that of the deeper South, not quite the same as most in the area. "I am so sorry that tragedy is what brings you here, but I am so thankful you are here."

"You'll forgive Aunt, but I am not especially pleased to be here," Bonnie replied. Her tone was flat and without malice.

"You haven't changed a bit, cousin," Jasper said in return. "Stepmother, maybe we should be more concerned with the care of my uncle and less about the formalities of forced hospitality." Jasper smiled at Bonnie as if he had done her a favor. "Jefferson, please collect some boys to carry my uncle to the first guest room. With your leave to do so, Father, of course."

Richard nodded, and a tall, stately black man in his forties stepped forward. He waved to three other men, who quickly rushed to his side. Jefferson approached the wagon and bowed his head to Bonnie. "Miss, we'll be real careful with him I promise." Two men climbed into the wagon, gently lifted Emmitt, and handed him to the others. Bonnie watched as the men showed great care in all the movements of her father. Then she noticed the rest of the servants gathered around. They all watched Emmitt closely. Bonnie could see tears in the eyes of many of the older women. No one paid any attention to Richard and Doctor Bagwell speaking. She had not until she heard the change in Bagwell's tone.

"Excuse me, sir. Why is there not a doctor here?" Doctor Bagwell's question was more of an accusation. "I specifically stated in the telegram that there should be a physician here to care for the Reverend."

"Doctor Simpson is the finest doctor in Nashville," returned Richard just as sharply. "We are not quite a provincial here as in Clarksville. Where a doctor can be away for long periods. Unmissed. He will return in the morning. You will be our guests tonight, of course. So, if my brother needs anything, you will be here to provide your services. Your assistant..." He paused to look at Dewey. "Can stay in the extra bunk in your room." Disdainfully, Richard looked at Reginald. "The boy can stay on the row." With an air of finality, Richard turned, offered his arm to Elle, and followed Bonnie, who was only one step behind the four men who carried Emmitt.

"Well, King Richard has spoken, gentlemen," said Jasper as he bowed toward his father's back. "Doctor, and I'm sorry. Sir, what was your name?"

"Dewey, Dewey Hobbs," replied Dewey as he stepped down from his horse.

“Ah, Mr. Hobbs,” Jasper smiled widely. “I will have our people take care of the horses and wagon. If you’ll follow me, I will show you where you can freshen up. Then I believe we’ll be able to rustle up some food for you, big fella. I can only imagine you are famished.” Similar to his father, Jasper turned smartly and headed toward the house.

The doctor handed his medical bag to Dewey and stepped down from the wagon. “I don’t think I like either of those fellas,” said Dewey quietly as a team of servants walked over to take the wagon and chestnut mare.

"Well, Deputy," replied the doctor. "If it makes it any easier for you. I don't get the impression that they like us very much either." The doctor turned his attention to the terrified Reginald. "Reginald, help these men with the horses, and then they will escort you to where you will stay for the night."

“Hey Doc,” Dewey said.

“Yes,” replied the doctor.

“What did he call me?” asked Dewey.

Chapter 8: The Uncomfortable Dinner

The men laid Emmitt in a large four-poster bed. Emmitt stirred but didn't wake up. Bonnie knelt beside the bed and took her father's hand. She looked up and saw the four men still there. Jefferson was the oldest of the men by at least ten years. He looked proud and distinguished, with curls of white mixed into his black hair. Bonnie noticed streaks of tears he had tried to wipe off his cheeks.

"That will be all, Jefferson," Richard said from the doorway. "Please tend to our other guests. Let the kitchen know we will supper at seven."

"Yes, Sir," Jefferson bowed as he motioned the others to leave before him.

"Bonnie, I will sit with my brother while you go get cleaned up," Richard said.

"I don't want to leave him," Bonnie replied.

"It was not a request," Richard said sharply. "Elle will show you to your room and assist you in cleaning up for supper." Richard walked to Bonnie's side and put out his hand to help her up. Bonnie refused the hand and walked past her uncle.

Bonnie paused in the doorway. "He is all I have in this world," she said.

Bonnie turned and found herself face-to-face with Elle. Tears ran down Elle's cheeks as she said, "And now you have us."

Sad and beautiful, Bonnie thought, but not the same kind of sadness. Elle's bright green eyes outshined her emerald necklace, even wet with tears. Bonnie wasn't sure why, but as soon as Elle put out her hand, Bonnie met it.

"Doc, you been on many plantations?" asked Dewey.

"I'd say yes," replied the doctor as he washed his face in a basin. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I ain't never been on a real big plantation and don't know hows to act, guess you could say," Dewey said. "I mean, I got manners and all that, but these people is different. You think they'd let me eat with the servants?"

"I believe they would take it as a great offense if you asked," replied the doctor. "I suggest you limit yourself in conversation as much as possible. I will try to speak for you whenever I can."

"Thanks, Doc," Dewey said. "Do you think they are takin care of Reggie?"

"I imagine young Reginald is well," the doctor replied.

Dewey's hands fidgeted as he paced the room. His heavy boots thudded on the wooden floor step after step. He raised his head to speak, then stopped and paced more.

"Is there someone else you are worried about?" asked the doctor knowingly.

"Well, she ain't gonna like it here," Dewey replied. He continued to tread heavily across the room. "She doesn't like these people, and neither do I."

"Whether she or we like them is irrelevant," said the doctor. "They are her family, and her father will need a place to recover that can provide better care for him. Besides, like it or not, Bonnie can take care of herself. Now, stop pacing and wash up."

“I knew there would be a beautiful young woman underneath all that grime,” Elle said sweetly.

“You scrubbed hard enough to start over and make a new one,” Bonnie protested.

Elle smiled and waved the objection away. “We are not exactly the same size, but I could give you a dress for the evening if you like?” Elle asked hopefully.

Bonnie looked at her faded cotton dress. It was patched and resewn more times than she could remember. The bottom hem was frayed beyond repair and gave it an uneven look all the way around. Sweat stains followed the waistline like a belt. It had started out as blue but now leaned toward gray with a patchwork of stains. Bonnie looked at the crimson taffeta dress on Elle. Bonnie assumed Elle was the model of elegance and fashion. The dress was stunning but completely impractical. How in the world would she shovel out a barn stall or bend over to collect chicken eggs? Then she remembered where she was and who she was looking at, “I think I’ll keep my dress, thank you.”

Elle smiled and said, “Of course, darling. No need to change things, now.” The last word left no doubt that Bonnie would have to change eventually.

“I’d like to see my father now,” Bonnie said. “I’m not hungry.” As she finished her sentence, her stomach rumbled loudly in disagreement.

Elle smiled that annoyingly sweet smile again. “Of course, my dear. We will stop by his room on our way to supper.”

Two young men past Bonnie and Elle headed toward the back staircase as they walked down the hall. The men wore the tattered clothes of field hands and were very different from everyone Bonnie had seen so far. Their eyes cast downward as they made their way through the hall. Richard stood in the doorway to Emmitt's room and spoke softly to someone inside. His demeanor was different, less foreboding, and authoritative.

“Yes, Emse. I know,” said Richard kindly. He straightened up when he noticed Elle and Bonnie. Richard’s eyes flashed inside the room one more time before he turned toward Bonnie. “Supper will be in ten minutes. Do not be late,” he barked as he walked past them.

“Of course, dear,” Elle replied.

Elle took Bonnie by the hand and led her into the doorway. Just inside the room stood a tall, lean woman. Her black hair was pulled back with a red scarf in a traditional fashion. Bonnie could tell she wasn't a house servant but didn't look like a fieldhand either. She looked stately and strong in a way Bonnie had not seen since her mother. She always felt her mother owned everyone she walked into. Not out of authority because she didn't really have any. It was a presence. It was the illusion of authority. Her mother set every room at ease with kindness and forbearance. People immediately responded to her in a way that amazed Bonnie, but this woman was different. She commanded authority as if she pulled it out of the air and spun it around her like a shield.

“Esme, this Bonnie,” said Elle.

"I know Mistress Elle," said Esme. "These were the first hands to touch her when she came into this world."

“You what?” exclaimed Bonnie.

“Your Mama and Papa wouldn’t allow anyone else to do it,” said Esme with a smile.

“You were born in this room, on that bed.” Esme's smile faded. "Your Mama was the brightest soul I ever knew. You got her light. I see it."

Bonnie searched for words but could find none. "Why have I never seen you before?" Bonnie asked. I've been here plenty of times when I was younger, and I would have remembered you."

“How many slaves do you remember seeing here when you were little?” asked Esme. "Two maybe three up close and they was always house girls.”

“I... I don’t remember,” Bonnie tried to recall faces from her past.

“Ain’t no matter," Esme's smile widened. "You're here, and I'm here, and we gonna take care of your Papa.”

Bonnie looked from Esme to the bed where her father lay. She noticed a hunched figure in a chair beside the bed for the first time. An old woman held Emmitt's hand and rocked ever so slightly in her seat.

“Granny Moon wanted to come pray over your father,” said Esme. “She was the first hands to ever touch him when he came into the world. They’ll be time for talk’n later. You get on to supper so Master Richard don’t get cross with you.”

Elle took Bonnie by the hand and led her out the door.

“Doctor, I do hope you forgive my bluntness earlier,” said Richard as they sat at the table. “I do not want to give the impression of ingratitude for the services you have provided my brother. We are grateful for your continued support until Doctor Simpson arrives.”

"Sir, I understand your bluntness and would expect nothing less given the circumstances," the doctor replied cordially.

“Wonderful, then you’ll grant me further directness,” Richard said in a less friendly tone. “What was the cause and circumstances of you amputating my brother’s leg in such a hasty fashion?”

A bite of chicken froze inches from the doctor's mouth, and he lowered the fork to his plate. He glanced at Bonnie before he turned his head toward Richard.

“Richard dear,” interrupted Elle. “That is hardly appropriate conversation for the supper table.” She glanced back at Bonnie.

Richard slowly chewed as he stared at his wife. The table was silent as he dragged the moment out. "Right, you are, my dear. Doctor, we shall continue the conversation over bourbon after the meal." Silence followed Richard's words as no one moved—no one except Dewey, who continued to struggle with cutting chicken from the bones.

"I am sorry for your father's condition," Jasper broke the silence. "But I am glad to see you again, cousin. It has been at least eight years, has it not? I do hope we can get reacquainted. I will be happy to show you the ground tomorrow."

“I remember the grounds perfectly well,” Bonnie replied. “I remember what you all do here and how you do it. I have no interest in getting reacquainted with your way of life.”

"Ah well, I see that I have stumbled upon a moccasin nest and will venture into safer waters," said Jasper. He turned his attention to Dewey. "My friend, you are welcome to pick up that piece of chicken if it keeps you from sawing your way through that plate."

"Jasper!" rasped Elle.

"I would like to hear what Bonnie has to say about our way of life," Richard broke in.

"I don't think you would, uncle," Bonnie replied as she placed her fork beside her untouched plate of food.

"I believe we should be grateful that Emmitt and Bonnie are here..." Elle started.

"Quiet!" Richard interjected. "Please do, continue, Bonnie. I would love to hear what my brother has filled your head with so I know what to expect in return for my Christian kindness."

"Christian kindness," Bonnie scoffed. "Yes, uncle, you are a paragon of Christian values."

"Paragon means great example, Big fella," said Jasper.

"Shut up, Jasper," barked his father. "Do go on, Bonnie."

"Mr. Buckshire, I must protest," said the doctor.

"You think keeping people in bondage is a Christian value?" asked Bonnie. "Withholding from them what Jesus granted everyone?"

"Ah yes, your father's old argument," Richard dismissed. "There really is nothing new under the sun. Did Paul not write, *Servants be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling?*"

"Dear, please," begged Elle.

Bonnie grinned, "Yes, he did, but Jesus said that he was sent by the Father *to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recover of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those that are bruised.*" She stared at her uncle and waited for his response.

Richard sat back in his chair and met her stare. A wry smile broke across his face.

"Jasmine," he called to the servant that stood in the corner.

"Yes, Master," said the thin, dark-skinned woman.

"Are you brokenhearted, bruised, or blind?" he asked sardonically. His stern gaze fixed on Bonnie.

"No, Master," replied the woman.

"Are you happy here in your position in my house?" Richard asked. He shifted his gaze from Bonnie to Jasmine.

"So happy, Master," she replied quickly.

"That will be enough," Elle said. "You may retire to the kitchen now, Jasmine."

"Yes, Ma'am," said the servant as she rushed out of the room.

Bonnie stood slowly. "I believe you are the blind, uncle." She turned and walked from the room.

"I imagine you were not expecting supper and a show, Big Fella," said Jasper as he finished his glass of wine. "Feel free to take any scraps to your room if you like."

"Enough, Jasper," said Richard. "Doctor, do let the servants know if you need anything. If you'll excuse me, I have things to discuss with my wife."

Elle rose, apologized to Dewey and the doctor, and followed Richard out of the room.

“A delightful exchange,” said Jasper. “I do believe I will go reflect on the riveting discourse.” He left Dewey and the doctor alone at the table.

Bonnie entered her father's room as two young men lifted Granny Moon and carried her toward the back stairs. "My uncle and I argued," Bonnie said.

"Child, the last hut in the quarter knows you argued by now," Esme smiled. "Besides, I knew it was coming from the moment I saw your eyes. I knew your uncle's words, and I knew your father's. Of course, your father's words came from a sweeter voice this time. I been hearing that argument since they were no older than a hiccup. The results weren't always the same. Early on, it ended with shouts and tears, then came shoves and fists, then worse of all, silence."

“Why don’t I know you?” asked Bonnie. “You’ve been here since Pa was little.”

"Well, your uncle didn't want your Papa preaching to any fieldhands," said Esme. "Your uncle figured he could control the house folk well enough, but he made them stay away as much as possible. Your Papa didn't like it none, but your uncle reminded him it wasn't his house or land anymore."

“Did Pa really set half the slaves free?” asked Bonnie.

"Oh yes, Ma'am," Esme beamed. "Everyone that was willed to him when the old Master died. Everyone got papers, and he set up transportation to Pennsylvania. He set my George free."

“Who was George?” asked Bonnie.

"My husband," Esme's smile faded. "I think the old Master feared your Pa might do something crazy. So, he had his will done, so families were split right down the middle between his two sons. All the property, too. Your Pa freed all he could and signed the property over to his brother when he left."

"Where is George now?" asked Bonnie.

"Lord knows, child," Esme smiled. "I pray he stayed out of trouble, but I doubt it."

"Excuse me, ladies," interrupted the doctor. "But I'd like to check on my patient."

Esme placed a rough hand against Bonnie's face. "I am so happy to see you, child. You rest tonight, and we'll talk more later." Esme paused and turned back at the door. "Bless you, doctor. Bless you for everything you've done, in case you don't hear it from anyone else."

Chapter 9: The Chicken Coop

The moon shone brightly over the landscape as Ruth peered around the large oak. The last candles in the little farmhouse went out two hours ago. Anyone in the house should be asleep by now. She looked around the yard again for any signs of dogs and thanked God that there were none in sight. It had been six hours since she left the cave. Fear and hunger had pushed her from the damp shelter. The night was cold, but her anger kept her warm. Anger at Bonnie for lying about someone coming. Anger that she had to run for her life. Anger for the rumble in her stomach. Anger for everything.

The chicken coop was between her and the farm. If she were careful, the chickens wouldn't stir, and no one would miss a few eggs. She could grab the eggs and then get back into the woods. The moonlight illuminated a clear path, nothing for her to trip over or kick by accident. The hog pin was on the other side of the yard, and they wouldn't stir unless she got near them. Aside from the coop and the pin, it was just a small house and an old outhouse on the edge of the wood line. She could get to the coop, back into the woods, and be on her way in no time. But it was a risk. A risk she didn't want to take, but her stomach and lack of energy told her that she must.

Nothing moved except the leaves tossed in the light breeze. Ruth stepped out from behind the tree. Chills ran down her spine as she crouched low. She made sure to keep the coop between her and the house. It wasn't much concealment, but it was better than nothing. She had to force herself to breathe every few steps. The moonlight faded away as a cloud drifted above. The yard grew darker, but there was still enough light to see clearly. Slowly, she stalked forward, her eyes focused on the farmhouse door.

The clouds rolled past and lit the yard again. Her heart raced as she knelt beside the coop. The chickens stirred but didn't make much noise. Ruth looked over her shoulder at the wood line. The distance looked twice as far as it did from the other side. She took a deep breath. All she needed was just two eggs, and then she'd be back in the safety of the wilderness.

She moved closer and found the slots for retrieving eggs. She held her breath as she slowly slid her hand toward the opening. Before she reached the open slot, her stomach growled loudly. The chickens panicked. Feathers flew from the opening as the terrified birds beat their wings. The birds' squawks echoed in the empty night. Just as panicked, Ruth shoved her hands in the coop beneath the frightened birds. Her hands multiplied the chaos inside the coop and drove the birds into a frenzy. They clawed at her hands as she frantically searched for eggs. Ruth refused to leave empty-handed despite the panicked claws that raked across her forearms. She scooped an egg in each hand as the farmhouse door opened with a loud clang.

She heard the shouts but didn't wait to understand the words. Her feet beat across the yard as fast as she could make them go. Fear fueled her run as she sprinted toward the safety of darkness just a few yards ahead of her. She was just two steps away from the oak when the shotgun boomed.

Bonnie stirred in the chair. Her back ached from where she leaned forward, resting her head on the bed. She stretched and noticed it was still dark outside. There was no way to tell the time, but she knew it had been long since the doctor's last check. The candle on the dresser had burned down several inches.

"It is close to four if you were wondering," came Jasper's voice from the shadowy doorway. He stepped into the small light from the shrunken candle. "I didn't mean to wake you if I did."

"You didn't," Bonnie replied. When her eyes focused, she realized he wore the same clothes he had at supper but more disheveled by far. "Why are you still awake?"

"Oh, I've been playing cards with the overseer," Jasper slurred.

"And drinking," Bonnie responded.

"Nothing gets past you," replied Jasper as he wagged a finger in her direction. "Dunlap is a jolly fellow that very much likes his drink. He likes to pretend he doesn't want company, but after a few, he craves the company, and he's always had a few. So, no more pilfering my father's bourbon supply when he's not looking."

"So, instead, you get drunk with the slave driver?" scoffed Bonnie. She made no attempt to hide her disgust.

Jasper laughed loudly and quickly covered his mouth. "My dear cousin, Charles Dunlap, drives nothing. He's drunk more than he's awake, and I fear he knows about as much about tobacco as you," Jasper chuckled. "I am just a poor fool trying to survive an overbearing father and a wicked stepmother." Jasper attempted to look pitiful but could only hold it for a few seconds before he grinned.

"A fool, yes, but hardly poor," Bonnie replied. "What do you want, Jasper?"

"Dear cousin, I want us to be friends," he said as he attempted to straighten up.

"You were not nice to Dewey," Bonnie stated flatly.

Jasper parodied a shocked and sorrowful face. "I do ever so apologize for any blatant ungentlemanly conduct I may have perpa... umm... perpa..."

"Perpetrated," supplied Bonnie.

"Yes, that," smiled Jasper. Against the noble..." Jasper's smile faded away. "Wait, who is Dewbie?"

"It is Dewey," Bonnie corrected. "What do you mean, *wicked stepmother*?"

"Ah, the fair gentlewoman of the house," Jasper attempted a severe look. "Do not let her fool you. She seems the sweet belle of the ball, but in reality, she is quite evil. She is always telling me to stay out of the quarter and stay sober and other such nonsense. Just you watch how she treats poor Jasmine. She does her best to hide her evilness, but I can see right through it." His tone turned bitter as he continued. "Every time we have a runaway, she insists it is her responsibility to handle the matter, even though she is incompetent. She can't seem to get anything right, and it costs father money, which in turn reduces my chances of traveling to Europe next summer. Not one of the runaways from the last year has been caught. That is why Father hired someone to hunt down the last one."

Bonnie listened to Jasper ramble on about Elle's dress collection, jewelry, and endless waste of money. But she was focused on the idea that Richard hired someone to chase down the last runaway. "Do you have many runaways?" she interrupted.

"We have our share just like every other plantation," replied Jasper; perturbed, she interrupted his rant.

“When you say the last one, was that resent?” Bonnie asked but kept her eyes averted from Jasper.

"Resent enough, I guess," Jasper replied. His voice had changed with that response. "That is an interesting question, cousin." Jasper pushed off the door jamb he leaned on and folded his arms across his chest. "Why do you ask?"

Bonnie looked up at Jasper's stern face and accusing eyes. She tried to think of some reason why she would ask that question. The candlelight flickered across Jasper's furrowed brow. Her stomach turned as she searched for a response. She opened her mouth to speak but stopped when Jasper burst out in laughter.

“You should see your face,” Jasper cackled. “I do believe I will be under the weather and not make it to breakfast. Please give my best to Dewbie before he goes." He bowed unsteadily, turned, and walked out the door.

“It’s Dewey,” she said to the empty space.

Chapter 10: The New Doctor

Bonnie ate breakfast in her father's room. Elle and Richard both came by individually but didn't linger long. Elle mentioned that Jasper wasn't feeling well and would likely sleep most of the day. Bonnie just nodded; she had no desire to enter into a conversation about her drunken cousin or anything else with Elle. Richard's visit was cold. He all but ignored her and made no attempt at conversation. He just came into the room, looked at Emmitt for a short while, and then stalked out again. Bonnie wasn't disappointed by the way the visit went.

She hoped to see Esme, but she did not come back. She desperately wanted to ask Esme questions even though she didn't know what to ask. Bonnie felt that regardless of what she asked, Esme would have an answer. Old images flashed through Bonnie's mind if she concentrated. She remembered visits to the plantation but only small bits of information. Picking up pecans with Jasper and sitting on a pony with her uncle holding her in the saddle. Mostly, her mind conjured up images of her mother. With the images came the tears that always followed thoughts of her mother.

"Bonnie," said the doctor from the doorway. "May I enter?"

Bonnie quickly wiped tears from her cheeks. "Of course, Doctor. He has stirred quite a bit in the last hour. I think it is time for more medicine."

"No, my dear," replied the doctor. "The time for medicine is over. I only wanted to keep him sedated for the trip and through last night. The wagon ride down here would have been unbearable if he was awake, and it would have lasted through the night as well. Now that he is here, he must eat, get up, and move around to keep the blood circulating in his other limbs. It will be painful, but he can manage it."

Bonnie looked at her father and tried to imagine him getting up and moving around. Then, more thoughts flooded her mind. How would he take care of himself after this? Would he be able to ride effectively? What was life going to be like now? Most importantly, how long would they have to stay at the plantation? She was right about to ask that question when she heard footsteps and voices coming down the hall.

Richard stepped through the door with a short, fat man behind him. "Here you are, Doctor." The doctor was barely over five feet and seemed to be just as round as he was tall to Bonnie. He looked ridiculous, almost like a caricature. His wispy hair was heavily oiled and pulled over the top of his head. To make matters worse, the greased ringlets of his mustache were uneven.

"Benedict Bagwell, at your service." The much taller doctor stretched his open hand low.

"Doctor Rupert Simpson," said the shorter doctor as he bypassed the proffered hand.

"What is the status of the patient?"

"He is still resting, Doctor," said Bonnie in a hushed tone.

"Mr. Buckshire, I do not treat patients in the presence of children," declared the doctor. He briefly glared at Bonnie and then turned his attention back to Emmitt. His stubby fingers grabbed the blankets and wanked them off. Bonnie had helped Doctor Bagwell change the bandage during the night, and there was no sign of bleeding.

"Mr. Bagwell, I will require you to remove this bandage," said the man, irritability.

"It is Doctor Bagwell," retorted Bonnie.

"Is it? He didn't say," said Doctor Simpson. He turned his attention to the taller doctor.

"Oh yes, I remember. Doctor Benedict Bagwell, from Louisville originally, is it not?"

Doctor Bagwell's jaw flexed. "Originally, yes, but I call Clarksville home now."

"I can't imagine why," snorted Simpson. "Oh wait, I do seem to remember some colleagues telling me about a Doctor Bagwell that was run out of Louisville on a rail, so to speak. For medical incompetence, I believe. Possibly something to do with injecting patients with water instead of pain medicine?"

Bagwell glowered at the fat man. "The bandage is fresh, and the wound is healing well."

"You will excuse me if I don't take your word for it, *Doctor*," said Simpson. "I will manage. I can't imagine there is anything else for us to discuss, *Doctor*."

"No, imagine there is nothing else to be said," Doctor Bagwell replied. He looked at Bonnie briefly before he turned to Richard. "Mr. Buckshire, I thank you for your hospitality. My company and I will depart shortly."

Richard examined the calm expression of Benedict Bagwell and then looked at the fussy Doctor Simpson. Bagwell stood proud and dignified despite the dressing down he just received. On the other hand, Simpson cursed as he struggled to reach past his belly and the edge of the bed to Emmitt's bandaged leg. Richard stretched out his hand to the tall doctor. "Thank you for everything you've done for my brother. Please, provide me a bill for your services," said Richard. "Bonnie, I imagine you would like to see the doctor off." He noticed her worried expression as the other doctor roughly unwrapped the bandage. "I will stay here with Doctor Simpson and your father."

Bonnie noticed Richard's tone was much softer than it had been the night before. "Yes, thank you, uncle."

Bonnie stood beside the wagon as Dewey tightened the harnesses on the horses. The smells of the barn felt more like home than anything she had encountered in the massive white house. All her attempts to have a conversation with Dewey failed. He was mad, but she knew it wasn't at her. She assumed he strongly desired to throttle Jasper and was disappointed he had not appeared yet.

"You know my cousin is an idiot, right," Bonnie said hopefully. "I mean, you shouldn't be bothered by the things he said to you last night."

"What? Him?" asked Dewey. "You think that's what's bother'n me? I don't mind him none. Plenty a people make comments to me to get my goat."

"Really? Your goat?" quipped Bonnie.

"You know what I mean," fired back Dewey. "Anyways, that ain't what's bother'n me. I don't like the way you said that other fella treated ole Doc Bagwell, for starters."

"I know," agreed Bonnie. "It made me pretty mad as well. What else?"

"Well," said Dewey sheepishly. "I don't like the idea of you being here with these people."

"Why, Dewey Hobbs, are you worried about me?" asked Bonnie.

"Well, I oughtna be," replied Dewey. "You're meaner than a rattlesnake when you wanna be."

"So, kind of you," Bonnie replied. She couldn't help but smile. She didn't mind being thought of that way. "Don't forget to take care of the things at the farm and tell old man Smith not to butcher my hogs unless there's no other choice. I'll be back as soon as Papa is recovered."

They finished hitching the horses to the wagon and noticed Reggie sitting on the bench with a worried look on his face.

"You alright, Reggie?" asked Dewey.

"Yes, Sir Deputy," replied Reggie. "I'm just ready to get far away from here."

"Yeah, me too," answered Dewey.

"Bonnie, may I have a word," said Doctor Bagwell.

"Of course," said Bonnie. She placed a hand on Dewey's arm. "Don't forget to go check the cave." Dewey nodded.

The doctor stood several yards from the others, wringing his hands to stave off the chill. He looked tired, as if he had been up all night. She had seen him in the night when he checked on her father. He didn't speak to her even though she was half awake. Bonnie thought about the two doctors and knew she wasn't going to be happy with the change.

As Bonnie walked toward the doctor, the smell of fried chicken crept out of the kitchen on the breeze. The aroma pulled Bonnie's mind from the moment and made her think of warmth. The delectable afternoon meal would chase away the cold, but it would be at the table with her uncle again. The feeling of loneliness had already started to work its way into her heart. The sun was hidden behind banks of clouds that rolled through the sky in an endless progression of

darkness, and her sorrow deepened. Bonnie knew it was only going to get colder once the doctor and Dewey left. Bonnie drew Elle's shawl tighter around her shoulders.

"I wanted to explain to you about Doctor Simpson's comments," the doctor started.

"You don't have to explain anything to me," Bonnie replied. She knew enough about Doctor Bagwell to trust him over a rude little fat man. She chided herself for thinking of the other doctor that way but accepted she could think of him no other way.

"I do," Bagwell insisted. "I was run out of Louisville, where I worked for the City Hospital for many years. Doctor Simpson was correct in that, and his claim of failing to give medicine was also correct. I made rounds to check on patients released to recover at home. I carried a medicine bag like the one I brought to your cabin. I carried bottles of laudanum and morphine to give for extreme pain. Just like you saw me give to your father. The bottles in my bag were emptied and replaced with water. The liquids are clear, so I did not catch it before I injected it into a patient. As a result, I killed a patient. A patient with a very wealthy and powerful family."

Bonnie stood quietly for a moment. Over the last two days, she had watched the doctor give numerous shots and perform a surgery that she assumed usually required a team of doctors. She knew how skilled and diligent he was with everything. "Who put water in the bottles?" she asked.

Bagwell sighed, "It doesn't matter. The responsibility was mine." He took her hands in his. "Now you listen to me, young lady. You will not be able to get away with being a self-righteous pest down here, even if you are right. That doctor will do his job to care for your father, but he'll be no friend to you. Your aunt seems a decent enough woman, albeit self-absorbed like

most women of her station. I think you can see where your uncle stands. Don't go stirring up trouble. Your father will recover enough for you to return home in a couple of months. Until then, you must keep your composure. I'd be obliged if you'd write and let me know how you and your father are doing."

"I will," Bonnie replied. "Wait, you think I'm right?"

"I figured you'd hang on to that," Bagwell smiled. "Let's just say you've given me some things to think about, and we'll leave it at that."

She wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug. Tears welled in her eyes, and she tried to keep them from falling, but it was useless. After a long embrace, he patted her shoulder and climbed into the wagon. For the first time since they arrived, she saw Reggie smile when the horses started to walk. Bonnie flinched when Elle walked up beside her. The older woman said nothing but ran her paisley shawl over Bonnie's shoulders as well. Dewey tipped his hat as his horse walked by. There was no grand show of affluence to see them go. Only Bonnie and Elle watched the wagon and rider disappear down the lane.

Emmitt recoiled in pain and let out a short yell of agony before he stifled it. He tried to sit up in bed but found that he had no energy to support himself. Through gritted teeth, he cried out, "Bonnie!"

"Do sit still, Mr. Buckshire," the little fat man chirped.

"My brother is a Reverend," responded Richard. "Please address him accordingly."

"Richard?" asked Emmitt out of his fog. "Where's Bonnie, Richard?"

“She’ll be along shortly,” replied Richard. “Please hold still so the doctor can finish his work.”

Emmitt lifted his head to see the doctor wrap the last strand of bandage into place. He could feel his toes, but they weren't there. Every time he tried to flex any part of his leg, pain shot through his body.

"Surprisingly, the sutures are well done and holding," said the doctor disappointedly. "The bandage needs to be changed daily or whenever you see bleeding. He needs to eat and get sunlight. By tomorrow, he needs to be up and moving around. I will return the day after tomorrow."

“Thank you, Doctor,” said Richard. “Please see yourself out.”

Richard waited until the little man disappeared out the door before he took the seat beside the bed. "Well, little brother, it's been a long time," said Richard. I did not expect our reunion to happen this way. In fact, I did not expect we would ever reunite." Richard poured a glass of water and helped Emmitt sit up to drink it.

“Evelyne must have told me a thousand times to stop being stubborn and make peace with you,” said Emmitt as he strained to push himself against the headboard.

"I am terribly sorry for her loss, Emmitt," said Richard. "She was a wonderful woman."

“That she was,” replied Emmitt. “She would be happy that I’m here.”

Richard smirked, "Well, that's good because your daughter is none too pleased." He took Emmitt's glass and refilled it. "She gave me a sermon last night at the supper table with everyone

sitting there." Richard laughed. "I swear I felt like it was us all over again. It took everything I had not to smile."

"Any of it sink through that thick skull of yours?" asked Emmitt.

"Ha, well, let's say she made her point quite poignantly, but a man must make a living and support his family," Richard said.

"Well, you can bet you haven't heard the last from her," said Emmitt as he drank more water.

"I expect not," Richard's cheerful voice faded away. "Emmitt, I can't have you or her riling up my people here. It is bad enough that the abolitionists in the North are causing problems, and if that sickly buffoon from Illinois wins the election. I could lose the plantation."

"Would that be such a bad thing?" asked Emmitt.

"Yes, Emmitt, it would," shouted Richard. "This is our family land! Buckshires carved it out of the wilderness. Wrestled it away from savages. Cleared the land, built the house, and made it into something by the grace of God!"

"No, Richard," replied Emmitt. "I absolved myself of this land. Buckshires may have claimed it, but the toil and back-breaking work to make it was the tax of other men and women who have nothing to show for it. God would be no more pleased with the Buckshire's Independence plantation than he was the tower of Babel."

"You are infuriating," Richard said as he stood. "I will not argue with you. As long as you and your daughter are *guests* in my home, you will do as I ask. Do not subvert my authority here."

“Still chasing the illusion of authority, big brother?” asked Emmitt. “I will continue to pray that you submit to God’s authority.”

“God’s will for me is to be the master of this plantation,” replied Richard. “And I will do just that, regardless of your sermons.” He paused in the doorway and looked back at his brother.

“What happened to your leg, Emmitt?”

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