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## Unclean and Unforgivable

Cindy Pope

cpope41@students.kennesaw.edu

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*Unclean and Unforgivable*

By

Cindy Pope

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Professional Writing  
in the Department of English

Norman J. Radow College of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Kennesaw State University  
Kennesaw, Georgia

Fall 2022

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## Acknowledgement Sheet

From conception to publication, writing this novel has been a long journey, full of twists and turns, setbacks, and false starts. And there is no way I could have traveled that long and winding road alone. Nor would I have wanted to.

First and foremost, I am immeasurably indebted to my daughter, Crystal. Without her encouragement when I was down, scolding me when I slacked off, and inspiring me not to give up, I never would have gotten one tenth into my journey. An accomplished writer herself, she has taught me far more than I could ever have dreamed. Writing has always been a way for us to stay connected, no matter what else was going on in our lives. Not only did we earn our graduate degrees together, we also share our ideas, give advice, and constantly lament over the hard work of writing and publishing. And I love her dearly.

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Attending writing conferences is essential for a writer to become successful. At a Red Clay Writers Conference in Kennesaw, I met Ann Hite, Appalachian fiction writer and former president of the Georgia Writers Association. Ann welcomed me into her Master of Art class for serious writers only, pushing me to write scenarios, short stories, and essays that touched on some most uncomfortable places in my soul. Always thoughtful and knowledgeable, Ann not only knew I had it in me to do the hard work of writing, but she knew how to pull that creativity out of me and put words to paper. Because of Ann, I traveled further into my writing journey than I thought possible. And she made it so much fun!

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me to business associates and writing groups. And I can't say how much I enjoy (and need) our 'business' lunches.

Introductory Essay  
The Importance of Conducting Research for a Historical Novel

**Introduction**

In the mid 1980's, I watched *Florence Nightingale*, a TV movie starring Jacqueline Smith in the title role. The movie portrayed Miss Nightingale during her nursing service years in the Crimean War. To this day, one horrific scene in which the British had set up a mobile army surgical hospital next to a river still resonates with me. The entire unit used the river water for drinking, cooking, and bathing. However, Miss Nightingale spotted the rotting carcass of a horse in the middle of the river. When she pointed it out, no commanding officer saw fit to order its removal because said removal did not fall under any of their authorizations. It wasn't until Miss Nightingale fought to explain how the river running through the deceased horse was the main reason so many wounded men and staff in the hospital became sick that she was able to persuade one authoritative figure to have the animal corpse removed. She further instituted a regime of hygiene for the survival of the patients and staff in the makeshift camp, a regime she continued to follow when she opened her nursing school in 1860 at St. Thomas Hospital, London, England.

But I had to wonder: what were the real effects of using that germ-infested water on the patients? That was when I had the idea to conduct historical research that would provide authoritative background for a fictional narrative on medical and sanitary practices in the Victorian era. My idea was to construct a novel that would engage, educate, and entertain readers using fictional characters who interact with historical figures and show how they navigated through the lack of medical standards of the day. My characters would use experimentation and documentation to change standard unsanitary procedures into more hygienic and safe practices for the patients, doctors, and nurses; practices that formed the beginnings of modern medicine.



## **Implementing Research into the Novel**

I chose to set my novel in Richmond, Virginia, in 1870, as cursory research showed that 1870 was the beginning of Reconstruction in American History, Richmond was a major Civil War battle site, and is where the Virginia College of Medicine is located.

To provide an accurate account of what chemicals and compounds, methods, and techniques surgeons and nurses used to prevent infection in pre- and post-operative patients, I conducted archival and bibliographic research of scholarly medical books, journals, and articles. With the results of that investigation, I used my protagonists, Victoria Evans, and Dr. Nicholas Barton, to demonstrate the sanitary practices and teachings of Florence Nightingale, Clara Barton, Ignac Semmelweis, and Joseph Lister. My characters use those practices to change the outmoded mindset of the classically trained older doctors and teach a new generation of doctors how to use proper sanitary practices and save lives—practices that continue to save millions of lives today.

Conducting archival research taught me that as long ago as 1848, Dr. Semmelweis understood that poisonous organisms entering the female body during childbirth—organisms carried by doctors and midwives—were the direct cause of approximately 90% of the deaths of mothers and infants. And while Florence Nightingale prevailed to instill cleanliness methods in Europe, it was Clara Barton who brought those principles to the battlefields of the Great American Conflict. I read that groups of American doctors during the Civil War did believe in germ theory but did not agree on how germs were spread. By understanding and appreciating the people who went against the status quo of standard medical practices and social morals, I felt I

would be able to provide a greater understanding of who these people were and the importance of what they were trying to achieve.

My goal was to incorporate the bibliographic research into my capstone project using setting, dialogue, and characters to stage scenes that will absorb readers and transport them to another time and place. Yet, no matter how much I wrote, rewrote, and edited, I struggled to find ways to write of such disgusting realism so as not to repulse readers, readers who do not understand the Victorian mindset.

My fictional characters, Dr. Nicholas Barton, cousin of Clara Barton, and Victoria Carter Evans, are introduced to my readers in a powerful manner. Initially, when Victoria approaches Dr. Barton regarding a paid position assisting with writing his manuscripts, the doctor dismisses Victoria from his house on the grounds of impropriety. However, Victoria reminds him of how his cousin's unladylike behavior saved lives in the battlefield. The original paragraph in my novel was flat and uninteresting, but by using research of the real Clara and certain rhetorical effects, I was able to have my female protagonist respond with a whip-smart remark about how it was a shame that Cousin Clara hadn't stayed at home and read poetry instead of trudging through blood and mud, working side-by-side in the dark assisting male surgeons while they operated on wounded soldiers. Victoria's retort made the ending of the scene far more dramatic and realistic.

The idea for that retort came from the research source, Steven Oates' novel *A Woman of Valor Clara Barton and the Civil War*. When I read the passage in which Oates talked about Clara's nursing duties on the battlefield and the way she did not think about the consequences of her unladylike behaviors, I knew exactly where to place it in my novel.

In another scene, when Dr. Barton takes Victoria to the amphitheater dissecting room, I used the descriptions from Fitzharris' book *The Butchering Art* in which she details the harsh

realities of a Victorian operating theatre. For example, the setting of the “cold, damp room,” and “overwhelming stench of putrefied flesh and blood,” came from reading Lindsay Fitzharris’ historical look at Joseph Lister.

Fitzharris also details the relationship between Joseph and Agnes Lister, explaining how Agnes worked side by side with her husband by taking dictation and recording his notes in his casebooks. Their goal was to discover how diseases were spread. This passage provided me with the inspiration of how my character, Victoria, would work as a secretary—a disreputable position for a woman in the Victorian era. I came to realize that Victoria and Nicholas were much aligned with Joseph and Agnes Lister: a determined couple who worked diligently to understand how poisonous entities entered the human body and how to prevent the spread of diseases caused by these entities.

While researching historical women who saved lives using sanitary methods, I found it hard to imagine that it wasn’t until 1869 that women were admitted into medical schools to obtain degrees. One would think women, after all their arduous work and dedication to the medical field, would be welcomed by their male counterparts. However, in her book *Bold Women of Medicine*, Susan Latta describes how unprofessional male colleagues could be to the women students. Latta tells of an incident from the November 8, 1869, edition of the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* describing the “mob of 69” or “the jeering episode at the new Pennsylvania Hospital.” The newspaper reported that when the ladies entered the amphitheater, the male students *greeted* them with yells, hisses, and ‘caterwauling,’ as well as throwing paper, tinfoil, and tobacco (quids). Some men even felt compelled to defile the women’s clothing by spiting tobacco juice on them.

I understood that my female protagonist would have to endure such behavior and find ways to rise above it. For the scene, I put my character, Victoria, in the same position as the female students to show the attitude of Victorian males in the professional medical setting. Yet, it is still devastating to learn that as hard as women worked in the past to further medical advances, many male professionals felt compelled to force these women to follow society's traditional roles for them.

Joseph Lister's article "Antiseptic Principle of the Practice of Surgery," from the highly respected and well-known *British Medical Journal*, provided the details on how to properly sterilize instruments and patients from deadly germs and continue to administer sanitation methods during the patient's recuperating period. My character, Dr. Barton, uses that information to demonstrate to medical students and doctors the proper methods of hand washing and sanitizing instruments when treating patients. Those sanitary practices became the focus of the novel as my characters struggle to bring about change in the medical field.

To provide conflict and engage the reader, the use of action verbs, such as "stumbled," "dragged," "assaulted," "strode," and "hurled," are required to show the definitive subject performing the action. These verbs also move the story along at a faster pace.

In the following paragraph, I experimented with the rhetorical effect called the Known-New Known Contract. "Three days later, Victoria struggled to keep up with Dr. Barton, stumbling as he dragged her down the corridor and into the cold, damp dissecting theatre. A wave of nausea rolled through her stomach as the overwhelming stench of putrefied flesh and blood assaulted her nose." The 'known' was Victoria stumbling into the operating theatre for the first time, followed by the 'new known,' which is her immediate reaction to that horrific and

filthy setting. The result came out even better than I imagined and provided a much-appreciated means of dropping pieces of information, breadcrumb by breadcrumb, to the reader.

Releasing the historical facts of Victorian-era medicine through the eyes of my female protagonist, as well as using persuasive dialogue seemed the best methods to provide clinical information and the mindset of that era's population to the modern-day reader. I chose both tactics to explain yet not overwhelm a reader who does not possess a medical background.

My goal was to acknowledge those who fought to bring about change in the medical field and to educate the modern reader by using scenes that document historical facts which show the real people who worked tirelessly toward understanding germ theory and overcoming prejudice and ignorance. It was the radical new thinking of these historical figures that led to establishing standardized sanitary methods for all hospitals and patients.

And while it is true that not all my research information will be used in the novel, said research provided me with a knowledgeable medical historical background, and concepts of the era. I learned of the proper spoken language, dress, and mindsets of doctors and nurses for me to construct accurate scenes and dialogue that will place my readers in the setting and atmosphere of the 1870's and the beginnings of modern medicine.

## **Relevance**

In researching those early days of medicine, I am amazed at the fact that we humans survived while living in filthy, germ-ridden surroundings; surroundings that did not include such simple concepts as washing hands before eating or even proper sewage disposal. Most of the world's population ate unsanitary food, drank disease-ridden water, and had no proper medical care. And the fact that women nor their ideas considered with any form of significance has

haunted me as the hygienic procedures we use today began with women understanding the importance of cleanliness. Since those early days, approximately one hundred and seventy-five years would pass—175 years—before public health measures were put into place worldwide.

But how is this relevant today? In the year 2020, humanity experienced COVID-19, a global pandemic the likes of which the world had not seen since 1918. One hundred years after the Spanish Flu outbreak that killed thousands, and governments worldwide had to once again require social distancing for everyone who gathered in public areas. Governments also required isolation for those infected with the COVID-19 virus, an idea that Florence Nightingale instilled in her makeshift hospitals during the Crimean War, an idea for which people laughed at her.

Also in 2020, facemasks were to be worn by everyone in public, yet not only was there a backlash from groups of people who did not believe in the effectiveness of wearing facemasks, but the general population had to be re-instructed on how germs are spread. And during the COVID pandemic, plaques were hung in public places, constantly reminding people to wash their hands, a concept that Dr. Ignac Semmelweis proved effective in preventing the spread of germs in 1848.

With over a century of laborious and proven medical practices, experimentation, and new discoveries, we should be at the echelon of modern medicine. However, my experience has shown that people seem to have forgotten the concept of how germs are spread. Have we gotten so complacent about proper sanitary methods that simple acts, such as washing hands and covering the face and nose when sneezing or coughing, have fallen by the wayside? After all my research, I was flabbergasted by the current mindset of a substantial percentage of the world's population arguing over government regulations on hygiene, doctor's instructions for immunization and social distancing, and following any rule of sanitary or hygienic practices. I

feared we humans were going back in time and that we would have to re-learn proper hygienic practices.

## **Conclusion**

From the bibliographic research, I learned two main facts: first, it was women, most notably Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton, who discovered that proper hygiene practiced on the patient and their surroundings provided a healing atmosphere.

And secondly, nearly twenty years after doctors Ignac Semmelweis and Joseph Lister proved that sanitary methods were crucial to saving the lives of patients, Victorian-era doctors in both Europe and America were not pressured by any government regulation, medical board, or supervisor to accept the theory of germs as poisonous to the human body. Nor were they properly instructed on the use of antiseptics or disinfectants to prevent infection as well as the spreading of disease. These medical professionals not only dismissed but feared those ideas because said ideas were too radical and went against their established methods. Those doctors willingly ignored these new procedures at the cost of their patients' lives because to admit otherwise was to know that their actions had led to the deaths of many of their patients.

The whole point of conducting archival and bibliographic research was to construct a novel that tells the realistic story of Victorian-era medical practices, as revolting as those practices were, and show how people labored and fought to establish proper sanitation methods that we humans today still depend on.

## SECTION I

### **Chapter One**

1862—Robertson's Hospital, Richmond, Virginia

A wave of nausea rolled through Victoria's stomach as the foul odors of unwashed bodies, blood, vomit, and fear struck her nose. Confederate soldiers in the Rebel Gray uniform of varying states of disrepair trampled through the makeshift hospital hallways and rooms while barking orders at everyone in their path. Orderlies bumped into her left and right as they carried stretchers containing wounded soldiers. Victoria held her lace handkerchief to her nose and mouth as they rushed by her. Some soldiers were missing an arm or a leg, and all were covered in blood. As each soldier brushed passed, her best day dress, a brown worsted affair trimmed in black wool, became stained with their blood.

Victoria, a nurse trainee, entered the foyer and stopped behind a line of soldiers awaiting entrance from a woman sitting at a desk by the front door. Was that Persephone Cole, her rival for the most handsome beaux just a few short years ago? Oh, but it can't be—this woman looks much too old. The woman stopped each soldier as they entered, recording their names and rank, and ticking off the number of the injured in her book.

"Name and rank," she asked.

"Ma'am, this gentleman needs a doctor immediately," the litter-bearer huffed.



Staring him in the eyes, the woman calmly but boldly replied, “I must register each soldier to ensure he is seen by a doctor and provided a bed.”

“He needs to be seen by a doctor—now!”

Victoria visibly tensed as she heard the frustration in his voice.”

“I understand perfectly, sir, but I must have his name and rank to ensure there is a record of him.”

The litter bearer huffed then answered as if in a roll call. “Williams, Reece, Sergeant.”

“Thank you,” she said, writing down the name and ticking it off in her book. She pointed which direction for the orderlies to carry the soldier.

“Next,” the woman called.

Once the soldier in front of her had registered, Victoria stepped forward. The woman behind the desk looked up. “Persephone Cole. It is you.”

“Good morning, Victoria. Oh, but your name is Mrs. Evans now, isn’t it?”

“Yes, George and I married last spring, just before he left for his regiment. Oh, it’s so good to see you—”

“It’s good to see you, too.” Persephone rose from her desk and handed Victoria a pamphlet. “We’ve been expecting you and are so glad you’ve joined us.” She placed her arm around Victoria’s shoulders and maneuvered her away from the desk. “We need all the extra sets of hands we can get. If you would please, go stand over there and read this. A matron shall come for you momentarily.”

“But I—”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t stop for idle chitchat,” Persephone called over her shoulder and rushed back to her desk.

Victoria scanned the foyer and the front rooms, rooms that just a few short years ago had been home to the Robertson family. At that time, the Robertson’s home had been filled with ladies in fashionable afternoon garb serving tea and gossip, or the Robertson’s hosting soirees, dances, church socials, and dinner parties. But now, to show their support for The Cause, the Robertson’s had moved out and left their beautiful home in the hands of a nurse, Sally Tompkins, who had converted the house into an active and growing hospital.

A ragtag group of wounded confederates sat on the once highly polished hardwood floors shoulder to shoulder, awaiting attention from a nurse or doctor. Many lined the walls in the hallways, staircase, and most rooms, creating a sea of gray, and all covered in blood and filth.

The worst of the wounded screamed for mercy. Above those screams, doctors and nurses yelled for assistance—and all Victoria could do was stand in a doorway and stare.

A matronly nurse grabbed her hand. “You’re Victoria Evans, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She dragged Victoria out of the way of incoming litter bearers and into the kitchen next to a stand of washbowls and cloths.

“Ever done any nursing before?”

“Well, I helped Mother as she tended to the sick and wounded at Clearwater.”

The woman nodded. “You’re Steven and Rebecca Carter’s daughter.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Call me Matron Mary. Now, put your cloak, reticule, and gloves in that closet over there. Grab one of those washbowls and fill it with salty water. With a clean cloth and a bar of brown soap, go to the nearest wounded soldier. Check his injuries, though, before washing his face and upper torso.”

Good Lord, am I supposed to actually touch them? Staggered with such an undignified request, Victoria thought for a split second to run home, the devil with her patriotic duty. The only men she had ever touched in her life were her father, her brothers, John and Thomas, and her husband, George. She had put her name on the list to be a nurse trainee because she believed she would only be tasked with reading to the soldiers or writing letters home to their families and sweethearts.

What if John, Thomas, or George were wounded and all alone in a hospital? Would she not want the doctors and nurses to do all they could to save their lives? Or at least treat them with dignity? Besides if these boys have the courage to fight for her, the least she can do is nurse them to the best of her ability.

With unsteady hands, Victoria poured water into the pan, dropped in a few grains of salt, and grabbed a cloth and a bar of soap. She turned around in search of the closest patient with the least blood and dirt. The nearest soldier to her was an older gentleman with a gunshot wound to his upper thigh.

Victoria strode to him and knelt at his bedside. “Hello sir. My name is Victoria, and I shall cleanse you and ease your distress.”

“Yes, miss.”

The bandages wrapped around the hole in his leg had turned black with dried blood and grime from the battlefield. From her periphery, she saw Matron Mary scrutinizing her every move and continued with the unpleasant task.

Remembering the tenderness and confidence with which her mother had cared for the injured and sick on the plantation, Victoria inhaled deeply and tossed her cloth into the wash bowl, proceeding to untie the grimy, blood-soaked bandage and further rend his trouser leg. “Now, this may hurt a bit, but I’ll be as gentle as possible.” Even she heard the tremor in her voice that belied any confidence she may outwardly present.

“Yes, miss,” the gentleman whispered.

She dared a glance at his face and hoped it was humility caused him to turn his face away.

The dried blood caused the bandage to stick to the wound, and he twitched as she tried to remove it. She touched her hand to his and gave a gentle squeeze. “Please forgive me, sir. I shall endeavor to be more careful.” Victoria grabbed the cloth and soaped it thoroughly before leaning over the wound.

He mumbled something she thought sounded like, “bless you,” but she couldn’t be sure.

Victoria forced the yelling and horrid smells that surrounded them away by focusing on her patient. Memories of the ways her mother used her smooth, calming voice to soothe those who had sought her help came back to Victoria. “What’s your name, sir?” She hoped speaking to him might put him at ease.

“Williams, ma’am.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Williams. Is there a Mrs. Williams or sweetheart waiting on your return?” She squeezed the excess water from the cloth directly onto the bandage, soaking it thoroughly with cool, soapy water.

“Yes, ma’am.” Williams stared at the ceiling. “Miss Anne and I plan to wed soon as this awful war is over.”

“How wonderful. And where shall these nuptials take place?”

“North Carolina, miss.”

Her hands froze for a moment. That’s where George was from. That’s where she was to be living now with him and his family on their tobacco plantation. Images floated before her of how she should be living her life now.

A soft cough from Matron Mary reminded Victoria of where she was.

“Oh?” She carefully released the bandage from the wound, biting her lip as her patient twitched and moaned in pain. “Sir, I’m going to wash your wound, but I’ll be as careful as I can.”

“Yes, miss,” he replied between clenched teeth.

“Tell me about your Miss Ann.” Victoria barely listened to him as she eased the washcloth over and around the wound, carefully wiping away the dirt and dried blood, continually soaking his leg thoroughly before each swipe of the soft cloth. To ease his discomfort, she stopped every few seconds and provided a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to his questions, wishing to give the poor soul a bit of relief before beginning again.

After inspecting the wound, Victoria glanced up at him and planted a smile on her face. “It appears you shall need surgery to remove the Minié ball from your leg, but thankfully, there are no signs of infection. We will endeavor to get you well and out of here so you may get back to marry your Miss Ann as soon as possible.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Now, I’m going to prepare a clean pan of water and a fresh cloth with which to wash your face and arms before the doctors come to take you into surgery.”

“Thank you.” His voice now a coarse whisper.

Victoria stood and searched for the nearest exit. However, Matron Mary handed her a fresh washbowl and cloth before nodding her approval. So instead of taking a much-needed break, Victoria cradled Mr. Williams’ head in the crook of her arm and carefully washed the filth and sweat from his face, paying close attention to his deep-set blue eyes, dry mouth, and haggard beard. His dark hair felt like straw as she washed away mud and debris.

She unfastened the buttons of his uniform jacket, sat him up, and slipped it off. The shirt underneath was wet with sweat and dirt, so Victoria removed that as well. As he remained sitting up, half-supported by her, she washed his chest, back and arms, scrubbing his rough, course hands vigorously in an attempt to remove the dried, caked-on blood from where he had been holding his injured thigh.

After a thorough cleansing of Mr. Williams face, upper torso, and legs, Victoria fluffed his pillow before easing him back onto his cot. “The doctor will be with you as soon as possible,” she advised before walking away.

Matron Mary ushered her aside. “I saw the repulsive expression on your face at performing such tasks. And so did your patient. Your job is to provide a thorough cleansing of the patients, plus warmth and comfort to ease these men’s distress. You have no concept of what all these men been through, so as a courtesy, you shall maintain complete indifference to the unpleasant aspects of their wounds and make sure these men are cared for to the best of your abilities. And I suggest you never dismiss one of these men by simply walking away as you just did. Now, I believe that Mistress Cole provided you with a pamphlet when you came in. I strongly encourage you read it thoroughly before deciding to come back.”

“I wasn’t expecting—”

“And these men weren’t expecting to be shot and dying. But they are. And it will be your job to take care of them as long as this war continues.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now, if you can put aside your feminine sensitivities, go over to that cupboard where you will find clean nightshirts. Take one and dress your patient with it. Make him comfortable before you go on to your next patient.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And be quick about it. More wounded are coming in every minute.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She found where the nightshirts were kept and prepared her patient for Matron Mary to inspect her job. Upon approval, she grabbed the washbowl and rushed out the back of the hospital. There she dumped the water from the bowl and inhaled clean, fresh

air. Images of what she had just seen and done hit her. She found a clump of bushes to hide behind as waves of nausea rolled through her stomach, causing her to retch.

This was too much—too much blood and filth and pain for her to deal with. As soon as her illness past, she determined to go home and forget all about this business of nursing soldiers.

Once well enough, Victoria rose and glanced around to see if anyone were watching. No one else was about. She could leave right now, and no one would be any wiser. *But how should she feel if George had run away from his duties to his country? And what would happen should George discover that I ran from my duties of taking care of soldiers?* Refusing to admit defeat, she cleaned herself up, smoothed her auburn hair back into the hand-crocheted hair net, retrieved the washbowl, and returned to her duty.



After a grueling day of hard labor as Victoria had never experienced, she exited the front door of Robertson's Hospital. The warmth of her heavy woolen cloak around her neck and shoulders shut out the cool night air. Even so, the strange sense of being a female and walking alone at night in an unfamiliar city settled around her. After a slight pause to remember the way back to Mrs. Chestnut's home, it startled Victoria at how different the city looked in the evening. Lighted braziers strategically placed along the sidewalks provided just enough light for her to see a few feet in front of her. Confederate soldiers walked up and down the sidewalks, and the jingle of reins and the thudding of horses' hooves against the roadway as they pulled carriages loaded with ammunition and supplies



to Confederate camps were sights and sounds Victoria thought were normal in the big city of Richmond.

With trepidation, she descended the hospital steps, her aching feet and tired legs reminding her of the grueling day behind her. Thankfully, the walk to her temporary residence was only blocks away. Most of the soldiers she met on her way nodded or took off their caps as she strode by, and it comforted her that should she get lost, surely the Confederate boys could direct or even escort her to the Chestnut home.

Coming around a corner, the Chestnut home stood grand and welcoming. Victoria rushed up the steps and into the foyer. An eerie quietness surrounded her in the partially lit foyer as she undraped her cloak and hung it on the hall tree. As she took off her gloves, the aroma of fresh-baked bread wafted from the kitchen, and for a split second she thought about getting something to eat. Her mouth watered at the thought, but a more urgent sense of getting washed and changed came over her. She took her reticule and gloves with her to her room, shivering at the emptiness of the large house. Mrs. Chestnut had written Victoria's mother numerous times about how friends and family were constantly visiting for teas, dances, and suppers. Climbing the stairs to her room, Victoria realized just how much The War had changed everything.

Once in her room, Victoria sat on the edge of the bed and unlaced her boots. She grimaced as she eased them off her sweating feet, allowing the boots to hit the floor with a resounding "clunk" that echoed throughout the house. Too exhausted to care, she gathered her strength before unrolling the thick woolen stockings down her aching legs to inspect the damage. Blisters appeared on the heels of both feet. Her toes were red and scrunched together. She almost cried as stabbing pains shot through the balls of her feet.

She stretched out her legs, wiggling her toes and rotating her ankles, allowing the nippy evening air to cool and dry her painful limbs.

The weariness of the day hit her hard and she fell back on the bed, relishing the quiet. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples in a vain attempt to push away the sights and sounds of the hospital. A loud rumbling in her stomach reminded her that the last bite of food she had eaten had been over four hours and too many tasks ago. Involuntary moans escaped her mouth as she forced herself into a sitting position. Her corset dug deep into her ribs, and tomorrow, she told herself, she wouldn't lace the darned thing so tight.

Slowly she eased off the bed, waiting for the circulation to return to her feet. The cold hardwood floor helped ease the pain in her bare feet as she padded to the washstand. She tipped the pitcher of water over the matching ceramic bowl and grasped the bar of freshly made soap. When she dipped her hands in the chilly, clear water, she saw that traces of dried blood remained on her fingers, nails, and palms. And it all rushed back to her: the filthy soldiers she had washed; the bloody bandages she had unwrapped; the used, blood-stained bandages and cotton rags she had picked up from the floor of the surgery with her bare hands between screaming patients; she had dumped the nasty discards into a fire pit in the backyard. Scrubbing the blood-splattered surgical room floor on her hands and knees, washing her hands, washing the patients, washing the dishes—yet with all the washing and scrubbing, blood remained on her hands.

Fear and anger in her heart fought with hunger and exhaustion in her mind, making the room swim before her. Victoria caught a glimpse of her pale face in the small oval mirror attached to the washstand. She glanced down at her dress. Blood stains from

when she first arrived at the hospital remained. Horrified that she had been wearing the blood of the wounded—and possibly dead—soldiers, Victoria vigorously scrubbed the stains on her dress. She wished that by removing all traces of the gory evidence from the dress would therefore remove those gruesome images from her mind.

A thorough scrubbing of her hands, nails, and lower arms gave her a sense of religious cleansing. As she dried herself on the clean towel that hung on the side of the washstand, she stared at the bloody water left in the bowl, reminding her of the hymn “Washed in the Blood of the Lamb.” In her first day, Victoria had already seen too many wounded and dying soldiers. Was that what this conflict was all about—Southern soldiers being sacrificed?

She gasped as she stared back at her reflection. “Oh God, help me,” she prayed. “I must be losing my mind!” *Mother would be horrified at me having such thoughts.* Thankfully, her mother would never know of the unclean, harsh realities of nursing wounded and dying soldiers.

Her stomach grumbled as she changed out of her brown paisley dress and slipped on a clean pair of winter stockings. Victoria stepped into a warm and comfortable cream-colored outfit before guiding her still swollen and aching feet into a pair of soft, beige slippers. She could almost hear her feet say, “Thank you,” as she made her way down the stairs and into the kitchen.

In the large, spotless kitchen, the wonderful smells of homemade bread and potato soup greeted Victoria. The white paper lying atop a clean plate and bowl on a table caught her attention. In Mrs. Chestnut’s neat handwriting, Victoria read:

*My Dearest Victoria,*

*It saddens me to know that I may be late returning home this evening as I am collecting supplies for the local hospitals. However, I left instructions for Mona to prepare a pot of hot potato soup and to leave it on the stove and ready for you to eat when you get in. In the stove side-heating compartment, you will find a loaf of fresh-made bread. On the table, I have left a platter of cheese and a block of fresh butter to go with your meal. Please eat as much as you wish, for I know you shall be hungry and tired after your first day at Robertson's. I shall return home as soon as I can. Until then, make yourself at home. We shall have a proper chat soon, as I wish to hear about your day at the hospital.*

*Yours most humbly,*

*Mary Chestnut*

Giddiness rushed through her body as Victoria ladled the creamy soup into a china bowl. She cut a thick slice of bread and placed it on a matching bread plate. From the hand pump over the sink, she pumped enough cool well water to fill a glass before sitting in the hardback wooden chair. The soreness in her feet and legs immediately eased. She slathered butter on the bread before dipping her spoon deep into the bowl of soup, stirring it slowly to cool. The bits of potatoes and onion surrounded by the hearty, milky soup stock suddenly made her homesick. Hundreds of such bowls of soup had been served to her since she was a child. Images of her “helping” the cook gather the potatoes from the dark, dank fruit cellar while struggling to keep her dresses clean so her mother would not know what she had been up to came to mind. And oh, how she enjoyed eating

the fruits of her “labor” at the dinner table surrounded by her family. Victoria suddenly wondered how her mother and Emmy and Luke were faring.

*Oh, for heaven’s sake*, her mind scolded. *It has only been a day*. But it had been much longer since she had seen or heard from her husband, George, or her brothers, Thomas, and John. How were they faring on the battlefields? Had they been injured—or worse? But the sense of hunger urged her to plow through those thoughts and tuck into her dinner. Besides, after what she had endured that day, she deserved it.

After consuming two bowls of the succulent soup, two pieces of bread—one with butter and the other with a slice of cheese—and washing it all down with several glasses of cold, clean water, Victoria washed and dried her dishes. It did not escape her that until the start of this confounded war she had never washed a dish in her life, yet in one day she had already washed mountains of them.

Mrs. Chestnut still had not returned, and Victoria was glad for the added peace and quiet. She did not feel up to conversing with anyone yet, and she knew Mrs. Chestnut would ask about her day; an overwhelming day that Victoria still had trouble comprehending.

She decided to retire to her room and write her mother a letter. While sitting at the dainty desk, Victoria pulled out a sheet of paper, dipped her pen into the inkwell, and stopped. How much should she tell her mother about her first day of training as a nurse? There is no way her mother would ever understand Victoria bathing a completely unknown wounded soldier, much less a whole ward of them. And she could not conceive of a way to explain how she got blood on her best dress from the injured Confederates.

The moaning and groaning of wounded soldiers came back to her while she stared at the blank sheet of paper. The yelling of doctors for assistance, and the screaming of those patients on the operating table soon followed. That was something Victoria never experienced while she assisted her mother who provided medical care for the sick and injured at their Clearwater Plantation. Those days seemed to have been a lifetime ago and a completely different world to what she witnessed today.

Plus, her mother would be appalled at Victoria doing the hard, physical labor. Proper young ladies knew not of hauling buckets of water up and down staircases, scrubbing floors on hands and knees, washing dishes, picking up the bloody discarded bandages from the surgery floor before taking them to the fires outside to ensure those items could not be re-used. And those were just the chores Victoria had conducted in between caring for the patients.

She gave up the idea of writing her mother and instead fetched her journal from the traveling case. Writing of her experiences this day seemed the better option. However, the toil of the day began to wear on her after only a couple of pages, and Victoria suddenly had trouble controlling the pen. Her eyes could no longer focus on the page, and she replaced the pen in its holder and rubbed her aching hands. She wiped the pen clean, closed the lid of the inkwell, blotted the pages of her journal. She stood and stretched her stiff back, comforted by the cracking and popping of her spine as it slipped back into place.

After a cursory washing of her face and hands and brushing her teeth, Victoria slipped into her thick cotton nightgown and called it a day. The stiff, clean sheets smelled of lye soap and sunshine, aromas that again reminded her of home. She lay in the strange

bed, surrounded by darkness, welcoming the sensation of tension oozing out of her body, relaxing her. Her mind soon lost all sense of consciousness.

Until the early hours of the morning. Images of unfamiliar and injured men lying in cots came into focus. They called her name and begged for help. Each wounded soldier held out dirty and bloody hands, reaching and grasping for her. Some men were amputees, others suffered gunshot or shrapnel wounds. All were filthy, hungry, thirsty, exhausted—and demanding she attend to each of them. At first, she thought she was at the hospital, where help was available. But when she glanced around, she was alone with these patients in a battlefield. Nothing but hot, blazing sun in a cloudless sky above; dry, cracked earth beneath her feet, and these tormented souls before her. The overwhelming sense that she must provide medical care for them all or they would die terrified her. No matter which way she turned, hands reached out to her, haunted faces stared at her, their voices calling her name. Suddenly the sea of wounded soldiers came closer and closer, surrounding her, overpowering her. She screamed and pushed them away.

Victoria sat up straight, confused at finding herself in an unfamiliar bed and strange room. Clutching the sheet to her chest, she realized she had screamed into the night. Her breath came in gasps, and her fingers brushed her hair, now wet with sweat, away from her face. She scanned the room while trying to calm her breathing, slowly remembering where she was. She fell back onto the pillows and wiped her face and neck with her bare hand. With the horrors she had witnessed on her first day, a heavy burden settled in her chest. In that moment, she understood the realities of why she was in Richmond. That in a few short hours she was expected to go back to the hospital and witness more horrors.

She turned over to face the wall and curled up into a fetal position. The War had already raged for a year. Should it last much longer, how many more young men would have to be sacrificed or disfigured and maimed for life? Her stomach turned at the thought. God help us, she silently prayed.



## Chapter Two

1862—Robertson's Hospital

Victoria's eyes blinked open at the "bang" and reports of gunfire in the distance. She immediately sat up and glanced around while her mind sought to comprehend the current situation. Her muscles, however, rebelled against the movement. Wincing in pain, she rubbed her aching hands together and stretched out her legs, demanding her body cooperate. The dark and coldness of the room surrounded her. The fireplace held glowing red embers from the night before, yet those embers produced no heat.

Confused and still wearied from the day before, Victoria threw the covers off her warm body and slung her feet over the edge of the bed. She inhaled the chilly morning air as she stretched her arms over her head. Angry muscles tensed and stiffened with each movement. As she sat in the cold, dark room, she remembered that even just a few short months ago she did not see the dawn, unless it was after a soiree or dance, and only because she was unable to sleep because of the excitement from the night before.

For a moment she contemplated scooting back down in the warm bed and closing her eyes. However, the infrequent snaps and cracks of gunfire reminded her of why she was there. There was a war going on, and while the gunfire remained in the distance, it could mean wounded soldiers would be arriving at the hospital. Thoughts of Mr. Williams entered her mind, and she wondered how he had fared during the night. And

what of her other patients? Had the night nurses been as diligent about keeping the soldiers nourished and clean as instructed? Had they changed all those bandages as required? Instinct told Victoria she would need to see for herself. And if the night nurses were as exhausted this morning as she had been at the end of her shift yesterday, they needed relieving as soon as possible.

Already the thuds of the soldiers' boots as they walked along the sidewalk in front of the Chestnut house could be heard, as well as muffled footsteps in the hallway, the creaking of the stairs, and soft voices from downstairs wafted up to her. Shivering, she rose from the bed and slipped on her robe. Her back ached, her fingers were swollen and sore, refusing to cooperate when she forced them to fasten the buttons down the front of her robe.

When she stood up, she yelped as her bare feet hit the icy hardwood floor. It took her a moment to light the bedside hurricane lamp, plus another minute to find her slippers, which had somehow gotten shoved under the bed. She quickly slipped them over her freezing feet and padded to the fireplace. Victoria grabbed the poker to stoke the fire, and reached for a piece of wood. She stopped when she thought about the shortages of everyday goods, deciding it best to save the wood for her return later that evening.

Instead, she went to the washstand, poured water into the basin, thankful she had remembered to toss out the dirty water from the night before. She braced herself. The faster she cleaned herself up and dressed, the faster she could get to the kitchen and huddle around the hot stove. Yet her hands rebelled when she shoved them into the freezing water, and her whole body shivered as she splashed water on her face. With a

soft flannel, she scrubbed her face and neck, removing the last vestige of sweat from that horrid nightmare earlier that morning.

Taking her morning attire to the foot of the bed, the closest piece of furniture next to the fireplace, she dressed as quickly as possible with swollen fingers, aching arms, and painfully stiff legs. But she took time to give special attention to her blistered feet. Knowing that infection could set in from the blisters, Victoria set the wash basin in the floor and washed her feet carefully with the lye soap and cloth and dried them tenderly with a clean towel. She cut moleskin strips she found in the desk drawer and placed them in her shoes so that they would cover the blisters on her feet; a pair of clean woolen stockings should provide more protection.

When dressed, she stood in front of the mirror to check herself while every muscle in her body screamed for relief. She took a deep breath, which was much easier as she had remembered to loosen her corset and tiptoed down the stairs lest she disturb anyone.

The warm and brightly lit kitchen was empty, but she spotted a coffee pot resting on top of a cast iron stove. It had not been there when she had eaten her supper the night before, so she used a dish towel to lift it from the stove eye. She heard liquid splashing inside and saw steam escaping from the spout. A quick search for a coffee cup and saucer turned up a cabinet full. Victoria selected a cup and poured hot coffee into it. She warmed her nose by holding it over the steaming cup before taking a sip. The horrid taste made her wince. The bitter chicory concoction required a dollop of milk and a pinch of sugar to be palatable. Oh, how she looked forward to the day when real coffee would be available again. Yet she knew she shouldn't complain, as Mrs. Chestnut was providing the best she

could. After mixing the milk and sugar into the hot liquid, it became at least drinkable, but she most welcomed the warmth as the coffee trickled down her throat.

By the time she finished her last sip, still no one returned to the kitchen. It seemed strange that as many people as Mrs. Chestnut advised constantly visited and stayed over, Victoria had yet to actually see anyone about. She assumed someone was milking the cow, gathering eggs, and tending to the horses, but surely someone would be tending to breakfast and the household chores. Unless, of course, the slaves had already left for the North and freedom.

But right now, she had other things to worry about. Back in her room, she made the bed and put away her night clothes before fetching her cloak, gloves, and reticule. She blew out the hurricane lamp, banked what was left of the fire, and ran out the front door to face her second day.

As Victoria entered the hospital through the back kitchen door, the smell of fresh-baked biscuits and bacon greeted her. As did Persephone.

“Good morning, Victoria—er, Mrs. Evans.”

“Oh, goodness, Persephone. We have known each other far too long for such formalities.”

Persephone chuckled. “How did your first day go?”

“It went well, I suppose. I was expecting lighter responsibilities such as reading to the soldiers or writing their letters, but under the tutelage of Matron Mary, I learned quite a lot.”

“Matron Mary will keep you busy, but she is one of the best nurses.”

At that moment, a Black woman approached with a plate of fresh-baked biscuits, to which she offered to Victoria and Persephone.

“Oh, Victoria, I wish to introduce you to Miss Phoebe. She came here with Miss Tompkins to do the cooking for the patients, doctors, and nurses.”

“Good morning.” Victoria said while choosing a biscuit from the plate.

Phoebe nodded. “Good morning, Miss Persephone. Miss Victoria. It’s nice to meet you.”

Persephone chose a biscuit as well before continuing. “Miss Phoebe and her staff have been here since before dawn preparing breakfast and some distasteful concoction they call coffee.”

“The biscuits and bacon smell wonderful.”

“Miss Phoebe is a treasure. Some of the patients say that her dishes are why they remain with us.”

“Oh, go on with you,” Phoebe said as she turned to give out orders to her staff.

Persephone took a bite of her biscuit before facing Victoria. “Phoebe is a bond servant of Miss Tompkins,” she said under her breath. “And she takes Phoebe everywhere with her. I swear, I don’t see how this hospital could have survived without the two of them.” A little louder just so Phoebe could hear, Persephone continued, “But they work far too hard and too long, refusing to take care of themselves.”

Phoebe laughed at Persephone’s words yet kept on with her work.

“I wish to ask you, Victoria, to help me see that these women get some rest and remember to eat properly.”

Victoria swallowed the last bite of her biscuit and nodded. “I shall do my best.”

“Oh, I must attend to my desk up front, but I expect Matron Mary will be with you shortly. Good day, Victoria.” Persephone glanced over to Phoebe. “Thank you, Phoebe.”

“Thank you, Miss Persephone,” Phoebe waved and continued with her chores.

Swallowing the last of her coffee, Victoria thanked Phoebe as well and walked to the first-floor ward. There Matron Mary informed her that today she would learn the proper art of dressing a wound, to be taught by none other than Miss Sally Tompkins herself.

“Oh, dear God, was I so terrible yesterday?”

Matron Mary shook her head. “Miss Tompkins wants all of her nursing staff to perform their duties using proper hygiene and sanitary methods to her satisfaction, and Miss Tompkins feels the best way to promote that is to teach the nurses herself.”

Victoria deeply inhaled. Before she could say a silent prayer, Miss Tompkins stood before her.

“Good morning, Mrs. Evans. Might I have a word with you, please?”

“Yes, Miss Tompkins.”

From a far corner of the first-floor patient ward away from prying ears, Sally faced Victoria. “I understand from Matron that yesterday there were some issues between you and your patients.”

“I didn’t understand . . .”

Standing slightly taller than Victoria in her boots, Sally looked down and held Victoria’s gaze with her dark eyes. Dressed in a plain black cotton dress with her medical purse hanging from her waist and a stern expression on her face, Miss Tompkins

admonished Victoria. “Your main responsibilities here are to make sure the soldiers are made as comfortable as possible and keep the wounds free of infection. Now, I understand that with your societal upbringing, this may seem offensive and unladylike, but we are not here for societal mores. We are here to save as many lives as we can and make the patients as contented and calm as possible.”

“Yes, miss.” Victoria observed that Sally’s brunette hair parted in the middle and fashioned in a bun at the nape of her neck did nothing to relieve Sally’s plain facial features and slim stature. But behind that diminutive stature lay a strength and determination that commanded attention and obedience.

Sally continued, “This is nursing real men who have been seriously wounded, and nursing requires hard, physical labor for hours on end every day. Now, I understand that you assisted your mother in nursing those sick and injured on your plantation, but the work required to accomplish our mission of saving as many men as possible is a thousand times harder than what you have experienced.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Victoria could no longer hold Miss Sally’s gaze as her voice faltered. No one had ever reprimanded her in such a manner. A cold bitterness settled on her heart at Miss Tompkins words, and Victoria wondered if she had the strength and fortitude to conduct such labors.

“Now, as we are in need of as many hands as possible, I’m going to give you another chance and provide you with the proper skills and decorum to correctly perform your nursing duties.”

Victoria chanced a glance into Sally’s dark eyes. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Now, shall we begin?”

Victoria nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"As matron explained yesterday, the first duty is to clean each patient. Cleanliness is the key to keeping a soldier healthy. Now, grab your washbasin, soap, and cloth, and meet me back in here."

Victoria returned momentarily, and Sally pointed to the nearest patient in the ward. "I'll watch and instruct as you clean."

"Yes, ma'am." Victoria approached the wounded man closest to her and bent over him. Her heart suddenly caught in her throat. Why, he's no more than a boy. "Good morning, sir. I pray you had a proper night's sleep?"

"Yes, miss." His voice sounded hoarse.

"And what is your name, sir," she asked as she brushed his blonde curls away from his forehead, taking the time to gently place her hand where the curls had just rested. Did she detect a slight fever?

"Davey, ma'am. Davey Miller."

"Well, Master Davey, it's nice to meet you."

"Master Davey came to us last night," Miss Tompkins advised. "He's a drummer boy in a Virginia regiment and was luckily spotted lying in a field before too many hours passed."

"Your hand feels cool and soft," he said.

"Thank you, Master Davey. My name is Victoria, and I am here to clean your face and hands so that you can have breakfast. Is that okay?"

The boy nodded.

She carefully sat him up. "And where are you injured, sir?"



“My arm, ma’am.”

“Call me Victoria.” She carefully lifted his nightshirt over his head, the lad leaning into her body for support. Her body involuntarily flinched at his closeness. Not because of him being a stranger, but because his looks, personality, and brashness were just as she imagined her and George’s son would be, a son that she had thought she would have born for George by now.

“I’m sorry, Miss Victoria.”

Victoria noted Miss Tompkins step toward her. Recovering quickly, Victoria smiled and hugged the child closer to her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noted Captain Tompkins nod in approval yet remained standing in that same spot.

“Now, after washing your chest and arms, I’m going to check your wound, clean it, and provide you a clean shirt.” She leaned in close to his face. “After that, you can have breakfast.” She squeezed the cloth and attempted to wash his face.

Davey jerked away and waved his hands before her. “Hey, Miss, I ain’t no baby,” he protested.

“Ah, now we agreed for you to call me Victoria.”

He turned his head away from her.

“If you keep acting like a baby, what else am I to think you are?”

“I kin wash myself, thank you.” He kept his back to her.

“I have two brothers, so I know how you young men are—you’ll hit the obvious places and nothing else.” She leaned in close and confided, “Besides, if Captain Sally

finds out I'm not able to do my job, she shall have my guts for garters. You wouldn't want that, now, do you?"

She thought he mumbled a "no," before facing her again. "But I really can wash myself."

"Behind your ears, neck, and clean under your fingernails?"

A soldier in the next bed chuckled. "Now, son, if you was a real man, you'd let this here pretty nurse wash you, like the rest of us. Only a baby would complain so."

Victoria threw back her shoulders and placed her hands on her hips. "Or I can take you outside, strip you down while you stand in a washtub, and I can wash you all over."

Guffaws from the other patients on the ward caused Davey's face to turn beet-red. Victoria struggled to maintain a straight face.

"Oh, gosh, no, ma'am, um, Victoria. That wouldn't be fitting. You can just wash me off right here if you don't mind."

"Face and all?"

"Yes, ma'am," he mumbled.

"All right then. If you let me do my job properly, I shall not get into trouble, and you can have breakfast. I promise you shall feel so much better afterwards. Deal?"

"Yes, Miss Victoria."

Victoria soaped her cloth and wrung the excess water. She tenderly washed his baby-like face—it would be several more years before there was any sign of beard growth—and swathed his neck, chest, and right arm with her cloth.

As she concentrated on thoroughly cleansing the boy, Davey glanced up at her. “You sure are pretty. And your hands are so soft. Not like my mama’s. Mama’s are so wrinkled and rough—”

“Now Davey, I’m sure your mother is a fine lady who works hard for her family”

“But she’s always fussing at me, or Pa, or one of my brothers, or sisters. She’s always too busy for any of us, and she smells like lye soap or grease.” He sniffed the air. “Yet you smell so clean, like a real lady.”

She stifled a chuckle. “Thank you, Master Davey,” she said through clenched teeth as she scrubbed the filth out of his hair and scalp. “But I sure don’t feel so clean.”

He smiled back at her, and her heart melted. This was someone’s sweet child, and she would wager his parents have no idea where he is.

“Now, let me check that wounded arm.” From her periphery, Victoria noted Miss Tompkins being called away on other business.

Davey proudly held it out for her. “T’weren’t nothing really, just a piece of some kind of metal from when a shell exploded.”

She chuckled at his childish bragging. “Well, aren’t you a brave young man.”

“The surgeon saved it for me and promised to give it to me when I return to my regiment.”

“Another souvenir from the war?”

Davey nodded as Victoria placed his small hand on her shoulder. With both of her hands, she untied the reluctant bandage and removed it from his wound. Victoria frowned upon discovering a bit of redness that extended from the gaping hole in his slender arm. “I’m going to wash this arm now, so you let me know if it hurts.”

“Aw, you won’t hurt me.”

Victoria repeated soaping the cloth and wringing the excess out. As she brushed the cloth over the shrapnel hole, she gasped as a greenish puss rushed out. *Oh, dear God, no!*

Davey never flinched as he watched her expression change. “Are you all right, Miss Victoria?”

She glanced around searching for help. “Yes, yes, I’m fine, Davey. Don’t mind me.” Matron Mary happened by, and Victoria flagged her over. “Could you assist me with this patient?”

Matron Mary inspected the infected wound and frowned. She pulled Victoria out of Davey’s hearing. “Captain Sally is going to be awfully upset when she sees this.”

“I was thinking more of how the boy will be upset that he may lose his arm.”

Matron Mary shook her head. “That is the last thing Captain Sally will allow.” She paused a moment to think. “I’ll get her and the doctor to look at this and advise what we can do next. In the meantime, keep the child still and comfortable. And for heaven’s sake, don’t let on that anything is troublesome.”

Victoria nodded and went back to Davey’s bedside. “All right, young man. I’m new here, so there is so much I don’t know how to do yet. Therefore, Matron Mary will be bringing Captain Sally and a doctor to show me what to do with your arm.” Dear God, she hoped she sounded convincing. “Until they arrive, I’m going outside to toss out this pan of dirty water. You go ahead and have your breakfast, but remember, it shall ill behoove you to touch that arm,” she warned. Her voice softened before she continued, “We’ll be back with you soon as we can,” and squeezed his hand before she left.

Once outside, fear and worry washed over her. She did the only thing she knew to do. She prayed. “Dear God, he is but a mere child, injured while fighting in a war he had no business being in. He is alone, surrounded by strangers, and his family have no idea where their child is.” If she were his mother, she’d be worried sick. It dawned on her that she was worried sick.

Back inside, Victoria heard Captain Sally giving orders. She went to Davey’s ward and saw the hustle and bustle around him while Captain Sally gave directions, “Gentlemen, take this young man outside into the sunshine and fresh air. Glad Betsy, see to it that his wound is continuously flushed out with clean water and a syringe. Also, apply gentle pressure to squeeze out any putridness.” She saw Victoria and ordered, “Victoria, grab a bottle of whiskey and go with Glad Betsy to assist with whatever she needs. Apply the whiskey directly to the wound every few minutes. Do whatever you two can to kill any infection. The doctor and I will return to see if the wound is healing. If not, I sense more invasive measures will need to be taken.”

Victoria followed everyone out into the grassy lawn where a couple of the patients, not wounded enough to be bedridden, had placed a cot for Davey while a couple more patients who were almost healed, escorted the boy outside. She watched Glad Betsy as she situated Davey’s injured arm directly into the sunlight. Glad Betsy inserted a syringe into a jar of freshly boiled yet cooled water and squirted it directly into the shrapnel wound. Victoria stepped forward to get a closer look, but Glad Betsy demanded, “Step back, you’re creating a shadow on this boy, and I can’t see what I’m doing.” Victoria stepped back and Glad Betsy explained, “It’s the sunlight that Captain Sally believes heals these types of wounds, plus washing out as much of the infection as we

can. She also believes distilled alcohol poured directly onto the site further impedes the spread of the infection.”

Victoria frowned. “Where did the infection come from?”

Glad Betsy shrugged her shoulders. “We don’t know, but I guarantee you that Captain Sally will check the last shift of nurses to see who the last nurse was that was supposed to change this bandage and why they didn’t.”

“But how can that make a difference?”

“Because not only the patient but also their injuries must continuously be kept clean. I don’t know why, but it seems to work.” She glanced up at Davey and smiled. “We haven’t had a case yet that we haven’t been able to cure.”

For the next hour, Victoria assisted Glad Betsy in thoroughly rinsing and cleansing Davey’s arm while he lay in the sun. She looked up from her duties to see Persephone and Sad Betsy coming out with glasses and a pan of fresh water.

“Good afternoon, ladies,” Persephone said, and nodded to Master Davey, “And gentleman. We brought you some refreshing drinks and a pan of water and some cloths to help keep you cool.” She held out the tray of drinks for Davey, Glad Betsy, and Victoria to take a glass. “So, Victoria, how are you enjoying our little organization?”

“I cannot believe how clean and organized everything is. I’m learning so much, and the soldiers really appreciate what we do.”

“How are you coming along with the nursing?”

“She’s taking real good care of me,” Davey said from his cot.

## Chapter Three

1862—Robertson's Hospital

Victoria exited the hospital after yet another long and exhausting shift. After a couple of weeks of such labor, she would have liked to tell her mother that the work got easier, but she didn't like to lie. As her feet touched each wooden porch step toward the sidewalk, she ruminated over her day. Her morning began at sunrise when, even before breakfast, Glad Betsy pulled her into the severe case of a patient in the throes of delirium from a fever. Lt. Jones, the poor soul, kept thrashing his arms about and screaming about witches and demons. She saw bed linens ripped from the mattress, overturned small bedside tables, and medicine bottles and glasses crashing to the floor. From her periphery, Victoria saw other patients struggle to get out of the way, and the fear in the high-pitched voice of Master Davey yelling for someone to stop the mad man hit her hard. Yet Lt. Jones used his arms and legs to lash out when anyone got too close, keeping her, Glad Betsy, and Sad Betsy at a distance.

Over the cacophony of noise, Victoria heard Dr. Richards yelling for order while the nurses tried to hold Lt. Jones down. The doctor appeared before the melee in a blood-stained white surgical apron and a container of ether and a cloth. Once the nurses fought the patient into a moment of stillness, Dr. Richards shoved the ether-soaked cloth over Lt. Jones' face, wherein the soldier's body collapsed half on the floor and half in the nurses' arms. The doctor stood over them and nodded to Victoria. She held his gaze as he

wiped the sweat from his brow. “Have someone change his bed linens and get him back to bed while I finish in surgery. Don’t forget to check for other injuries. And get this mess cleaned up,” he ordered.

Sad Betsy glared at Dr. Richards’ back as he walked away “And thank you for your assistance, ladies,” she said under her breath.

A burst of laughter escaped Victoria’s mouth. “I didn’t think you capable of such speech to a superior.”

“Well,” Glad Betsy began as she glanced around, “we don’t seem to have an empty bed available, so let’s let him lie here on the floor while we change the linens. We’ll get one of the lesser-wounded patients to assist us in getting him back to bed.”

The fear in Davy’s voice during the incident still haunted Victoria as she struggled to her feet. “Let me check on Master Davey for a moment and I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t you go getting attached to that young man,” Sad Betsy warned.

“I won’t. He’s scared and alone and has never seen anything like this. I just need to let him know that everything is under control.”

“Um hmmm, if you say so.” Sad Betsy strode passed her.

An hour later, with Davey comforted and the ward back in order, Lt. Jones had settled into a restless sleep atop fresh bedlinen. Victoria pulled off his sweat-soaked shirt and trousers before washing his body with a new bar of Castile soap she found in a cabinet. She stood by his side and swabbed him with a flannel soaked in salt water and slathered in soap. First his face, taking care around his eyes, then his neck—front and back—chest, arms, lower torso, and finally his legs. Without a male in attendance, she



ignored the bandage around his groin, as a proper lady should, and concentrated instead on cooling him with a wet cloth and a hand-made straw fan. These things she had experience with. From head to foot and back again, she cooled her patient first swabbing then fanning, even dipping her hand in a small bowl of cool, fresh water, and brushing it against his dry, cracked lips.

Captain Sally tiptoed up to Victoria, lest she awaken the patient, watched over Victoria's handiwork, and asked, "How is his wound healing? Other than the fever, did you detect any other signs of infection?"

"I'm . . . ma'am . . . I was waiting for Dr. Richards to—"

"But you know that infection won't wait," Captain Sally interjected. "Remember, as per Florence Nightingale's first rule, our job is to *prevent* any signs of infection." She asked, "Why didn't you change his bandage earlier?"

"The patient presented this morning with delusions and thrashing about such that Sad Betsy, Glad Betsy, and I wrestled with the patient before Dr. Richards could use ether to calm him. I was waiting for the doctor to return before attending to his wounds for fear of causing more damage."

"I see." Captain Sally frowned, staring down her nose at Victoria. "But surely you recognized the fever as a sign of infection."

"Yes, ma'am, I did. But I feared him to awaken and begin thrashing about and yelling again thereby causing more damage to him and be a danger to the others."

"A man's life is at stake, which should take precedence over everything else. If you are afraid, then maybe this isn't the place you should be."

Victoria hung her head and wrung her hands. “Yes, ma’am.” There was something about Captain Sally’s authoritative presence that quelled any confidence Victoria may have gained.

Captain Sally sighed. “Well, let’s remove the bandage and treat his wound in the proper manner. She bent over to assess the damage.

“But Miss Sally, it’s in his . . .” Heat rushed up her neck and into her cheeks. She glanced around the ward lest anyone hear and whispered, “You know, in his . . .” She physically could not say the word but gestured towards her lower torso.

Captain Sally glared back. “Mrs. Evans, you are a wife and a nurse trainee, and this is *your* patient—”

“But it’s not decent—”

Captain Sally leapt to her feet and stood inches from Victoria’s face. “Let me advise you of what is not decent. Not decent is letting a man die because *you* let your ignorant femininity get in your way. Not decent is a nurse who cannot be bothered to even look at a soldier’s wound because of what society says women should not see and do. Not decent is making this man suffer because you think by ignoring his wound, it shall go away.”

Victoria swallowed hard as Captain Sally crushed what little confidence she had left. “I only meant that—”

“Enough.” Captain Sally shook her head and watched Lt. Jones sleeping. Victoria saw her struggle to contain her anger. “The first day you were here, the very first day, what did I tell you?”

“To make sure to prevent infection,” Victoria guessed.

“And did you?”

“No, ma’am.” A niggling pain began in Victoria’s temples. Her heart pounded in her chest, and her shoulders slumped at the chastisement. Her clasped hands wrung involuntarily in front of her.

“My dear, it does not matter where the soldier is injured. As his nurse, your job is to tend to his wounds. Period.”

“But I’ve never—”

“Well, you’re about to.” Captain Sally looked Victoria over head to toe. “Or I can send you home.”

Victoria gasped. “Oh, but ma’am, you can’t, I can’t go—”

“If you can’t do your job properly, I will have to.” An uncomfortable silence fell upon them before Captain Sally continued. “I understand you have a husband and two brothers in this war, is that correct?”

“Yes, my husband George, older brother John, and the youngest, Thomas.”

“And what if they were injured in the same manner as Lt. Jones here? Would you want their nurses to be squeamish and shy away from tending to their duties because of propriety and decency? Or would you want those nurses to work like the devil to save your loved ones?”

The possibility that her husband or brothers could ever be injured in the same manner as Lt. Jones had never occurred to her. Wouldn’t she want a nurse to tend to such private, unspeakable areas of her husband’s body if it meant saving his life? *But what if the other patients see me performing these unutterable tasks? What if Lt. Jones*

*discovered it was me that cleansed and bandaged such wounds? Whatever would he think of me?*

“Now,” Captain Sally’s voice brought her back to reality. “Once you understand that these men are also someone’s loved ones, it might make it easier for you to understand the importance of your job.” She waited a moment while Victoria let the message sink in. “Do we continue, or do I send you home?”

“I shall endeavor to continue, if you would guide me with your expertise.”

“Good.”

Captain Sally ordered for a couple of the patients who were almost healed to assist with setting up a corner of the ward to accommodate Lt. Jones’ cot and bedside table. She advised them to place screens and sheets around the area to provide privacy. Victoria and the assisting patients followed Captain Sally’s instructions, and soon they had shaped a comfortable area for Lt. Jones to rest in peace and quiet. Victoria stood back and looked over their handiwork with satisfaction. She fetched her cleansing accoutrements while the other patients moved Lt. Jones to his area of privacy.

Once everything was in place, and while Lt. Jones was still anesthetized, Victoria and Captain Sally began their work behind the screens. Victoria held onto the patient’s lower torso while Captain Sally exposed a post-surgical dressing that had not been changed since the previous day. Blood had oozed out of the laceration, through the dressing, and had dried.

“Oh, dear,” Victoria gasped. “No wonder the patient was distressed and irrational,” she whispered, lest any of the other patients hear.

Captain Sally shushed Victoria and reached into her leather pouch. She pulled out her much-used Bible, closed her eyes, and invited Victoria to join in saying a prayer.

Victoria stood aside, bowed her head, and waited patiently for her mentor to lay her hands on the soldier.

“Dear Lord, we humbly ask that you lay your healing hands on this brave soldier and guide us with the knowledge and strength to assist in his care. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, amen.”

“Amen,” Victoria repeated.

Wordlessly Victoria squeezed the flannel of excess water directly over the dried and bloodied bandage, soaking it through. She watched carefully as Captain Sally first cut the bandage with the scissors she also kept in the leather pouch worn around her waist. With the tips of her fingers, Captain Sally eased the bandage from the wound as Victoria continued to apply water to the bandage to aid in the ease of removal. Captain Sally released the last of the bandage which revealed burst stitches and a red, swollen gash which oozed puss.

Victoria’s heart sank as the putrid smell of infection hit her immediately. “If only I had acted sooner!”

Captain Sally stepped back and instructed Victoria to thoroughly clean the wound and purge as much infection as she could. She pushed aside the sheets used for curtains and began barking orders. “Sad Betsy, fetch me the brandy. Glad Betsy, bring me some fresh bandages. Victoria, when you’re finished, fill a pan with clean salt water and a fresh flannel with a bar of soap. I shall alert the surgeon this patient needs to go back to surgery.”

“Why must he undergo surgery again? Can’t it just be re-sutured,” Victoria asked.

Captain Sally smiled. “Well, at least you are learning the vocabulary.” Then her demeanor changed. “If we can get him back into surgery and cut away any more of the decayed flesh, we may be able to save him. But it shall take a lot of demanding work and diligence. In the meantime, I will advise Dr. Richards.”

Victoria’s pulse raced while her hands moved expertly, first in squeezing the inflamed flesh to remove the poisonous pestilence before cleansing the area thoroughly. When she thought she had removed as much of the impurities as she could, Victoria prepared the lukewarm salt water in a washbasin, grabbed a clean cloth, and fresh bar of lye soap. Her mind went over Captain Sally’s words with each step back to Lt. Jones’ private corner. “This could be your loved one.” “Wouldn’t you want their nurses to work like the devil to save their lives?” Victoria knelt on her knees with the patient’s groin injury at eyelevel and thoroughly washed the surgical site, squeezing out any extra puss and blood with her free hand. She mopped up the detritus as best she could with a clean cloth

Sad Betsy appeared with the brandy, which Victoria applied liberally to the wound, even guiding the amber liquid directly into the gash and surrounding area. The patient moaned and moved his legs and tried to roll over into a fetal position, but Victoria shushed him and held him in place.

Dr. Richards arrived at the bedside to check the ripped sutures. “Isn’t this the patient who caused the scene this morning?”

“Yes, sir.” Victoria stood as she capped the brandy bottle. “Do you suppose the infection was caused from the shotgun wound or from the bandage not being changed as it should have been last night??”

“Hells bells, I don’t know.” The surgeon shook his head, continuing to express his frustration. “These men are sitting in filth for days on end or lying in a pasture with the sun beating down on them, injured, malnourished, and dehydrated, before they get any medical attention. And those bastards running this show expect us doctors to fix everything and send the soldiers back out into that bloody awful mess.”

She blushed at his colorful language but understood, as she had seen the conditions in which most of the soldiers arrived for herself. “Captain Sally advised that more of the flesh could be removed from this patient to ensure the infection is also removed.”

“That’s what I’m going to try to do,” the surgeon said as he glanced in the direction of some patients to catch their attention. He motioned to them. “Come here, quick.”

Her interest peaked, Victoria asked, “But if you cut more and re-suture, how can you be sure it won’t happen again?”

Dr. Richards glared at her, and she ducked her head, knowing she had committed a terrible sin: A lowly nurse trainee never questions a doctor.

“Because this time you nurses,” he pointed at her sternum, “are going to ensure the infection is stopped before it can begin and cause any more damage.”

While Lt. Jones was in surgery and recovery, Victoria spent the next few hours hauling buckets of water from the well, or on her hands and knees picking up discarded

bandages and linen from the surgery floor, or sweeping, mopping, and assisting in changing bed linen in all the wards.

After a lunch that Victoria had cobbled together from leftovers of fresh vegetables that grew in the hospital gardens, she marched over to Lt. Jones' bedside, only to discover his bed empty. Matron Mary informed her that Captain Sally feared he may have something contagious, so she had him moved to an isolated area. Victoria searched the hospital for her patient and found him alone, sleeping in a cot out on a porch in the fresh air and sunshine. She immediately felt his forehead for signs of fever. Satisfied that it had cooled, she took a moment to prepare herself. *You can do this!* She peeled back the dressing. Her hands shook and blood pounded in her ears as she examined the sutures, taking care to ensure she did not come in contact with his manhood. *If Mother could see me now, she would go into apoplexy.* A small amount of blood had drained, but the stitches held. She cleansed the wound thoroughly before realizing she would need a bottle of brandy.

“Oh, Victoria.”

She gasped and whirled around to find Captain Sally standing behind her. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Your diligence on coming back after your lunch to check on the patient post-surgery is most commendable. I moved him out here because I suspect he may have contracted a contagion which caused his feverish outburst. Still, we must not let too many hours go by without ensuring the patients' injuries are healing.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you, ma’am.” A sense of warmth spread through her heart. *Well, I'll be Swanny—I actually did something right around here!*



“Since you know so much about Lt. Jones’ condition, I shall suggest to matron that you stay with him until he is out of danger. And I will have some orderlies move him back inside momentarily.”

She smiled. That meant a lighter workload. “Thank you, Miss.”

“Oh, one more thing.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“I recommend you smile a bit more. It makes the soldiers feel better to see a smiling face. It shows confidence and lets them know that someone here cares about them, thereby putting them at ease.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Once again, her confidence faded.

She swabbed his unshaven face and neck, then muscular chest and arms before moving down to his abdomen. Having cleansed so many patients, the steps became almost a habit for her now. Victoria wet the flannel again and rubbed his thick brown hair with the soapy flannel. She was careful to use her fingertips to clean down his scalp, just in case of vermin. With a fresh comb, she combed out his hair, brushing it away from his face.

She smiled down at her handiwork. Admittedly he had a handsome face; oval shaped with what she remembered her husband George called classical features from the Old-World paintings he had studied. Lt. Jones now presented a much better specimen than earlier this morning when Victoria had witnessed his wild eyes and wiry hair that stood out at all angles. He had jumped onto his bed, screamed, and fought invisible demons, yet now lay quiet and peaceful. That terrified and raving creature had been transformed into a bathed, groomed, and sleeping gentleman.

Glad Betsy walked by distributing lavender water and willow tea to the ward nurses. Victoria noticed how all the patients sat up straight and smiled at Glad Betsy, genuinely glad to see her. Glad Betsy loved her patients and was not afraid to let them know. Victoria took some of the water and applied a small amount to a clean flannel and laid it across Lt. Jones' forehead. The light, flowery aroma perfumed the air immediately around her and her patient, dispelling the foul odors that were settling on the ward. Victoria slid a chair close to Lt. Jones' bedside and sat down, alleviating the pain in her back, swollen feet, and legs from standing so long. She expressed an audible sigh and fanned herself for a moment.

It dawned on her that she had worked harder this week than she had ever worked in her life. And while these disgusting and unsanitary tasks were not what she had originally signed up for, a sense of pride warmed her heart for nursing the wounded soldiers. She had a purpose. She was needed. She was learning more about the human condition and soul than she had imagined existed. And she was learning more about herself.

While the orderlies carried Lt. Jones back inside the isolation area, Victoria left his side just long enough to fetch a bottle of brandy, a pan of salt water, clean cloth, and bar of soap. She dribbled brandy into the patient's slashed groin, thanking God he was passed out. She could only imagine how much the alcohol would burn and sting, causing Lt. Jones to thrash about again because his insides would be on fire. Not to mention should he awaken to see her in such a position. Satisfied the sutured gash was as clean as she could get it, she applied a clean linen bandage, pulled his clean night shirt down, and covered him up.

She retrieved her Bible and sat beside him reading aloud softly. She began with Psalm 23, as that was her favorite. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.”

At first, she didn't believe Lt. Jones could hear her until he held up his left hand for her to hold. He did not open his eyes or speak, but she knew. She continued reading through Psalms 91: “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”

Reading the chapters and verses came easy to her as she knew them well from attending church for so many years, but each time Lt. Jones squeezed her hand, she came to understand the power of those words.

She closed her Bible and looked down at her patient. The sunlight struck the ring on his left hand, reminding her that he was a married man. She wondered if his wife knew where he was. Where was she? Was she still alive? Would he ask her to write a letter advising his wife of his condition? *Why would you even care?* Because she had learned to care for all her patients, as if caring for them would somehow also be taking care of George. Not having received a letter or any word about him in months, she wondered every hour of every day where George was; if he was injured or ill, and if so, was he being taken care of as well as she tried to care for her patients?

Victoria spent the next few hours preparing bandages to be used on Lt. Jones' groin wound and diligently watching over her patient. Satisfied he was comfortable and stable, she stood from the stiff, wooden chair and massaged her aching back. Her fingers

were red and swollen from the day's labor, and she found more callouses forming on her fingertips and palms. She could just hear her mother's displeasure, "A great lady would never allow such disgraceful hands to come to be, much less expose them in public."

But when Victoria glanced down at Lt. Jones lying in his bed sleeping soundly with a clean nightshirt, scrubbed face, and combed hair, a sense of pride washed over her. Those red and calloused hands had comforted his soul, bathed his body, and cleansed his war wound. She had contributed to this man's well-being, and there were not many people who would appreciate such diligence as she had taken. For the first time in her life, she was important to someone else.

She cleansed his wound and changed the bandages one last time during this shift, then stepped into the ward to clear her mind. Long shadows spread across the room as the late afternoon sun bathed the patients in a bright, healing light. The windows were raised allowing the cool breeze to air the ward and refresh the patient's spirits.

Victoria left Lt. Jones' bedside to gather her cloak and reticule before leaving for the night, mentally ticking off in her head the tasks to be done first thing in the morning to ensure no step was missed. She gathered the cape around her throat as she traipsed down the steps and onto the sidewalk. The sounds of carriages rolling by, the pounding of horses' hooves, and people's laughter drifted around her. Her journey home began by walking west, directly into a sunset bursting with oranges and reds mingled with blues and purples as the evening closed in. Wind blew in from the James River, sweeping wisps of her auburn hair away from her face that had fallen from the carefully constructed, nurse-regulation bun she had fussed so with this morning.

Thoroughly exhausted and sore from the chores of the day, a smile spread across her face at the remembrance of Captain Sally's complimenting her for attending to Lt. Jones so diligently—a decidedly marked difference from earlier that day. The tap-tap of her heels on the wooden sidewalk resounded with each step, reminding her of her swollen and sore feet and legs from standing and climbing stairs so much today. Her stomach rumbled as she trudged up a slight hill. She paused a moment and counted how many hours had passed since she had eaten lunch. She imagined a hearty, meaty meal, complete with fresh-baked fruit pies awaited her. Her mouth watered at the thought.

A group of young men approximately her age stood on the sidewalk laughing and talking boisterously, blocking her path. From their verbiage, she gathered they were preparing to celebrate the night way, having recently signed up for the Confederacy.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," she said and pressed on, expecting them to tip their hats and move out of her way. Instead, one of the youths stood directly in front of her, blocking her path, leering at her.

"Well, well, well, look who we have here! Victoria Carter. Oh, I am so sorry," he smirked. "She is now a married lady, aren't you, Mrs. Evans?"

Her heart pounded at the sound of his smarmy voice and shock of red hair. She gasped and clutched her cloak closer to her throat. Lionel Stuart, Richmond's richest delinquent. And of course, his parents were good friends with her parents.

"Miss Victoria," he called out. Venom dripped from his tongue.

She winced at the salacious manner in which he spoke her name.

"I see you are out for an evening stroll. Probably seeking more men to handle after 'tending' to the bedded soldiers all day."

The other boys laughed and formed a circle around her. Lionel continued.

“Surely, my friends, you know of Miss Victoria, the soldier’s little nursie who *personally* takes care of *every, single, man*, on her ward.”

The others laughed and catcalled in her face. Her stomach rolled at the stench of alcohol on their breath. She maintained control while searching for a way out of their circle. Anger built in her chest at the salacious nature in which they spoke. Her eyes glared back at Lionel, daring him to continue.

Which he did. “I wonder if she wouldn’t oblige us with a few of her favors—if she isn’t too tired from servicing the soldiers all day.”

Suddenly, hands reached out for her, pushing and shoving, jostling her against each of them, the boys, pulling her into their arms and pushing her face upward in order to kiss her on the mouth. Their raucous laughter blared into her ears. Strong, forceful hands reached under her cape, grabbing, pulling, and twisting her around. Suddenly someone pulled her bun loose.

*Dear God, help me!* She screamed and fought against the groping hands. Her arms reached out to their faces as if to tear their flesh from the bones as she shouted, “Lionel Stuart, Ben Williams, Jack Ross, Elijah Purvis—get your filthy hands off of me and move out of my way!”

The boys laughed louder, yet relief washed over her when she saw their surprised expressions. A small space in the circle broke and she lunged through it, continuing to run up the walkway. Only when she knew the boys did not follow her did she notice that several people, laborers walking home, couples out for a stroll, even horses and carriages had slowed to witness the commotion. Yet not the first one came to her rescue. It struck

her that after all she and her fellow nurses did to save lives and comfort the wounded soldiers, the women still frowned at her while some of the men glared and complained about the indecency of women nursing complete strangers.

## Chapter Four

1862—Robertson's Hospital

Victoria glanced up from her lunch at the sound of Sad Betsy's heavy footsteps resounding on the kitchen hardwood floors. She jumped when Sad Betsy slammed her tray on the table.

“Oh, that man,” Sad Betsy fumed.

“What is the matter? What man?”

“Dr. Richards and his holier-than-thou attitude.” Sad Betsy's nostrils flared, and her face turned a dark shade of pink.

Victoria sighed. She had not been at the hospital long enough to have to personally work under Dr. Richards' supervision, but she had already seen and heard plenty. “What has he done this time?”

“Remember that patient of mine, that Sgt. Miller who came in several days ago and had surgery on his foot? Well, it's not healing like Dr. Richards thinks it should, so he has ordered me to give the patient mercury every four hours. Plus, I have to collect and measure patient's bodily fluids.” Sad Betsy glared at Victoria. “And you know what that means.”

“Not really,” Victoria admitted while shaking her head. “But if the doctor prescribed the medicine, he must have a reason.”



“Oh, he has a reason, alright—to keep me busy and on my feet for hours cleaning up after the patient.”

Frowning, Victoria said, “I don’t understand—”

“Patients who are given mercury salivate profusely. They vomit and have severe diarrhea for hours. And I’m not only to keep administering that awful concoction, but I am also to keep a record of the patient’s output. Plus, it will be my job to keep cleaning the patient and his surroundings after each purge.”

“What is the purpose of the mercury,” Victoria asked, still frowning. “I’ve seen several patients being given this drug, but I never knew what it was or what it was for.”

A moment of calmness passed over Sad Betsy as she explained. “The doctors believe that since the drugs makes the patients expel bodily fluids, the patient’s body is purging itself of the bad humors, which is what makes the patient ill in the first place.”

“Sounds like you don’t believe it.”

“It’s a waste of time if you ask me. The patients are always exhausted and weak after one dose. They can’t keep any food or drink down which makes them weaker, and I have as of yet to see any real improvement after the treatment.”

“And Captain Sally approves of this?”

“Since she is not a doctor, she abides their medical instructions. And I hate to admit it, but it is a customary practice to give mercury to most patients, no matter who they are or what ails them.”

“Oh dear. Well, if you need my assistance, I can ask matron—”

“No.” Sad Betsy held up her hand. “You have your own patients to take care of. I can’t ask you to help me while one of your patients may need you.”

Victoria finished the last of her meal, took her plate to the kitchen sink, and washed it, as per Captain Sally's dictates. "But if you need me, just holler."

"I will, and thanks for the offer." Sad Betsy sighed. "I fear it shall be a long afternoon for me."

Victoria gave Sad Betsy a wan smile and patted her on the shoulders before getting back to her own duties.

By late afternoon, as Victoria checked twice before administering willow tea or an arrowroot concoction to her patients, she glanced across the ward as Sad Betsy's patient, Sgt. Miller, began purging his body's bad humors.

The walking patients helped Sad Betsy get Sgt. Miller to the privy for a modicum of privacy. Moments later, Sad Betsy returned to change his bed linen and retrieve a clean night shirt. Startled by Sad Betsy's pale pallor, Victoria went to her. "Are you alright?"

"I shall be momentarily," replied Sad Betsy, her voice hoarse and strained. "Seeing a patient sick makes me nauseous as well."

Victoria chuckled. "That's a fine situation—a nurse who gets sick because of her patients." She paused a moment to study Sad Betsy's face. "But I must say, you do look a bit green."

Sad Betsy's shoulders visibly slumped. "But God, I just feel so sorry for the patients who have to go through this."

Victoria tried to offer a smile and comforting words, but mere words were not the answer.

As the afternoon crawled on, Victoria performed her duties, yet feeling helpless as she caught glimpses of Sad Betsy dutifully washing her patient, keeping meticulous notes, and continually changing his bedlinen. Sad Betsy also administered the mercury as prescribed and kept the walking patients close by to escort Sgt. Miller to the privy every few minutes; all the while the seriousness of his condition continued. And there was nothing they could do to end Sgt. Miller's misery.

To her horror, Victoria learned that Dr. Richards prescribed mercury for more of the patients he didn't feel were healing fast enough after surgery. That meant nurses would be taxed with more work, dwindling supplies would be wasted, and patients would be placed under undue stress and pain.

*Dear God, when would this terrible war be over?*

## Chapter Five

1862—Robertson's Hospital

Victoria started a ritual where at the end of her shift each evening, she strolled through the foyer area to see if Persephone were still there; not only to tell her goodbye, but also to see how many more wounded were queued up to be registered. She moved out the front door, pausing to secure her cape around her neck, then rushed down the steps and onto the sidewalk.

Once out on the sidewalk, she thought there to be more Confederate soldiers in the city each evening. Even though many weeks had passed, Victoria's evening walks home alone from the hospital still daunted her. She had witnessed arguments between shopkeepers and customers regarding shortages of supplies; she heard voices raised between soldiers about which of their regiments had participated in the worst battles; and she overheard citizens gossiping about how much longer this war would last.

This evening she reached the Chestnut home safe, and thankful she hadn't seen any evidence of The War coming closer to her new home. While hanging up her reticule and cape on the hall tree, Mrs. Chestnut called out, "Victoria, is that you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Chestnut came around the corner smiling and wiping her hands on a towel. "Why, my dear, I've so much to tell you. I've laid a fire in the parlor and thought we could have dinner in there. Oh, and there is a letter from your mother; I left it on your

bed, so go freshen up and see what she has to say. We'll talk over dinner. I made some potatoes and gravy, green beans with ham hocks, corn bread, and baked apples for dessert."

Victoria inhaled and grinned as the aroma of fresh baked apples greeted her. "Sounds and smells wonderful." Her stomach rumbled at the mention of food, reminding her that once again she had let too many hours pass since her noon meal. But at the thought of her mother's letter, a sense of dread filled her. "I'll be quick as I can."

A stained and wrinkled, cream-colored envelop lay propped up on her pillows, greeting Victoria as she entered the room. After a good hand scrubbing and change of clothes, she sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the envelop. She paused with the envelop in her hand, wondering what her mother would have to complain about this time. *Well, the sooner I open it, the sooner it'll be over.*

The letter began with the utmost etiquette, as only her mother would still use.

*My dearest daughter,*

*I am grateful to have the good health in mind and body to be able to write to you and do so hope that all is well with you and Mrs. Chestnut. But my dear, I must confess that I was shocked when I received word from Mrs. Stuart about your ill behavior and disrespect towards her son, Lionel, and his male companions. I was most embarrassed to learn of your harsh treatment to these brave young men who have pledged their lives to fight for our Cause. And to do so in a public street is unthinkable. Need I not remind you of the influence the Stuarts carry? And if what was related to me of your behavior should be spread to others, I dare say your reputation, as well as mine, shall be irreparably harmed A young lady such as*

*yourself must show proper restraint at all times and to give comfort and support to those dashing young men who are going into battle. My daughter, I have not the slightest idea of what has happened to you since you left us to do your patriotic duty, but I must insist that you cease and desist at once these ill manners and improper behavior. Why, I pray nightly that none of this detrimental scene has reached George or his family. You must now think of your family, and his, instead of being selfish and wicked in your words and deeds. I also pray that as of your receipt of this letter, nothing else untoward has transpired since your unspeakable behavior.*

*Oh, my darling daughter, how I must express to you the worries that plague my mind because of your brothers. It has been weeks since I have heard from my darling boys, and only then their letters were brief, providing no indication of where they were or how they are truly faring. Should you have any information, could you please share with your devoted mother?*

*In the preceding months, Confederate and Yankee soldiers have marched through the territory, confiscating anything of value, from crops to livestock to jewelry. The homestead is now bare and more the worse for wear. With your father gone and the slaves leaving, I fear Clearwater shall crumble and fall in around our heads. Therefore, Emmy, Luke, and I shall travel to Richmond and re-open Somerset—if I am successful in obtaining the proper travel passes and clearance papers for us. Then, with you being with us, we shall be a family again, such as we are. And you shall no longer burden Mrs. Chestnut.*

*I must conclude now to get this letter in time to post. But with this confounded war, all I can really do is hope it gets to you at all. Am anxious to see you and will be with you as fast as the current travel situation allows.*

*Your loving mother.*

Victoria wadded the letter up in her hands. Just like Mother to take Lionel's lies about her to heart and blaming everything on her. And planning to travel here to spy on her and make sure she, Victoria, did nothing wrong—as if she would have time for such.

But then again, what if Mother spoke the truth about the slaves leaving? They were leaving their master's homes here in Richmond, more and more every day. And where was Father? Victoria re-read the letter, but Mother only wrote that Father had gone. Gone where? Or was he dead? *No, that couldn't be it. Mother would have sent for me in that event.*

After reading the letter a third time, Victoria was still galled that her mother had written so heartfelt about Thomas and John yet reprimanded her for something she had not done. And Victoria sensed her first taste of independence was about to be compromised. By living with her mother again, Victoria feared she would regress into that silly girl again and becoming more concerned about etiquette and manners than standing on her own two feet with an important and distinct purpose.

When she had calmed down, Victoria strolled into the parlor to meet Mrs. Chestnut. There she stopped short when she found the parlor furniture had been rearranged. Two wingback chairs sat at angles in front of the fireplace, and two piecrust tables were placed on the outsides of the chairs. Those tables held matching hurricane lamps for extra light, and a couple of books each. A small, narrow wooden table just big

enough for a couple of teacups with saucers and a plate of edible sweets sat between the chairs.

Mrs. Chestnut motioned for Victoria to sit. "I had some of the neighbors help me set up the parlor like this. Makes it cozier, don't you think?" The wan smile on Mrs. Chestnut's face told Victoria that something had happened, something Mrs. Chestnut did not want to talk about.

"Yes, I agree, this is much cozier," Victoria said as she sat in the wingback chair closest to her.

Mrs. Chestnut sat in the adjacent chair just as Mona wheeled in their supper cart.

More rumbles of hunger rolled through Victoria's stomach while she enjoyed the mingled aromas of the ham hocks and cornbread. Yet these were dishes she rarely ate before The War, remembering how her mother advised such lowly foods were for the common folk.

"I fear this may be the last of such fare for a while," Mrs. Chestnut advised after savoring a bite of potatoes and gravy.

"Oh?" Yet even Victoria noted the lack of real meat in the meal.

"Supplies are going to the Confederate Army, everything from food stuffs to medical supplies to housewares. Supplies that are not being derailed thanks to the Yankees anyway."

"I've heard people complaining, but I hoped it was only temporary." Thinking this could be her last decent meal, suddenly Victoria found her dinner not so appetizing.

"Just be glad you are at the hospital, my dear, as the soldiers, doctors, and nurses will most definitely be taken care of before us citizens." Mrs. Chestnut took a small bite



of her cornbread. “And speaking of the hospital, I must tell you of my visit today to Robertson’s.”

Victoria stared at her companion. “You came to the hospital today? I never saw you.”

“I was only allowed in the foyer where a Miss Persephone Cole advised that I could not enter without Miss Sally’s permission. But I did see you carrying buckets up the stairs and dashing off to your next task.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t see you—”

“I’m glad you didn’t, as I should have detained you from your duties, which were much more important than acknowledging my presence. When Persephone introduced me to Miss Sally, I expressed my humble desire to see for myself the hospital and how it was so well managed. But Miss Sally rebuked my wish, advising that I was not permitted inside as my presence could disrupt the doctors and nurses, as well as contaminate the patients who were healing from such horrible wounds.”

“Well, we don’t get many visitors just to see how the hospital is run,” Victoria began.

“Oh, but Miss Sally was right of course. I walked in asking how many of the patients were Carolinians, and she advised that her patients came from all over, and that her duty was to care for the soldiers and not ask where they were from. And I had no real business being there, especially without an appointment. And Miss Sally’s responsibilities are far greater than just showing me her accomplishments.”

“But your generosity in providing supplies for the hospital and collecting donations, and as your husband is a senator, I would have thought you a powerful and most-welcomed contributor to our cause.”

“Oh, she thanked me profusely for the supplies I had collected and brought to the hospital, but be that as it may, I shall not return without Miss Sally’s approval. She is a very gifted and determined woman, very passionate about her cause, and I feel we could be very good friends.”

“So, you understand what she is trying to do?”

“Yes, and it is very commendable of her to dedicate herself to the survival of those wounded soldiers.”

Victoria sighed and laid her fork on her plate. “I wish mother were so understanding.”

## Section II

### Chapter One

1871—Richmond, Virginia

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Victoria Carter Evans frowned at her disheveled reflection. For the tenth time this morning, she had scrutinized herself in the cracked and faded mirror which hung over her tiny, scarred vanity table.

Thank God George isn't here to see me like this. Or his beloved South. If only we hadn't gone to war. If only George hadn't been killed. Or John. Or Thomas. And what about Papa?

The dry goods store cancelled their credit until they settled the fifteen-dollar bill, and except for what meager earnings her mother, Luke and Emmy, their married former house slaves, brought in, no other means of cash came into the house.

I shall never get that paid position looking like this.

She had been up before dawn preparing to look her best for the possibility of an interview. But her heart sank at the untidy mess reflecting back.

Victoria stepped back, pivoting from left to right, hoping to see an improvement. She bit her lip to quell the stinging tears behind her eyes. No matter how many times she

adjusted the hand-me-down skirt, the voluminous folds barely clung to her too-thin figure.

She ran her hands down the front of her best skirt. There once was a time George loved to hold me close. But she knew he would say she was far too skinny now. And everyone knew that only poverty-stricken, wretched souls were skinny because of their lack of money to buy food.

“Well, now you are a poor, wretched soul,” she scolded.

Her pasty complexion and bleary eyes showed all too well that she had constantly tossed and turned the night before. Her cheeks were still devoid of color, even though she had pinched them unusually hard.

Hmmmmmp.

Victoria’s fingers shook as she pinned her unruly, lackluster auburn hair. She remembered how, before the war, George would run his through her long tresses and tell her how much he loved to touch its softness, and how he loved its sweet smell. Yet this morning, she had brushed through it countless times in an effort to manage the dull, dry strands. But the humidity already caused the locks to frizz even more with each brush stroke.

She sank on the edge of the bed and rubbed her throbbing temples. Me? Obtain a paid position? What am I thinking? Ten years ago, the whole of her being had been reading, writing silly letters to her sillier friends, keeping a journal of parties and dresses and beaus, and crocheting ridiculously, useless doilies. Five years ago, her entire world had been turned upside down by The War. Even serving endless, exhaustive hours nursing soldiers and caring for the sick and dying had all come to nothing. All of that

work and knowledge were now deemed useless because the Conflict had ended, and women were supposed to return to their simple-minded activities—regardless of not having enough money to survive.

Victoria made herself slip on and lace up her last pair of decent ladies' boots, worn and faded as they were. Oh, dear, these will never do. Tears welled in her eyes and a heavy burden settled in her chest. For a moment, she thought of just forgetting the whole thing.

She lowered her gaze and took a moment to becalm herself, inhaling deep and counting to ten three times. An inner strength slowly spread through her body. She stood up, threw her shoulders back, and confronted her reflection. "Victoria Carter Evans. You are an adult now. Stop this foolishness and prepare yourself for this interview. You must accept your responsibilities and get a job. Damn the consequences." But inside she knew that no matter what happened she would not give up. We will survive. Somehow. We always have.

With a long, audible sigh, she stood and slipped her arms through her jacket sleeves. Victoria slowly buttoned it, praying the jacket would be tight enough in the waist to hold her skirt in place.

She fluffed out her crushed and out-of-fashion hat as best she could and inserted the hat pin, careful not to prick her fingers or scalp.

One last inspection in front of the mirror, Victoria grabbed her reticule and yesterday's paper before marching downstairs. Her mother's authoritative voice drifted up the stairs from the kitchen, giving Emmy instructions on how best to save the last of

the baking supplies for their next job. They may not approve of what I am about to do, but I must succeed.

Her stomach growled, and Victoria put her hand on it in a vain attempt to quiet the hunger pangs. For a moment, her vision blurred, and the stairs swam before her.

She told herself that it must be the excitement.

Once her head cleared, she sauntered out the front door and greeted the cool, gray morning. Dark, threatening clouds loomed overhead, and trees swayed back and forth in the gathering storm.

Victoria clutched the newspaper tight under her arm and held her reticule close to her body while she breathed in the air of the heavy rain to come. She hurried her pace toward what she hoped would be a new opportunity. With each step, the two nickels and three pennies clinked against each other in her reticule, a constant reminder that was all the money she had in the world.

She paid no attention to the horses and carriages passing by or to the pedestrians walking along the sidewalk with her. Instead, she chuckled at what her mother would say if she knew. Heaven's child—A widow woman going off alone to see a man about a paid position? And at his home? Have you no shame?

Victoria shook those thoughts from her head. Shame would not put food in their bellies or more coins in her purse. She strode down the street, playing her speech for this Dr. Barton over and over in her head.

His ad requested the possible candidate to remain in his home most days keeping his notes and patient records and assist in writing out his manuscript. Her volunteering as a nurses' aide at Robertson Hospital during the war and her mother's teachings of

medical skills and knowledge of herbs, as well as the awards won in school for her penmanship, made her perfect for the situation. And Lord knows we need the money.

Drizzling rain fell when Victoria stopped for a moment at a white clapboard house to double-check the address. She said a short prayer, squared her shoulders, and marched to the front door. She pressed the doorbell with nervous fingers. Once again, her vision blurred before her, and the light-headedness returned. She closed her eyes and waited for it to pass, steadying herself on the door frame.

While she waited for someone to answer, she pictured the doctor as an old man with white whiskers, stooped shoulders, and a passel of grandchildren.

Thunder rumbled overhead as footsteps sounded from inside. Victoria held her breath. The door opened and she glanced up, staring at a most striking gentleman with dark curls and a stunning shade of blue eyes.

“May I help you?”

Victoria held her gaze upon his face. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

“Miss, if you’re looking for donations to your charity, I’m sorry, but I’m not interested.”

His last three words brought her back to the issue at hand. “I’d like to speak with Dr. Barton, please,” she blurted. “Dr. Nicholas Barton.”

“I am Dr. Barton. How may I help you?”

“I’m here about the ad.” She handed him the folded newspaper and pointed. Her crochet off-white gloves did nothing to warm her chilled hands. “It says here you require someone with medical knowledge and good penmanship to keep your records.”

Her stomach rumbled, and she quickly held her hand over her midsection to quiet the noise. His comical expression told her he had definitely heard. Heat rushed to her face and Victoria tucked her chin to her chest, hoping that he did not see the blush.

When she thought it wise, she glanced back up at him just in time to see a tender expression wash over his face, accentuating his angular features. His broad smile warmed her heart.

The drizzle suddenly turned into a full-fledged shower, and heavy raindrops plopped on her face and disheveled hat.

“Well, at least come inside out of the rain.”

Her heart pounded with hope, and she followed him inside the spacious foyer. Everything seemed neat and tidy, for a single gentleman. Look at the shine on these floors. And his masculine furniture is sparse, yet functional. The artwork hanging on the walls caught her eye. The bright colors contrasted with the heavy, ornate furniture.

She followed him to his parlor, and he escorted her to a small comfortable chair by the fireplace before seating himself opposite her.

The doctor leaned forward. “Now, Miss—”

“Mrs.,” she corrected. “Mrs. Victoria Evans. I’m a war widow.”

“I sincerely apologies for your loss.”

She stared into his blue eyes. “Your last name is Barton. Are you related to Miss Clara Barton?”

He leaned back in his chair and smiled. “She happens to be my cousin.”

“How exciting.” She liked how the outer corners of his eyes crinkled. And they sparkle so. Just like George’s did. “I volunteered as a nurse’s aide at Robertson Hospital



and heard heroic tales about Miss Barton from Captain Sally Thompkins, the woman in charge, and how throughout the war, 'The Angel of the Battlefield' saved many lives."

Nicholas chuckled. "Angel of the Battlefield."

Victoria frowned. "Pardon?"

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk and clasping his hands in front of him. "God blessed Cousin Clara with an attractive face and diminutive stature, but it would ill behoove anyone to let that pretty face and small stature belie a shy and submissive woman. She was a strong-willed woman, who, when she set her mind on helping those she called, 'her boys,' she was a force of nature of which most people did not wish to deal."

Victoria smiled. "Yes, I remember Captain Sally constantly instructing us to make the soldiers as clean and comfortable as possible, and I have been repeatedly advised of how Miss Barton went out of her way to do. Captain Sally was also obsessiveness with cleanliness and instructed us on the same methods as Miss Florence Nightingale used. When the War ended and Robertson Hospital closed, it boasted a mortality rate of less than three percent because of practicing those strict sanitary procedures."

"Yes, Cousin Clara believed wholeheartedly in cleanliness and comfort when treating her patients."

Victoria nodded. "And while we nursed the wounded using those procedures, Captain Sally constantly regaling us with tales of how Miss Barton held a lantern for a surgeon to see while he operated on a soldier on the battlefield, all the while enemy shells burst all around."

“That she did,” Nicholas said proudly. “I was one of hundreds wounded at Culpepper, and to this day I still thank God Clara showed up. She and her assistants worked diligently changing filthy bandages for clean, making compresses and slings out of any materials available, applying tourniquets to freshly amputated and bleeding stumps. Hours later, after she dealt with the Union soldiers, she discovered that my wounded rag-tag group of Confederates lay nearby. She made her way to each of us, repeating the same process. And she did it all while speaking softly and urging each man not to die, that they had family who loved them.”

Victoria blanched. “Yes, we heard how bad it could be on the battlefield. My, how exhausting that must have been for Miss Barton.”

“Yes, but Cousin Clara had found her calling.”

Victoria thought for a moment. “But you were a Confederate. How could she nurse you if she sympathized with the Yankees?”

“Cousin Clara didn’t care who was injured. She lived her motto, ‘Ease pain, soothe sorrow, lessen suffering—that is your only thought day and night,’ no matter who it is.”

“Yes, Captain Sally held Miss Barton with a high regard. Even though Miss Barton was a Yankee, Miss Sally remarked how she would have enjoyed meeting her and comparing notes. Captain Sally understood that Miss Barton was a nurse, like us, trying to save as many lives as possible.”

He paused and wrung his hands in his lap. “And now, Mrs. Evans, while I must commend you for coming all this way to see about the paid position . . .”

All attempts at jovialness stopped as his serious tone brought her back to the present.

“However, I’m afraid that a male medical student would better suit my needs.” He continued wringing his hands in his lap.

A wave of coldness swept over her heart. Victoria opened her mouth to speak but snapped it shut when Dr. Barton held up his hand.

“With you being an attractive young woman, and I a widower, it would be unseemly to have you here alone with me for the better part of the day. And as you know, women are not allowed on the campus of the Medical College of Virginia.”

Her heart sank at the dismissive expression on his face. If I could just get him to listen. “I also excelled in penmanship at the Winthrop Academy for Young Ladies.” She watched his facial expression turn to boredom and hurriedly continued. “I come from a well-respected family here in Richmond.” Unable to stop, the words tumbled faster and faster out of her mouth. “Mother provided medical aid for our family and neighbors until a doctor could arrive, and she taught me the preparation and application of herbs for healing. I am honest and punctual . . .”

He put his hand up to halt her. “No, no, no. That is most unladylike. It just isn’t done.” His ice-blue eyes stared into her emerald-green ones. “Why, my superiors would have me banished from the college should I hire a woman. Not to mention losing all respect from my students. And my patients would refuse to allow me to practice medicine on them for allowing a woman with such delicate sensibilities to even be aware of the distasteful and unmentionable medical procedures and surgeries performed, much less keep a detailed record of it.”

Dr. Barton rose and walked to the other side of his desk. “No, no, ma’am, I cannot allow it.” He held out his hands to take her elbow. “And now, if you’ll pardon me, it would be deemed most improper for you to remain much longer, as I only asked you inside this morning because I didn’t want you to get caught out in this storm”

Victoria rose slowly from her chair, the burden of failure weighed heavily on her heart. She jerked her arm away from him, refusing to allow his touch. When she turned to exit the room, her angry footsteps fell heavy on the wooden floor, reverberating throughout his office. Halfway across the room, Victoria whirled around to face him. Her heart hammered in her chest as she chose her words carefully. “Dr. Barton, I wonder if it would have ever occurred to Miss Barton to worry about her delicate sensibilities or how unladylike her behavior was when she waded through bloody battlefields and worked side-by-side with male surgeons day and night in order to tend to the wrecked bodies of ‘her boys’?”

Dr. Barton stared at her, his mouth working noiselessly for a reply.

A smile formed on her face at his expression of surprise at her retort. “Why, her feminine delicacy might have been the death of you. Now, if you will excuse me sir, I bid you good day.

A flash of lightning lit up the room for one brief moment. Seconds later, thunder cracked overhead, shaking the entire house. Five years later, thunder still reminded her of cannon fire and Yankees seizing Richmond. Victoria held a hand to her chest and glanced out the window. Heavy raindrops pounded the windows, distorting her view.

“Feminine delicacies or not, I’m afraid I can’t allow you to leave at this moment.”

Dr. Baron gestured toward her chair. “Please sit down and wait until the storm passes. It shouldn’t be too long.”

“Oh, but I couldn’t . . .” Yet she allowed him to escort her back to her seat.

An uncomfortable silence followed. And while Victoria wanted to study his attractive features, she didn’t want to stare.

Dr. Barton cleared his throat. “Let me get you something to eat while we wait out the storm.”

“Oh, there’s no need to bother.”

He waved off her protestations and left the room. Several minutes later, he returned carrying a tea tray complete with tea pot, cups, saucers, and cookies. “I’m afraid this is all I have in the way of a repast. My housekeeper, Mrs. Cagney, is out this morning attending to the household shopping.”

Victoria accepted the hot cup of tea and a saucer containing a single cookie he handed her. But she couldn’t help but notice how he chose to keep a good distance between them.

The anniversary clock on the mantle chimed the hour.

“Please forgive me, Mrs. Evans, but I’m not good at small talk, and if you would, please excuse me, I must get back to work. I suggest you remain here at least until the storm passes, and I shall see you out.”

The heavy burden returned to her chest, and she could only nod.

Moments later, she finished with the tea and cookie, and went in search of Dr. Barton. She found him in his office, where she stepped just over the threshold. “I wanted to thank you for your hospitality before I left.”

“You are most welcome. And I pray you make it home before the next cloud burst.”

“I’m sure I will.” Victoria scanned the top of his desk. “If I may say, Sir, it appears you have a lot of work piled up.”

He chuckled. “Indeed, I do, Madam.”

“Well, to return your hospitality, may I be of assistance? At least until the storm has passed?”

He scrutinized her face closely but said nothing.

She again surveyed the messy stacks of papers competing for room on the desk with ink wells, blotters, fountain pens, and other office necessities. She chuckled at how the voluminous mounds of papers seemed to be winning and gave him a coy smile. “It would do my heart good, and it might allow you means of getting ahead of your paperwork.”

Still, he remained silent.

“If I may be so bold, Sir, it appears you need assistance sooner than later.” She stepped closer to the untidy desk and looked him in the eye. “I insist.”

A smile crept across his face. “All right, if you insist.”

The next few minutes passed quickly while she organized the papers as he explained the importance of each stack. Victoria first tackled the simplest undertakings,

such as the addressing of envelopes and mailing of letters. He expressed his approval of her penmanship before assigning the more complicated chores.

The minutes turned into hours as the stacks of paperwork dwindled, and the deluge outside long forgotten.

But her hunger pangs reminded her of the real reason she had come. The tea and cookie had helped, but . . .

A stomach spasm hit hard, and Victoria clasped a hand to her midsection. No decent woman would allow such to happen, and certainly not in front of a stranger. She sternly reminded herself that decency had nothing to do with hunger.

“Mrs. Evans, are you all right?”

Embarrassment flooded her face. Oh, Lord, what she wouldn't give to just die right here and now. “I'm fine, Sir.”

She lifted her gaze and tried to concentrate on Dr. Barton's face. But her periphery vision blackened and closed inward. Her chest heaved in and out. I can't breathe. She forced air into her lungs before she tried standing. I must get out of here.

“Dr. Barton, about the paid position. I completely understand that I do not fit your requirements, so, if you will excuse me, I shall take my leave.” Her voice sounded muddled, and the room swam before her eyes. Her vision worsened as she turned and blindly stepped away from the chair. Victoria grabbed the corner of his desk to steady herself, focusing her attention on her well-worn boots.

A black hole opened in the floor before her. She saw her right foot placed in front of her left, and willingly dove into the darkness.

Before she lost consciousness, she could have sworn Dr. Barton's hands grabbed her midsection before she hit the floor.

\* \* \*

Victoria later awoke with Dr. Barton and an older woman standing over her. He wiped her face with a cool cloth and held a bottle of a foul-smelling concoction under her nose. The bitter odor assaulted her nostrils, and she pushed it away.

Victoria put a hand on her head and surveyed her surroundings. She noticed she lay on a settee, and that Dr. Barton sat beside her on the settee. She attempted to sit up, but his strong, yet gentle hands eased her back.

Victoria tried talking around her thick tongue and dry mouth. "What happened? Where am I?"

"Mrs. Evans, do you remember me?"

She frowned for a moment, her mind working hard to place him. "Yes. Yes, I remember you. You're Dr. Barton, Miss Clara's cousin." Her voice petered out and the room once again swam before her.

He chuckled. "Well, now I understand what an impression I didn't make on you."

Victoria glanced around. "What happened?" Once again, she tried sitting up.

"You stay right where you are."

His tone forced her to remain still. "Dr. Barton, I'm not sure what you're up to, but I can assure you—"

"When did you last have something substantial to eat?" His eyes bore through her, and his harsh manner matched the hard countenance on his face.

Victoria gasped at his bluntness.



Before she could respond, he said, “I’m guessing about three days, correct?”

“Well . . . I,” and she struggled to sit up again.

“You stay right there.” He nodded toward the woman behind him. “Mrs. Cagney knows of your family from church, and fortunately she gave me a few important facts regarding your financial situation.”

“Oh . . . well . . . you see . . . I . . .” Victoria’s mind reeled at what this woman might have said.

“Mrs. Cagney will bring you some chicken soup with bread and milk. As a doctor, I’m ordering you to remain here for a while longer, take in some nourishment, and get some rest.”

Victoria shook her head. “But you don’t understand, Sir. I can’t—”

“Yes, you can,” he barked and held up a hand to shush her. “Doctor’s orders.” His tone quickly softened. “Only when I’m sure you are ready will I allow you to take your leave.”

“But mother . . .” She endeavored a third time to sit up, but fell back, her strength now gone.

“I’ve already sent word.” He smiled at her and eased her back onto the pillow. “You rest now.”

She put a hand to her chest and said, “Thank you.” She choked back tears of helplessness and wondered what her mother would have to say about this fine mess.

An hour later, she shuffled home. All her hopes of acquiring the paid position dashed with his one sentence, “I’m deeply honored to have met you, but I’m sorry, the position . . .” Her mind refused to allow her to finish Dr. Barton’s words.

Five years ago, I had no idea of even know how to tie my own shoelaces, and today I had the nerve to ask a surgeon for a paid position. And made a fool of herself in the bargain.

The burden of no job or prospects weighed heavily on her slender shoulders. A wave of nausea rolled through her stomach.

Her spirit in tatters, Victoria drug her feet up the path at her home, stopping only to dry her tears. The whole idea had been a gamble to begin with.

And she had lost.

## Chapter Two

Two weeks passed since Victoria's desperate—yet failed—attempt to obtain a paid position with Dr. Barton. In those two weeks, the weight of worry and fear burdened her mind and heart. Each day her despondency left her unable to concentrate on her next plan of action.

“Victoria, breakfast is ready.” That meant coffee and maybe a piece of toast—if her stomach could handle it. Yet her mother's voice momentarily brought her out of the stark realization of their financial situation.

“Yes, Mother.” She dressed and made her way downstairs. The smell of chicory coffee mingled with the sweet aromas of cinnamon and sugar of the fresh-baked apple and peach pies. Her mother and Emmy had thankfully made enough money from the sale of their baked goods earlier in the week to purchase more baking essentials.

She overheard her mother in the kitchen advising, “Now, Emmy, be sure to watch those pies carefully and make sure they don't burn. That big order for Mrs. Chestnut's party is later this week, and I must make a list for the dry goods store. Please remind me if there is anything we are running short on.”

“Yes, Miss 'Becca.”

Victoria huffed. Anything we are running short on. Such as beef, chicken, vegetables . . . God, what she wouldn't do for an egg and bacon strips, and real coffee for a change. As she seated herself at the dining table, a note propped up by her plate caught her attention. “What's this,” she asked to no one in the room. The handwriting looked

familiar. Dr. Barton! She tore into the envelope and scanned the pages for any wording saying she had been hired after all.

In lieu of that message, she read his story of being involved in a dreadful carriage accident and the request for her to come to the hospital later that morning, “if you are not previously engaged.”

“Mother?” She re-read the letter just in case she missed something.

“Oh, good, you found it. From whom is that note?”

“Dr. Barton. He says he has been in an accident and has been hospitalized these past couple of weeks but wants to see me while he’s still in the hospital.”

Her mother harrumphed. “You send a note back to him saying such a request is impossible. After tarnishing your reputation during the War years by being a common nurse and being exposed to such evilness that no lady should even know about, it has taken me five long years to rectify that situation, and I am not about to let another doctor soil your reputation again.”

“But Mother, this could mean a paid position where I could earn enough money for us to actually have food on the table and decent clothes. I shall make myself presentable and have Luke take me in the carriage, all proper like.”

“Luke has enough chores to do around here, plus I’ll need him to help me make deliveries—”

“Then while he’s out, he can drop me off at the hospital.”

“No child of mine is going to—”

“I am not a child. I am a grown woman with empty coffers and a hungry family.”

An hour later, in her most presentable dress, Victoria stepped out of the carriage and strode through the hospital entrance. Her nursing demeanor returned naturally once she stepped inside the hospital. She threw her shoulders back and looked each staff member and patient in their eyes.

She eventually found Dr. Barton's bedside with the assistance from a nurse or two.

For a split second, she wondered if she would even recognize him. Yet a warm smile crossed her lips at the sight of him.

"Good morning, Mrs. Evans."

His blue eyes struck her as she walked onto his ward. She noticed that as Dr. Barton attempted to sit up, anxiety and embarrassment spread across his face at seeing her. He tried to smile back at her, yet his handsome features from a few weeks ago now appeared haggard and drawn, exposing his pain. His unruly, unkempt black hair and unshaven face bespoke neglect from the nursing staff.

Even when he tried to smile and put on a gallant front, she recognized that worry and fretfulness lay behind it. "Good morning to you, Sir." Victoria stood stock still at least six feet from his bedside least anyone deem her to be improper.

"I see you received my note."

"Yes, Sir." Her reticle hung in front of her held tight by the straps with both hands. "How may I be of assistance?"

"As you can see, I've had a little set-to recently, and will not be able to perform any surgeries, teach any anatomy classes, or see any of my patients."

She dared not move, yet still wondered why he had summoned her. “I’m so sorry to hear about your accident, but I don’t see how I can be of any assistance?”

“As it happens, I’m being discharged in a day or so—”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” She took a step closer. “You look a bit . . .” As soon as she realized she had let her guard down, she stopped. “I’m sorry, Sir. You were saying?”

“I’m trying to advise you that Mrs. Cagney is not up to the task of cleaning, cooking, and nursing. I remembered you stating how you had nursed the wounded at Robertson’s Hospital during the War, and that you followed Captain Sally’s thoroughness on cleaning and dressing wounds to prevent infections. I thought I might ask if you wished to assist me once I am released.”

She sensed her brows furrow. “Assist you how?”

“If you don’t mind, could you move a little closer? I feel as though I’m speaking to the entire ward.”

“I feel that, if what you have to say to me is entirely respectable, the entire ward may hear.”

He sighed audibly. “Very well. I shall require a nurse for the first few days of my homecoming. Mrs. Cagney will be there throughout the day so there is nothing untoward for you to worry about.”

“And you want me to do the nursing—alone in your home?” Her voice rose in volume and strength more than she intended. “That is not the position for which I applied.”

“I had thought that while you assisted with ensuring my healing succeeded without infection or further damage, I could train you as my record and correspondence keeper.”

Victoria held her breath for a moment. That wasn't the job she had wanted, and she knew there was no guarantee he would not back out of his word at any moment. “Sir, you advised during my interview that being alone with you in your home would be most inappropriate. Now you say that such an arrangement with me as your nurse instead would be morally correct?” Again, her voice rose in volume.

“Mrs. Evans, I have three cracked ribs, a broken arm, bruises, and stitches in the lacerations to my chest and legs. I can assure you that nothing untoward will be possible.”

She refused to move yet studied his face for any signs of untruthfulness. Several moments past before she asked, “You say Mrs. Cagney will be there during the day?”

“That is correct.”

“And what about the evenings?”

“What about them?”

“Sir, I've seen those kinds of injuries before, and if I remember, they may require twenty-four hours of nursing assistance.”

“I should never ask such of you. Or Mrs. Cagney.”

### Chapter Three

Emmy breathlessly rushed into the dining room. “Miss ‘Becca, you got to . . . please hurry . . . we ain’t got time . . .”

Victoria stood as Rebecca ran to Emmy and held her by the shoulders. “Calm yourself and tell me what it is.”

Emmy inhaled and exhaled three times to catch her breath. “The Johnson baby. The baby is coming, and Mr. Johnson says his Missus is having a real bad time.”

“I’ll talk to you later,” Mrs. Carter yelled over her shoulder as she flew past Victoria.

Victoria heard Emmy lament, “Oh, that poor Misses Johnson, why she just a child herself.”

While Emmy and her mother ran upstairs, Victoria proceeded to the kitchen and saw Luke hitching up the horse and carriage. Moments later, her mother and Emmy raced downstairs and out the back door, the midwifing bag clutched tightly under her mother’s arms. She stepped onto the back porch and watched as Luke assisted her mother into the carriage before running to sit in the front seat with Emmy by his side.

From inside the carriage, her mother gave orders. “I’m not sure how long we’ll be, but while we’re gone, ring that chicken’s neck, dress it, and we’ll have it for dinner tonight.”



Victoria's eyes followed her mother's finger pointed at a red hen clucking and pecking across the yard. Suddenly, Luke slapped the reins, and the horses and carriage jolted forward, with her mother and Emmy's heads jerking backwards. She continued watching as the women held onto their hats as the carriage faded into the distance. The wheels of the carriage stirred up a cloud of dust that surrounded Victoria, choking her.

The hens clucked and strutted from the commotion. A neighbor had given it to them as payment for Luke fixing a wagon. Victoria frowned at the red hen and shivered. While terrified of chickens, Victoria knew it meant a decent meal tonight. Many times in the past she had witnessed Emmy grab a chicken, hold it tight under her arms, and snap the neck.

Her mind told her that she sooner she got started, the sooner it would be over with. She paced herself, eyeing the red hen with both disgust and hunger. She snuck up behind it, grabbed its midsection, and hoisted it off the ground.

But the hen panicked, wiggling, and cackling loudly, proving stronger than Victoria thought. Before she could tuck it under her arm, the chicken managed to get its wings free, flapping and struggling against Victoria's grasp. It almost jumped out of her arms a couple of times, but she caught it by the feet at the last second and held it upside down with her arm stretched out as far as possible, keeping the hen as far away from her as possible.

The angry hen jerked and squawked, beating its wings against Victoria's arms and torso. But Victoria tightened her grip, the skin on its feet tough, coarse, and dry to her touch. But it was the talons she really feared and held her eyes tightly shut while taking the hen in the direction of Luke's chopping block. Her fear finally got the better of her,

and she opened her eyes right in front of the block. She slung the chicken down, headfirst, onto the chopping block and reached for the ax.

The hen suddenly went limp in her hand. *Well, this was much simpler than I thought.* Proud of herself, Victoria gathered the limp creature in her arms and carried it to the kitchen. There she tossed it into a huge pot and threw it all in the oven to keep until she could boil enough water to thoroughly clean and dress it.

A sense of accomplishment rushed through her, and she gathered an armload of firewood, also tossing it into the stove. She tossed in some bits of kindling and paper on top of the wood and grabbed the box of parlor Lucifers to light the fire. Just as she bent over to light a fire, someone knocked on the front door.

*Who in the world?* She dropped the box of matches and hurried to the door, checking herself in the hall mirror by straightening her hair and smoothing her skirts before opening the door.

“Why Dr. Barton.” Her heart raced as images of the previous evening flooded her brain. “What a lovely surprise.”

“Mrs. Evans, you must come with me.”

Only then did she notice his breathless and agitated state. Behind him she noticed his carriage stood in front her house, the horses constantly prodding the ground with their hooves. She cocked her head and frowned. “Sir?”

“There has been a terrible accident, and the patient, a prominent member of Richmond society, is in need of emergency surgery. Dr. Morgan wants me to perform the surgery using the sterilization procedures, and I need you to document the process and outcome. This is our first major test to prove the sanitation method works.”

“But I . . .” she pointed behind her.

He shook his head and stepped forward; his ice-blue eyes bore through her. “I do not have time for any female foolishness. It is imperative we get to the hospital *now*.”

Victoria stepped back and nodded her head. “Of course. Let me change my clothes and leave a message for Mother—”

“We don’t have time,” he yelled.

“Yes, Sir.” She jerked her shawl and reticule and dashed out, slamming the door behind her. As soon as she exited, he took her by the elbow and dragged her to the carriage.

He opened the door, and she leapt in, making sure her skirts were out of his way. Dr. Barton yelled to the driver, “Hospital. *Now*.”

The carriage jerked forward, slinging Victoria against Dr. Barton. A blush quickly spread across her face, and she just as quickly righted herself. “Excuse me, sir. I’m so sorry.”

The carriage bounced and swayed as he waved his hand to her as a matter of dismissal and stared out the window, ignoring her.

Victoria straightened her skirts and held her reticule tight in her lap. She studied Dr. Barton’s face. In profile, she noticed the anxiety in his face, the jutting jaw line, Roman-style nose, and how he pursed his lips. By the way his jaw muscles constantly moved, she assumed he was gnashing his teeth.

“Hurry up, driver,” he yelled again.

Victoria settled herself in the corner of the seat as far away from him as possible. She had never seen him like this before and attributed his behavior to him thinking only of his patient.

“If this goes well, and with Dr. Morgan behind me, I can teach more doctors how to use these sanitary techniques and cleansing principles on every patient and add this as a publishing opportunity, more doctors could learn how to use those methods.” He looked vaguely in her direction. “My God, can you imagine such cleansing practices and sanitary methods being taught in medical schools across the country? Across the world?” He turned back to the window, resting his chin on his fist, rubbing the palm of his other hand up and down his trouser leg, his jaw muscle working harder now.

She only nodded knowing that in his mind he wasn't really speaking to her; she could have been anyone who just happened to be sitting beside him.

The carriage came to a sudden stop in front of the hospital. Dr. Barton jumped down and motioned for her to hurry. She scooted across the seat and offered her hand. He barely assisted her, touching her just long enough for her feet to touch the ground.

He grabbed her by the elbow and rushed into the hospital.

Skirts and petticoats swished and wrapped around Victoria's legs while she struggled to keep up with Dr. Barton causing her to stumble as he dragged her down the corridor and into the dissecting theatre. Immediately upon entering the cold, damp room, a wave of nausea rolled through her stomach as the overwhelming stench of purification and blood assaulted her nose. Memories of her years of nursing at Robertson's Hospital came flooding back.

Dr. Barton assisted her to a seat in the front row of the auditorium. A quick glance around at the hundreds of students in attendance caused her head to swim. Their unwelcome stares bore through her as if they could see into her soul. Once seated, Victoria placed her pad of paper and pencils on the wooden railing before her. Suddenly, offensive remarks of her immoral character and rude comments on her personal appearance struck her ears. Caught up in the bullying atmosphere, many of the students stood on their seats and jeered. Spitballs hurled passed her, some hitting her arms and face. One student decided to aim his tobacco spit at her dress, only misjudging his aim because a couple of other boys boisterously nudged her, almost knocking her out of her seat.

Dr. Morgan, Nicholas' superior, stepped into the fray. Holding up his hands for them to quiet, he yelled, "You there, John Williams, Abel Manning, Adam Culpepper. I suggest you quiet yourselves because this lady worked at the Robertson Hospital, and I know for a fact that her nursing skills saved your fathers, brothers, uncles, and cousins lives. And I demand you give her the respect she deserves." He then grabbed one of the by the collar and dragged him to the front of the small operating table. "Gentlemen," he yelled. "I have here your fellow student, Mr. Schmidt, who has graciously volunteered to assist Dr. Barton with his demonstration today."

The boys quieted and settled into their seats. But still the whispered words of *mistress* and *harlot* reached Victoria. She used every ounce of restraint to remain poised and composed, like a true lady. Her hands trembled as she picked up a pencil and poised it over the pad of paper, concentrating on Dr. Barton while awaiting his next set of instructions.

In the center of the auditorium stood a tiny, ancient, bloodstained, wooden operating table with clean straw underneath. Dr. Barton seized control of the zealous crowd first by addressing the doctors who stood with him on the dais. "I know most of

your nurses were trained using the techniques of Nurse Nightingale of keeping the patient and their areas clean. Therefore, you must know of the importance of her number one rule: that the most important duty of every nurse in surgical wards is the prevention any type of infection.”

A doctor spoke up. “But Dr. Barton, surely you don’t expect each of us to . . .” Dr. Barton raised his hand to stop her. “My cousin, Clara Barton taught these techniques to me. Her success in keeping her patients alive before and after surgery, myself being one of those patients, is well known. And right here in Richmond, Captain Sally Tompkins ran the private hospital during the War, wherein she strictly adhered to cleanliness methods. Their success rates were near one hundred percent, a record no ordinary military hospital could achieve. Now I shall teach those same sanitary techniques to you.”

Victoria lowered her head to quell a smile. Dr. Barton had put the doctor in his place and had done so in front of everyone.

Dr. Barton turned his attention to the medical students. “Gentlemen, today we are going to save the life of our prominent patient by using Listerism, a system devised by the eminent British surgeon, Joseph Lister, and using his theory of germ prevention. But before I operate,” Dr. Barton dipped his hands in a bowl of water. “Please take note of how I wash my hands thoroughly with phenol and warm water then dry them on a clean cloth.” Dr. Barton proceeded to detail each step for the stunned students. After the demonstration, he advised the doctors to do the same.

Amidst the mumbles and grumbling, Dr. Barton gathered the surgical instruments and dumped them in another bowl. “This bowl contains a sterilizing solution of boiling water and carbolic acid.”

Rumblings from the student audience rose to the front where Victoria sat. Victoria heard each angry grouse and complaint at Dr. Barton's audacity from the doctors as she continued to itemize each step of the procedure.

Yet Barton spoke over the vocal rumblings. "Dr. Lister has documented these methods of cleansing first himself before touching the patient, thus preventing micro-organisms to enter the patient's body. And he proved those procedures cut the mortality rate at the University College of London by forty-five percent."

A superior spoke up and gestured toward his colleagues. "But sir, surely you don't suggest that we surgeons are on such a low level as to be equal to the poor and unwashed masses that these 'bugs' would dare live amongst us."

Dr. Barton shot back. "In 1848, the distinguished Viennese gynecologist, Dr. Ignac Semmelweis, discovered that when his superiors performed autopsies, especially on gangrenous corpses, then went directly to the maternity floor to deliver babies, ninety percent of those mothers and their babies died. And they died from infections that spread as fast as gangrene. When Dr. Semmelweis demanded that all of the doctors and nurses and attendants wash their hands before and after attending to a maternity patient, all the mothers and babies survived with no complications. What he proved was that those same 'bugs' that had been killing mothers during childbirth were, in fact, being spread by the doctors and midwives who were hired to protect those mothers and newborns." He paused a moment, gathered his composure and continued in a softer tone. "His proven cleansing methods gave his maternity ward a ninety-percent survival rate for the mothers and babies. And he did so nearly ten years before Joseph Lister made the same discovery."

Another doctor stepped forward. “But the time involved—”

“As you saw, sir, it only took me less than five minutes to wash and dry my hands,” Nicholas countered.

Suddenly the only sound in the room was Victoria’s pencil scratching across the paper, capturing every moment.

Dr. Barton ladled out the carbolic water solution onto the small, rickety surgery table and asked for the patient to be brought in. As the patient was wheeled in on a gurney and transferred to the now sterile operating table, Dr. Barton explained as he demonstrated how to pick up the sanitized towels with a sterilized clamp and lay them in a huge pan to cool. When cool enough to handle, he taught the nurses how to wash the now anesthetized patient.

Victoria noted how Dr. Barton detailed his use of a solution of boiled water and carbolic acid as he wiped the solution on the patient’s abdomen with clean linen to thoroughly cleanse the patient and used sterile forceps to pluck a scalpel from the bowl of boiled water.

Dr. Barton explained to the class how, also in 1848, Dr. Crawford Long of Atlanta, Georgia, had instrumental in the creation of anesthesia. “Today’s patient is a twelve-year-old boy suffering from appendicitis and has just been anesthetized with ether. Because of Dr. Long’s discovery, we surgeons are now able to put patients to sleep so that not only would they no longer feel pain during the surgery, but each surgeon can now take the time to properly perform the necessary surgery.



“And part of that time will be spent performing the most important procedure, that of killing any destructive micro-organism that may invade the body. We do that by thoroughly cleansing the patient, especially at the site of the operation.

“Only when I am sure the instruments and I are thoroughly cleansed shall I attempt to cut into a patient.” In a much calmer voice, he advised, “Now, we have thoroughly washed ourselves, our instruments are sterile, and our patient is clean. Shall we begin?”

With skill and precision, Dr. Barton cut into the patient, located the inflamed organ, sliced it clean away from the patient, and held up the appendix for the students to see.

At the sight of the bloody, inflamed organ, the previously rowdy and raucous student, Schmidt, hit the cold, hard-wooden floor in a dead faint.

Victoria gasped in horror and partially rose from her seat.

Without missing a beat, Dr. Barton asked, “Could someone please take care of our fallen comrade?”

That was Victoria’s signal to continue with her notetaking.

“Now, gentlemen, I shall introduce carbolic acid full strength to flush out the wound.” He demonstrated by clamping clean cotton linen into another pair of sterilized forceps and dousing it in straight carbolic acid. “Lister described how this method kills any sepsis entities that may enter the body.” Dr. Barton thoroughly swabbed out the wound then applied sutures made of catgut. “We finish by cleansing the sight with more carbolic acid and applying clean dressings. These dressings need to be changed every few

hours and straight carbolic acid introduced at the wound site at each change. It is our due diligence to watch for any signs of inflammation, fever, or discharge.”

“But *Doctor* Barton,” a colleague spoke up, disparaging the use of the word doctor in front of Nicholas’ name. “Isn’t that discharge a sign that the body is purging itself of the harmful fluid imbalance in the patient? Such as blood pooling in one section of the body where it is not needed?”

“No, *Doctor*, it is not,” Dr. Barton replied in the same disparaging tone.

“According to Dr. Lister, discharge, inflammation, and fever are signs that infection has set in, and the body is literally being eaten alive by those microscopic germs, which must be completely eradicated in order to save the patient’s limb and life.”

Nicholas’ supervisor, Dr. Morgan, spoke up. “And what do we do if any sign of fever or inflammation appears?”

“Lister created a paste made of carbolic acid, linseed oil, and carbonate of lime that he used to successfully treat wounds once any sign of sepsis has appeared.”

Another doctor sneered. “Do you mean to tell me that every few hours the patient must have their dressings changed with another thorough cleansing and dousing of this corrosive acid?”

Dr. Barton nodded. “If the patient is to survive, yes.”

“This whole affair seems to be a painstaking terrible waste of time,” another doctor scoffed.

Nicholas looked him straight in the eye. “Then I suggest you prepare to tell your patient’s family that their loved one died at your hands because you couldn’t be bothered to properly administer treatment.”

Another doctor stepped forward. “But what if the patient is seriously injured and needs immediate attention? There would be no time for such foolishness.”

Dr. Barton stared him in the eyes. “Nurse Nightingale believed that if everything were cleaned and prepared beforehand and stored in a hygienic environment, time wouldn’t be a factor.”

A colleague sighed. “But Dr. Barton, this is all a complete waste of time. We cannot see those things you call *germs*.” Sarcasm dripped from the word. “So therefore, they don’t exist.”

“With all due respect to you and your medical knowledge, maybe I can explain it this way. While it is true that I may not be able to see the actual germs with my naked eye, I know they exist because of their malodorous nature and detrimental damage to the patient. During the War, doctors watched silently as diseases spread from patient to patient, contaminating whole hospital wards. Even doctors who were professionally trained stood by silently as the deadly germs ate away at their patient’s flesh and did nothing about it—except to further open the wound stupidly thinking that the more pus and blood and foul odors the body was healing itself.

“And those trained doctors did so with unwashed hands and instruments, thereby introducing more deadly germs into the patient’s body. Today there is irrevocable proof that eradicating those deadly germs is the only safe method of saving lives.”

Understanding washed over Victoria at the importance of why Dr. Barton and Dr. Morgan were adamant that the doctors and nurses follow these sanitary procedures before each surgery and during every recovery, just as Miss Tompkins had been in training her in the correct methods of cleansing each of her patients, including their bedding, and

clothing. It struck her to the core of how important her job had been, and how she, a mere woman with no medical training, had probably saved more lives than these so-called trained professionals. Now she would be just as adamant at properly documenting each step not only to save this patient's life, but thousands more. Yet Victoria saw that only a few of the doctors and nurses nodded. Most of the others smiled sarcastically, as if awaiting Dr. Barton to make a false step. And they would be ready to pounce on him—and her—for any action they deemed as inaccurate and unnecessary.

Quickly she turned her attention back to her note taking and stared. She used every ounce of restraint in her body to remain a composed professional and documented everything she saw and heard. Keeping a valid record of the sanitary procedures, operation, and recovery period could only enhance Dr. Barton's career. And save her job. But the looks of disbelief and dismissal on the doctors' and students' faces tore at her heart. *If only they would listen.* Her mind whirled at the consequences.

\* \* \*

Hours later, Victoria rode home in Dr. Barton's carriage, with him remaining at the hospital to ensure the success of the surgery and the survival of his patient. Exhausted, she rested her head on the back of the carriage seat and closed her eyes.

Her mind wandered back to the sensational Burke and Hare murder trials in England, where two men went into the business of snatching corpses from fresh graves and selling them to medical schools for students to use in dissection. When they ran out

of fresh corpses, Burke and Hare had turned to murder in order to secure enough cadavers for the medical schools. And because of their actions, no one would ever consider surgeons more than butchers. Yet today, she had seen Dr. Barton at his best in the operating theater, even being taken aback by his command of the doctors and nurses, and in his commitment to presenting Lister's cleansing procedures to the students, doctors, and nurses in the dissecting theater. Until today, she never recognized the passion and commitment Dr. Barton had for saving the lives of not just his patients, but for every patient.

Now she understood the importance of Dr. Barton's work and prayed that should she ever need any type of surgery that Dr. Barton, or one of his students who believed in the process, would be the one to perform it.

The lack of carriage movement brought her out of her thoughts, and she opened her eyes to see that the carriage had stopped in front of her house. She forced her tired, aching body out of the comfortable seat and into the dark and quiet night. The carriage drove off after she stifled a yawn and unlocked the front door.

She heard her mother's and Emmy's voices and strolled toward the kitchen. From just inside the doorway, she saw Emmy standing at the stove. "That chile, I swear, Miss 'Becca."

Her mother glared back, both hands jammed into her hips.

Victoria stepped into the room to defend herself. "Mother, I tried—"

"Where have you been?" Mrs. Carter demanded.

Before she could answer, Emmy opened the oven door and lifted the lid on the pan as a terrible squawking filled the room. Emmy immediately screamed and backed up, wildly flailing her arms around.

Chicken feathers flew through the air. Victoria and her mother screamed as well, watching in horror as the chicken Victoria had thrown in the oven earlier that morning was not only still alive, but terrified and angry enough to risk any means of escape.

Victoria whipped about the room running into her mother and Emmy, her skirts swirling around her feet, all the while trying to grab the hen. Each time she grabbed for the bird, she grabbed someone else instead.

Someone pulled her hair when the chicken got close. She tripped over her skirts, then her boots tangled up in her mother's and Emmy's skirts. She fell on her backside and struggled to get up, the yelling and screaming hurting her ears. She never knew who, but one of them stepped on her hand.

From the floor, Victoria watched the chaotic mess as the chicken flapped out of their reach. She stared in disbelief as the hen finally landed into Luke's outstretched arms.

The screaming and squawking calmed down. Chicken feathers slowly floated down while she looked around the room. She glanced at her mother, whose hair had been pulled loose and hung sideways as if in a comedy. Victoria pointed and laughed.

Emmy, her bandana skewed sideways and hanging on by a prayer, giggled as she struggled to hoist Victoria off the floor, but Victoria's feet kept slipping out from under her.

From her periphery, Victoria saw Luke shaking his head while he calmly stroked the chicken and took it outside. She thought she heard him mumble something about women's foolishness.

Emmy, Mrs. Carter, and Victoria laughed and hugged each other, making sure they were okay. She watched as feathers still gently floated down, covering all of them and everything else in the kitchen, like fresh-fallen snow.

Her mother assigned each of them a chore in an effort to clean the kitchen as quickly as possible. Victoria did as she was told, still laughing at the memory of her mother and Emmy's disheveled state. Each time she and Emmy glanced at each other, they burst out laughing.

Mrs. Carter frowned at both of them, but Victoria caught her mother laughing a couple of times when she thought no one was looking.

## Chapter Four

Victoria bolted upright at the loud knocking and her mother's harsh voice just outside her bedroom door.

"Victoria, open the door. I must speak with you at once."

"Just a minute," she said, crawling out of bed and pulling her robe tight around her body.

Victoria opened her door and stepped back to see her mother, prim and proper as always, her light green eyes flashing with anger. "Good morning, Mother." She attempted to give her mother a kiss on the cheek, but Rebecca quickly stepped away.

"Get dressed and come down to the parlor," she said coldly, turned, and marched back down the stairs.

With a sudden intake a breath, a huge lump formed in her throat. Victoria's hand clasped her neck as she tried to swallow the lump down. Only on rare occasions had Victoria witnessed her mother confronting overseers at Somerset Plantation in such a manner, but never to her children.

Victoria dressed slowly in a plain, brown cotton dress and slippers. She double-checked herself in the mirror several times to put off the confrontation as long as possible.

She eased into the parlor to find her mother pacing in front of the brick fireplace.

"Sit down, please." Rebecca waved her hand toward the sofa. "I must speak with you regarding your behavior evening before last."



The word “please” registered with Victoria, but from the tone, she knew this was not a pleasant request. Her knees weakened at the clipped coldness of her mother’s voice and the stiff manner in which Mother held herself. Victoria recognized it immediately. Her Mother used it effortlessly to tamp down her anger. The pounding of her heart hammered against her tightening chest. “Mother, I—”

“Sit down.” Her mother glared and gestured once more toward the sofa. She closed the pocket doors and turned. “I was confronted today about you being in attendance with Dr. Barton at the medical college two evenings ago.” Her skirt and petticoats rustled with each step as she marched back and forth in front of the fireplace.

Victoria’s throat tightened. She swallowed hard before sitting and held her back straight and exactly six inches from the back of the sofa, as her mother had taught. She watched her mother intensely before speaking. “What about me and Dr. Barton?” Her mind raced for an explanation as fast as her heart pounded.

“I was at Mary Chestnut’s home today delivering pies and cakes to the Ladies Sewing Circle.” Her mother’s voice remained calm, but Victoria knew the wrath behind it. Mother turned and faced Victoria. “And everyone was talking about your rash and unforgivable attendance at a . . . medical procedure.”

A smile tugged at her lips at the way her mother pronounced ‘medical procedure’ as if it were some kind of a satanic ritual. Victoria averted her eyes from Mother’s glare and braced for whatever was coming.

“While I served my best clients, several of the ladies discussed how you were seen coming out of the hospital. And that you had been with Dr. Barton in some kind of a

theater taking notes while he operated on a patient.” Her mother huffed. “By now, I guarantee that everyone in town is aware of your little escapade.”

Victoria’s chin almost struck her chest, and she stared as her hands nervously fumbled and folded over each other in her lap.

“A decent, young lady like you going to such a disgusting place, and with a man, a man who is not your relative!” Her mother quickly turned her back.

The tone stung Victoria’s heart. Tears pooled in her eyes, blurring the whiteness of her knuckles as they gripped her hands that still lay in her lap. There was no way she could make her mother understand the importance of her actions, even if it meant saving lives.

Her Mother whirled back around. “And *deliberately* being seen by Dr. Barton’s colleagues, nurses, and students.” Her Mother spat her words and wrung her hands furiously in front of her. “As well as Dr. Barton’s superior.”

Victoria’s head jerked up. “Mother, I—”

“Lord, have mercy, Child.” Her mother raised her voice such that it reverberated against the walls in the small parlor. “Do you not understand how your actions today could jeopardize Dr. Barton and his work?” Her eyes shot daggers into Victoria’s soul. “Don’t you know that one simple act of yours could ruin the reputation of the entire Carter name?” Her mother’s arm hung stiff at her sides, both hands clenching and unclenching. “I honestly don’t know what to do about you.” She lowered her voice, her face inches from Victoria. “A true Southern lady would never conduct herself in such a disgraceful manner.” Once again, she turned her back and this time hung her head.

Victoria saw the jerking of her mother's shoulders and knew a crying jag had begun. "Mother, will you please listen to me?" She rose from the sofa and gently placed her hand on her mother's shoulder.

Her Mother jerked her shoulder away, as if burned.

Victoria opened her mouth to remind her mother of Sally "Buckie" Preston, Victoria's best friend since childhood, and a young lady from a proud and distinguished Southern family. Everyone knew how Sally conducted many scandalous love affairs, including three fiancés in three years, all of whom mysteriously wounded or died. And don't forget, there was her notorious affair with the Confederate General, John Hood.

Victoria wanted to tell Mother that if Sally and the Preston family could survive such disgraces, then surely the Carter family could survive this one little indiscretion. But thought better of it and snapped her mouth shut.

Suddenly, Victoria's mother whirled about. "No, I won't." Her scowl deepened. "You knew better than to act in such a manner. It's bad enough that you spend all your days alone at that Dr. Barton's home, but to traipse around a medical college and witnessing a medical operation as you did is disgraceful." Mother's eyes widened "You acted as bad as that Scarlett girl in Atlanta, like a piece of white trash." Her Mother continued glaring but her voice softened. "Or worse."

Anger welled up inside Victoria, and for a split second, power and liberation coursed through her veins. She jerked her hands across her midsection, signaling her mother to stop. "That's enough."

Her Mother's hand flew to her mouth. "How dare you raise your voice to me."

By now Victoria had tolerated more than her fair share of her mother's outburst, and now it was her turn. She grabbed her mother's wrists and held them tight. "Now, will you please listen to me?" Her pulse quickened; her breathing became labored. Amazed at her own strength when her mother shrank away, Victoria suddenly realized how weak and brittle her mother's wrists were in her grip.

*Just like our relationship.*

Shame and alarm rushed through Victoria when she finally understood the violent treatment of her mother. She dropped her mother's hands and quickly turned away, her own shoulders now shaking with fear.

In her periphery, Victoria saw her mother sink into a nearby chair and weep uncontrollably, her face buried in her hands.

It took a moment, but she gathered all her inner strength and remained quiet, refusing to look at the pain she had just caused. When she could no longer take it, Victoria knelt beside her mother and wrapped her arms around her mother's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Mother, I truly am." Humiliation surged through her body while tears stung behind her eyes. "All I did was attend a medical procedure and take notes for Dr. Barton to draft an article for a medical journal. His cleansing methods, if properly performed, could save thousands of lives." Her voice choked up, but she had to get the words out. "I know I should have told him no, but this was such a terribly important operation for Dr. Barton's career . . ." her voice fell away and tears rolled unabated down her cheeks. Between sobs, she managed, "I know it was unwise, but I did it, and there is no going back. I did not mean to harm you or anyone in any way. You must know that."

Several moments later, when the sobbing subsided, Victoria wiped away the tears with the back of her hand, searching for the proper words before continuing. “And it was wrong of those women to hurt and embarrass you in front of Mrs. Chestnut.” She paused just long enough to gather strength. “Why, she knows of the importance of nursing from the War. I remember her coming to the Robertson Hospital and saying what a tremendous job Captain Sally was doing, and that Miss Tompkins was our ‘Angel of the Battlefield.’ So, it was wrong of her not to speak up for me and our work in the hospital.”

Her Mother’s eyes flew open wide, her crying jag forgotten. “You are an impertinent child.” She paused a moment to catch her breath. “The War is over—and has been for five years. And what you did is over and done.”

Victoria stood her ground. “And you are making more out of this than you should.”

“I thank God George is no longer with us to see what you have done. Your reckless actions could not only hurt us, but George’s family as well. Have you thought of what will happen should George’s family find out?”

Victoria’s head hung low, her eyes refusing to meet her mother’s glare. *How dare she bring up George at a time like this?* A crying jag built from deep inside, bursting forth at the thought of her beloved George. She forced it back just in time. After a moment, she cleared her throat and said, “Mother, I said I was sorry. I never meant to harm anyone.”

Her Mother sat forward and slapped the palms of her hands on the chair arms. “Well, you have harmed. You can apologize all you want, but the fact remains that, once again, you have brought shame and disgrace to this house.”

She watched her mother fall back into her chair, throwing her right arm across her closed eyes, and sigh loudly. Over the years, Victoria witnessed how she had perfected this maneuver as a means to scare the family into letting her have her way.

Fighting back a chuckle, she knelt at her mother's feet and gave her a humorless smile. "I've seen you perform that stunt much better in front of Papa."

Her Mother dropped her arm, and Victoria reached for her mother's hands, holding them tight in her own. Even as her mother struggled to pull away.

"All these years, you thought you were getting away with this stunt with Papa, but he knew you were faking then, just like I know you're faking now."

Her Mother frowned, but Victoria refused to back down. "If any of my actions have brought such disgrace and dishonor to this family, I can't help but notice how you are not ashamed to reap the rewards of such behavior. My disreputable job with Dr. Barton brings in more money than your baked goods ever will."

Her Mother closed her eyes. Victoria stood silent as tears slowly streamed down her mother's face.

Unable to witness anymore, Victoria got to her feet and paced in front of the fireplace. When the silence in the room became unbearable, Victoria said, "I know you said all of those things to frighten me into behaving more like I would have before The War, but we live in a different world now. If I behaved by your antiquated customs, this family would have starved by now. You must know that a huge part of Papa is in me, and I know Papa would tell me to do what I must to survive."

She studied her mother's face, how her eyes remained closed, and tears still crept down her cheeks. Victoria had said her peace and turned to stroll out the doors. When she

reached the pocket doors, she brusquely opened them and stepped over the threshold. She turned once again to face her mother. "I'm going up to my room now, so please call me when supper is ready." She hoped the tone of the word "please" sound as harsh her mother's when she asked Victoria to sit.

Her mother opened her eyes and rose from the chair. "You have no idea of the shame and humiliation you have wrought on our lives, and I shall never be able to show my face in Richmond ever again."

Victoria watched her mother stand straighter and taller than ever before. "But you forget that you live in *my* house now, and by Jehovah, from now on, you *will* abide by *my* rules."

## Chapter Five

Victoria slammed her bedroom door and leaned against it. Only when safe behind a closed door would she allow her courage to break. Her body fell across the bed, sobs racking every fiber of her being. *How could I have spoken so to Mother?* With all the illicit gossip spread about her and Dr. Barton, she knew all too well how deep those verbal lashes cut.

Tears flowed easily at the memory of the horrendous things her mother had said. Waves of nausea rolled in her stomach at remembering how she had grabbed and squeezed her mother's wrists. A thousand different scenarios of how she could have better handled the situation flashed through her mind. *Oh, God, if I could only take it all back.*

To quell the throbbing in her head and aching in her chest, Victoria sat on the edge of the bed and took stock of her situation. There had to be someone with whom she could confide. Someone who could understand her side of the situation. A mentor who would tell her she was right not to deny her feelings. A female who could offer advice. And confidence.

*Miss Sally Louise Thompkins. Of course.*

In that same instance, her feet hit the floor, propelling Victoria to the scarred yet sturdy mahogany writing desk. A million words assaulted her brain as she sat in the non-matching vanity chair. Her hands trembled while pulling sheets of sepia-colored paper



from a small desk drawer. Victoria brushed a tendril of loose hair tickling her face, grabbed a quill pen, flipped the ink pot lid open, and jabbed the pen nib in the pot. The words flowed from her mind through her hand and onto the paper before she could finish a complete thought.

*My Dearest Captain Sally,*

*I thank God that I am well enough in body and spirit to write these few lines to you. It has been months since our last correspondence, and I write to you today as you have been on my mind recently. Currently I assist a doctor in keeping his patient records and writing up his manuscripts for articles in medical journals. Therefore, I am constantly reminded of the invaluable nursing training I received from you at Robertson's Hospital during The Conflict. That training has been indispensable in my understanding the patients' ailments and the doctor's treatments. Also, your generosity in showing patience while teaching me the most pertinent and important points of nursing is something I shall never forget. And I so much miss your presence and friendship in my daily life.*

*As you may be aware, so much change has taken place here in Richmond, and my mother, with whom I live, is not coping well. Therefore, it is with a heavy heart that I put pen to paper today to seek advice from a mentor of whom I have the utmost respect, and in whom I feel I may place complete trust.*

*No doubt you will have heard the rumors surrounding myself and Dr. Barton, the surgeon for whom I work. Such gossip is nothing compared*

*to a most indelicate incident in which Dr. Barton escorted me to the dissecting theater at the Virginia School of Medicine yesterday. As Dr. Barton is adamant about instructing doctors on the necessity of using Dr. Joseph Lister's germ theory and aseptic surgery protocols, my sole purpose in attending the surgical procedure was to document the necessary steps of this most hygienic concept, the same concept you yourself instilled at Robertson's Hospital,*

*My job at the theatre was to take notes while he demonstrated the proper sanitary procedures for cleansing doctors, instruments, and patients, as well as performing an appendectomy on a twelve-year-old patient. Dr. Barton wishes to standardize those sanitary procedures for all hospitals, doctors, and nurses to follow, Being Clara Barton's cousin and taught by her, Dr. Barton understands that thousands of lives could be saved should those procedures become mandatory. And now, I, too, appreciate the necessity of those same procedures in which you were adamant we nurses adhere to, and understand why our mortality rate during the war was so low.*

*And while mother was at sixes and sevens about it, she refuses to listen as I try to explain my side, and I fear the worst is yet to come.*

Victoria laid her soul bare in setting forth the details of her desire to earn money by working with Dr. Barton, no matter the cost, which led to the horrendous argument with her mother.

*Seeing all that you accomplished by opening the hospital to the wounded soldiers and the lives you saved using hygienic standards, I sense a greater purpose for myself. No longer will simply earning a living suitable for a lady will suffice. A whole new world has opened at my feet, and I must answer to a higher calling, a calling that will place me beside Dr. Barton in doing all we can to establish proper hygienic protocols for all hospitals, doctors, and nurses to practice. I sense such a resolve will provide a deep happiness for my soul. Yet by doing so, I fear my relationship with my mother will be irreparably shattered.*

*And it is in this dilemma that I find myself. I seek your advice. You understand the importance of our work, much more important than simply conducting myself in all things proper for a lady. I stand at a crossroad in which any path I choose will mean severe consequences and deep regrets for someone. I cannot express how I would cherish a word of advice from such a respected soul such as yours.*

*Your most humble servant,*

*Victoria Evans*

She signed her name with a lighthearted flourish, blotted the pages, and stuffed them into an envelope. Suddenly a weight lifted from her shoulders as she sealed her fate in the envelope. *Miss Thompkins will understand and properly advise me.*

Darkness had settled in Richmond when Emmy knocked and advised dinner was ready.

“I’ll be right there.” Victoria sat on the edge of the bed a moment, the argument with her mother rushing back. No matter how much cool water she splashed on her face, she could not wash away the sad, weary reflection that stared back. The sound of her own shuffling feet grated on her nerves. Standing in front of the only chair in the room, Victoria jerked up the same drab brown dress and slipped it unceremoniously over her head, only half-heartedly smoothing out the wrinkles.

The reflection of her thin body in the full-length looking glass caught her off-guard. She traced the image with the tips of her fingers, touching the hollow shell of her likeness with its red, swollen eyes and pale cheeks. She thought her hair atrocious and ran her long fingers through the dark strands in a vain attempt to restore order and life into the tangled mess.

For a moment, the memory of how bright and cheerful her 16-year-old self had been stared back years earlier while she stood in front of this mirror preening for hours. One evening stood out in her memory. Had six years and a war past since that one hot August evening when she had acted so childish and made Delta mad by pulling her own dress down to expose bare shoulders? She remembered her favorite green organdy dress, and how she had pinched her cheeks until they were rosy before sliding down the banister like a little girl. And her family’s reaction when she had burst into the dining room. She especially remembered how George smiled and flirted all through dinner.

*What would George think of me now?*

Disgust washed through her, and she placed a hand over the reflection before fleeing the room.

Emmy and her mother's voices drift into the hallway from the kitchen. Victoria held her breath as she crept into the dining room, unsure of what her mother would say or do if she saw. She eased into her usual place at the table across from Mother and saw that Emmy had set the table with remnants of the blue-and-white Carter family China. A smile tugged at her lips, noting how, no matter their difficulties, her mother kept alive the dignity and spirit of a by-gone era by having the table properly set, even though most of the pieces had been broken, stolen, or lost during The Conflict.

Her Mother carefully strode into the room carrying a pot of hopping john. She sat in her spot but did not speak. Victoria sensed that previous tensions prevailed, but still opened her mouth a time or two to break the silence. But the expression on her mother's face cooled her courage.

Mrs. Carter's dainty hands filled both plates with the cheese and rice mixture and a piece of corndodger. Victoria stared at the design on her plate, prodding the field peas, beans, tomatoes, and rice around instead of eating them. What she wouldn't give to have something more than this tasteless, horrid mess and a tiny piece of cornbread.

Victoria pinched off a piece of browned crust from the corndodger and placed it in her mouth. Her stomach rumbled for more, so she closed her eyes and forced a few morsels of the rice and peas concoction down her throat, almost choking at the disgusting mess.

By means of diversion, she continued watching her mother's hands while she ate. Victoria would never forget the comforting, smooth-as-silk-touch they used to bring her. When little, her mother used to tenderly brush the hair out of her eyes, her mother's warm, delicate hands caressing her innocent face. And the aromas of gardenias arose

from her mother's skirt hems. She smiled, remembering how she always knew that when she smelled that sweet scent, her mother was nearby.

But now to look at her, no one would know they were the same pair of hands. After baking and washing dishes all day, her mother's hands appeared rough, red, and course. The aroma of gardenia was now replaced with sugar and cinnamon mixed with the sharp stench of lye soap and sweat.

Victoria tucked her chin to her chest, ashamed of how hard her mother had to work, ashamed of yet another reminder of the harshness of the South losing the war.

She glanced up as Emmy came in front the back porch where she and Luke always ate their dinner, weather permitting. "They's some pie that was not sold today. I can bring y'all a piece, if ya want."

"No thank you, Emmy." Her mother pushed her plate away and glanced toward Victoria. "After handling those pies all day, I'm afraid I couldn't stomach to eat one now."

The expression on her mother's face told Victoria that wasn't the real reason she turned down the offer, but pie sounded a heck of a lot better than the hopping john before her. "I'd like a piece, please." *After the day I've had, I deserve something sweet.*

"You didn't eat your supper," Mother snapped.

Victoria ignored her and smiled up at Emmy. "A big piece, if you please."

Her Mother glared and said, "We can't afford to be wasting food."

Victoria shrugged her off.

A minute later, Emmy placed a saucer of apple pie in front of Victoria, and all teachings of etiquette left her. She immediately speared a chunk of apple coated in sugary filling and popped it in her mouth. “Mmmm, that’s so good.”

Seconds later she scraped the last bit of sweetness from the saucer with her fork and looked up to see her mother frowning. But Victoria continued to lick the last crumb of apple and goo from her fork while scrutinizing her face. Before she could say anything, Victoria hopped up from the table and followed her nightly routine of clearing the table and helping Emmy with the dishes.

After Emmy dried and put away the last dish, Victoria cleaned the countertops and swept the kitchen, anything to keep from seeing that look on her mother’s face. When the kitchen chores were completed, she hustled upstairs to retrieve the book Dr. Barton had lent earlier. She made sure her mother wasn’t in the room before settling herself in the parlor for a quiet evening of reading.

Yet an uncomfortable sadness settled in her chest. Victoria assumed her mother was still upset over the argument, but when she opened the book and tried reading a page or two, the burden refused to go away. She glanced around at her current tattered surroundings. The parlor felt cramped and shabby. The thick green curtains limply hung from their dusty rods, their hems now barely touching the floor. On the opposite wall, she stared at her Papa’s favorite picture of Queen Victoria, once brightly lit and hanging in the dining room at Somerset. But tonight, at Clearwater, Queen Victoria seemed to glare back, her expression bleak and dreary in the lengthening shadows. Victoria sighed, knowing it wasn’t that long ago when her mother would never have allowed their home to get in such a state.

A smile pulled at her lips, remembering how, once upon a time, her mother and Papa held elegant parties at their Somerset Plantation in the Virginia countryside. As a little girl, she would sit on the staircase with her face squeezed between the wooden dowels while a live band played a beautiful waltz to which her handsome Papa twirled his lovely wife Rebecca across the shiny wooden dance floors, which mirrored the dancers' graceful moves. Jeff and Varina Davis often came down from the Confederate Capital in the city of Richmond to share dinner and dancing with her Papa and Mother, as well as their nearest and dearest friends.

*And such elegance her mother brought to Somerset Victoria had never been seen before.* Every flat surface held brightly colored flowers in elegant vases. Each window her mother had decorated with curtains of rich fabrics, their hems trailing at least twelve inches on the floor. The amber glow of candlelight from tables, wall scones, and chandeliers bathed the rooms in a warm, pleasing glow. Venetian crystal bowls, etched glassware, and silver platters imported from England reflected the tawny light while holding delectable drinks and food. And her mother always insisted that every lady and gentlemen had their favorite drink in her mother's decorative red, European glassware. Everything sparkled from days of polishing and waxing.

Victoria chuckled, remembering how she, Persephone Cole, Marilla Miller, and Sally Preston, along with other little ladies and gentlemen, including her brothers Tom and John, practiced their dancing skills in the hallway and foyer.

A deep sigh escaped her at remembering how laughter and gaiety once filled every room, and her mother's grace, refinement, and sophistication showed her family's ability to afford such expensive tastes.



The clock struck the passing of another hour, jerking Victoria back to the grim present. She sat on the settee, her back ramrod straight as her mother had taught, no matter the surroundings or emotions. The uncomfortable sadness deepened in her chest. Tears quickly formed, burning behind her eyes.

To quell the memories of what used to be, Victoria quickly brushed the tears away before they could fall, deciding to escape the unpleasantness of reality by picking up the Charles Dickens book. She soon became emotionally embroiled in the exploits of the orphaned waif from England.

The minutes ticked by. After reading a couple of chapters, the words blurred, and she laid the book in her lap. Realizing how much the lantern wick smoked when her tired eyes burned, she rubbed both eyes, pressing the heels of her palms into her eye sockets. The room completely blackened; tension slowly melted from her body. For one moment, she didn't have to be aware of her current surroundings.

Victoria sat stark still, the second hand of the clock ticking away the passing of more time. Tension may have eased from her body, but her mind refused to rest. The words she spoke during her hateful argument with her mother returned. The image of the medical students' frowning faces when she entered the dissecting theater came forth. Their raucous laughter still rang in her ears, as did their laughing faces as they pointed at her. The catcalling and salacious nature of their hateful words returned. As did Dr. Morgan's verbiage at the boys for their disrespect to Dr. Barton and the importance of what he was trying to teach them.

The only revenge she felt was when the young student fell to the floor in a dead faint during the surgery. At least, with her being a delicate and unwanted female in their presence, she hadn't fainted.

But the ugliness of the scene would remain with her; and the argument with Mother refused to leave her mind. Or her heart. *That damnable demonstration!*

Her eyes flew open and blinked several times while adjusting to the dim light. Just as her mother walked into the room and wordlessly passed, Victoria picked up *David Copperfield* and pretended to read. Yet she could not resist peeking over the top of the book to study her mother's elegance and grace as her mother sat at her huge embroidery table. Two double wall sconces backlit her, and Victoria saw how her back remained stiff and straight, even as exhausted as Victoria knew her mother to be.

Her mother began her embroidery, the last vestige of artistic luxury she allowed herself since The War. From Victoria's position on the settee, she saw the piece upon which her mother worked. The pattern consisted of heavenly angels in brightly colored, flowing gowns, one of her favorite motifs.

Victoria watched as her mother's hands moved in a musical rhythm, a seamless choreography of artful skill that played out before her. First her mother pushed the needle and colored thread through the top of the huge tapestry held fast in the large embroidery loop. The needle made a "pop" each time it slid through the face of the fabric. Her mother pulled the needle back through from the bottom of the fabric, the thread "whooshing" with each pull.

Fascinated, she watched as her mother's nimble fingers ensured the thread precisely placed, achieving a beautiful, and lasting piece of art. Victoria loved how her mother's

hands moved swiftly and steadily. The skill and artistry of such movements fascinated her so that she momentarily forgot about *David Copperfield*.

Her mother used her small, but heavy gold embroidery scissors with their intricate swan handles to cut the thread and change colors. Victoria had admired the scissors since childhood, especially since her mother shared that the scissors were a wedding present from her mother when her Papa took her mother to be his wife. A sudden thought struck Victoria. *That was the only story I've ever been told about my maternal grandmother.*

Her mother cut the thread and securely tied a knot. When she leaned over to put the swan scissors back into her embroidery basket, her mother fumbled with them. They slipped from her grasp and struck the hardwood floor with a clatter.

Startled at the piercing noise, Victoria gasped. She clasped her hand to her chest and watched in horror as the scissors broke apart. One of the sharp points stuck in the floor next to her mother's foot. Her body refused to move when she realized that one inch in another direction and the blade would have pierced her mother's fabric shoes and lodged into her foot.

When Victoria regained her senses, she glanced up and saw Mother staring at her. She leapt up and ran over. "Mother, are you all right?"

Her mother gave a wan smile then leaned forward to pick up the pieces of scissors. "Superstition says that this is a sign that company is coming."

Those were the first civil words her mother had spoken since Victoria came home. The heavy atmosphere immediately lightened, providing the perfect opportunity for Victoria to swallow her pride and smooth things over. She slowly built-up courage and

dared place her hand on her mother's shoulders. "Mother, I do so apologize, not only for my behavior today, but also for the things I said to you earlier."

"I know, Dear." Her mother patted her hand, but never smiled. "It's over now and what's done is done," she lamented.

"Yes, Mother." Victoria leaned over and placed a delicate kiss on her mother's cheek.

## Vitae

### **Cindy Pope**

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140 Victoria Station  
Woodstock, GA 30189  
Cell Phone: (678) 389-1734  
E-mail: [cindypope1958@yahoo.com](mailto:cindypope1958@yahoo.com)

### **EDUCATION**

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#### **Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia**

Master of Arts in Professional Writing, December 2022

Concentration: Creative Writing                      Support: Applied Writing

*Capstone Title and Topic:*

*Unclean and Unforgiven—Historical Fiction on Victorian Medical  
and Sanitary Practices*

*Committee Members: Professor Melanie Sumner, Fiction*

*Professor Garrard Conley, Creative Non-Fiction*

#### **The University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama**

Major: English    Minor: Journalism

Bachelor of Arts Degree, December 1992

Honors Scholarship Recipient

#### **The University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama**

Continuing Education

Creative Writing Courses – 1996-1999

#### **The University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama**

Special Studies

Creative Writing Courses – 1995-1996

#### **Wallace State Community College, Hanceville, Alabama**

Major: English    Minor: History

Associate of Arts Degree, June 1990

Graduated Cum Laude

## **PRESENTATIONS**

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*Journey into Archival Research: Major Revisions to 19<sup>th</sup> Century Historical Fiction*, SAMLA 94 – Change, Nov 11-13, Jacksonville, FL

*The Importance of Conducting Research for Fiction and Non-Fiction Writings*, The Christian Authors Guild Oct 2022, Sojourn of Woodstock, Woodstock, GA

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## **WRITING EXPERIENCE**

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