

Nathan's Fate

A novel
by
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CHAPTER ONE

2002: Ginny Returns to the Fields

The bedroom spoke of an older era. A shining glass lamp spilled muted light into shadowy corners. Time had tinged the lamp's white ruffled shade with touches of yellow. A soft light bulb illuminated half of a grandmother's body resting, propped up on firm pillows, in her queen-size bed. Her thin frame was covered by a black and red T-shirt, which announced the year that a local football team had conquered the state. The grandmother's casual sleeping attire contrasted with the antique gold bracelet on her wrist.

The older woman had no real cares as her day edged away and no idea that the night held travel across tremendous distances into unknown territories. Although most everyone she knew called her Ginny, her actual name was Genevieve Meyer.

Ginny's long fingers reached for a Bible on her walnut nightstand. The dark-brown book sat next to the glass lamp and a pearl-handled hairbrush. This brush received little use since its owner preferred a plastic one with rubber bristles. Ginny kept the yellowing lamp shade and ineffective brush because they were sweet reminders of a time she loved, when her crinkled reflection did not cause her to wince. Decades ago, her skin glowed like an eggshell, smooth and white. Eventually, the eggshell became cracked and spotted.

When Ginny reached the age of sixty, she asked her daughter, Charlotte, to give her a facelift for her birthday. Her daughter cringed, claim-

ing that if there were complications during the procedure, she would carry the guilt of having caused them. So, Ginny's skin became patterned with crevices, gradually coordinating with the cover of her Bible. No matter what the days brought, the final minutes of Ginny's nights were spent reading a page from this treasured book. The cover revealed its time on Earth with imperfections of varying lengths. Tiny paths of wear wound around the title. Ginny turned the aging pages tenderly, knowing their link to the spine, though still unyielding, became more tenuous with each reading. Some of the gilt-edged sheets were haunted by slight discolorations that crept threateningly toward the printed text.

Usually, after placing the book back on the nightstand, the grandmother's hand with its prominent purple veins would reach out from the bed and pat the Bible as if it were a friend. However, tonight, on the eve of her birthday, Ginny closed the book and drew it near. She adjusted her blue comforter in preparation for sleep, with the worn Bible beside her.

Tomorrow would be a long day. Charlotte and her daughter, Sara, insisted on celebrating her birthday. Ginny viewed the upcoming party as a "she-cheated-death-again" festivity. The celebration was sure to include rich food to nibble, candles to blow, and cheeks to kiss. It would be fine—another year sneaking in its pain and joy.

Ginny closed her eyes and thought about her husband, Davis, who had traveled ahead of her decades before. She saw his brown hair swept to the side, hair her fingers slid into often until his sudden and premature death. Her mind believed Davis waited just a heartbeat beyond her current reality. Still, Ginny feared her own passing, no matter how strong her faith in an afterlife. She could manage with Davis at her side. *But what if he wasn't?*

Seeking comfort for troubled thoughts, Ginny nestled into the bed's welcoming sheets. Her granddaughter, Sara, believed staunchly in her loved ones sleeping on cotton with a high thread count. With this delicious comfort against her skin, Ginny's mind drifted. It transported her across five decades to a day when she was making pies in the fly-plagued kitchen on the farm.

With cinnamon and nutmeg scents dancing in the air, Ginny prepared

a pie crust to crumble delightfully in hired men's mouths. As she sprinkled flour for rolling dough, a close family friend, Emme, rapped on the back door. Ginny ushered her in, trying not to touch anything with her floury hands.

"Well, this is a surprise," Ginny said. "Would you mind if I keep rolling? With the workers coming here to harvest tomorrow, there aren't enough hours in the day to get everything done." The younger woman moved back toward her dough without waiting for a response from Emme.

Ginny tried not to think how she must look to her guest. She had grown thin while grieving over her husband's unexpected passing. Today, her hair rebelled against its bun. Stray brown strands tinged with copper danced across her face. A touch of sugar glistened on one flushed cheek. Emme did not seem to notice Ginny's haphazard appearance.

"Sorry to arrive unannounced," Emme said. "I'm sure I am putting you out. Please, go ahead and work on your pies. The kitchen smells delicious."

Ginny expected Emme to pull an apron off the wall hook and jump in to help her, or at least offer to stir the apples in their sticky spice mixture. Emme appeared less than eager to contribute to pie creation, though.

"If there is one thing I can do well, thanks to you, it's make a pie," Ginny said.

Emme smiled. "Having men in the fields is a trial, as I well know. They'll eat all those pies you're making in one evening. Perhaps I should bring over a few extra loaves of bread tomorrow?"

"That would be wonderful. Life has been hectic without Davis here to oversee things. I am rising to darkness every morning."

"I know it has been a struggle for you. That's why I'm here. Do you mind if I sit?"

The heavy-set Emme slipped into an oak chair at the table. Unfortunately, she chose the one with the loose rung. Ginny frowned with worry over the chair supporting her. The wood creaked but remained reliable. Returning to her rolling pin, Ginny glanced at Emme, who was scrambling through a large cloth bag she held on her lap. Emme pulled a brown leather book from the bag with the utmost seriousness etched around her

tight lips.

“Ginny, this book is a Bible,” announced Emme.

“It certainly looks like one,” Ginny said. She flipped her dough, hoping Emme’s lips were not about to share a lecture on her absence from church last week.

“This book has been in your family since the Civil War,” Emme said. She placed the book on the table and rested one hand on top of it with reverence.

The rolling pin stopped. “My family? Why do you have it, if it’s from my family?”

“The Bible belonged to your momma,” Emme said. “And I know you need it now.”

Ginny’s fingers relaxed wearily on the rolling pin handles. Her wrists throbbed. “Momma’s Bible? She gave it to you?”

“Temporarily. Margaret wished for it to be yours.”

“She never mentioned it. You never mentioned it.”

“No,” Emme said. “I was waiting for the right moment.”

I’m over thirty years old, Ginny thought. Wasn’t that moment ten years ago?

Ginny abandoned the pie-making. She wiped her hands on a damp towel and took a seat beside the woman she thought of as an aunt. The book’s delicately patterned cover rested under Emme’s palm. On closer examination, Ginny noticed the spine held colored creases from frequent use. She resisted the urge to pick it up.

“I dreamt about your momma last night,” Emme said softly. “She looked beautiful and well. She insisted I give you this gift, so here I am.”

Ginny searched her guest’s face. Gray streaks were overtaking Emme’s black hair. Lines had begun to crisscross beneath her brown eyes. Ginny noticed those eyes were moist. “Well, I appreciate your bringing this book to me, but why didn’t you pass it on earlier?”

“I have to confess,” Emme murmured, looking away from Ginny’s gaze. “I hid this Bible for safekeeping, and I hope you’ll forgive me, but I forgot about it. Your mother would be appalled, but I know the pages must be in your hands now.”

“Because of the dream?”

“Yes, and I must tell you, as your mother directed before her passing, that this heirloom requires great care. You have to protect it always and entrust the pages to a deserving woman in the family when that time comes. This gift serves as an additional responsibility in your life.”

Experiencing a slight resentment at being cautioned in this way, Ginny fought to make her voice sound friendly. “Of course, I will take care of it. This is a piece of Momma’s life.”

Emme contemplated how to proceed. “This book means more than that. The women who came before you relied on the Bible for strength in seeing their families through rough waters.”

Ginny was still struggling with how Emme conveniently forgot, for years, to give her an heirloom.

“Dear girl, listen,” Emme said. “The early women of your family—Harriet, Lydia, Andrea, and even your mother, Margaret—wrote the words that brought their hearts peace and put the messages within the book.”

“Peace? You mean a resolution to the problem?”

“These women wanted to gain calm during their tribulations,” Emme said. “Once a trying time ended, the prayers were taken out. Their notes were written for strength, say if a loved one was ill or in harm’s way. Help was requested as they struggled to feed families or care for children.”

“My mother did this?” Ginny said.

“She did.”

“Why couldn’t she pray about the problems?”

“She could,” Emme said. “But this manner of praying released these women from worry. They handed the problem over to faith, never asking for anything trivial.”

“I suppose my mother asked for the strength to leave her child,” Ginny whispered.

When she first sat down next to Emme at the kitchen table, Ginny did not foresee such a challenging conversation. She had been awake and moving since five-thirty in the morning. Her young daughter, Charlotte, would wake from her nap in a few minutes. Ginny sensed the opportunity of having leftovers for her noon meal and resting for fifteen minutes fad-

ing away.

“You didn’t write any prayers?” Ginny asked.

“I didn’t consider it proper,” Emme replied. “I received the book for safeguarding until you were older.”

“Well, I am definitely older now.”

Emme winced.

“I wonder why Momma didn’t just leave this book with my father,” Ginny said.

“I can’t say. It’s kind of a tradition among women.”

“And the placement? How do we know where to put our petitions?”

“Margaret inserted hers in the chapters or next to the verses that meant the most to her,” Emme said. “You do read the Bible?”

“Yes,” Ginny answered, although she neglected to mention how little. If she wrote a prayer, the placement might be random.

“I need to tell you there’s one prayer that’s still in there,” Emme said. “Not sure why, but let it be.”

“From my mother?”

“No, from your great-grandmother, Lydia. She was born Lydia Robbins, I believe.”

Ginny stifled a chuckle. “Now why on earth would I need to keep a note that old?”

“Lydia wrote about a man she loved, a Nathan Shaw,” Emme said. “If you’re interested, I can tell you that story another time, the bits Margaret told me. Lydia’s request was not resolved, or she would have taken it out, or her daughter, Andrea, would have. So, your mother left it alone.”

“I doubt Great Grandma Lydia is looking down on us and worrying over whether we will bother her yellowed old paper,” Ginny said. “My Grandma Andrea rests in heaven with Momma. That means there is no one to say why a message about Nathan still needs to be inside the book.”

Emme frowned. Seeing her displeasure, Ginny added, “But I do understand why you left it.”

“Well, promise me you’ll at least read Lydia’s words before taking them out.”

Ginny nodded in agreement, though she wondered why this irrelevant scrap of paper held such importance.

Emme moved the Bible toward Ginny. Then she rose, murmuring about letting Ginny get back to the pies. Ginny stood too, as her body complained about leaving a place of rest. She gave Emme a quick hug, wrapping her arms around a back that was muscular from years of rural life. Ginny's initial frustration with Emme faded within the perspective of all the good things this true friend had done for her.

"Thank you for bringing my gift from Momma and telling me its history," Ginny said.

"Anything for Margaret—and you," Emme said, as she pushed her chair back into the table. "I'll get the bread loaves to you tomorrow." Then she moved quickly out the door and down the steps.

Ginny walked out on the back porch to watch Emme's departure. A persistent wind toyed with Emme's shin-length skirt as her friend turned, smiled, and waved. Ginny returned to her kitchen, shaking her head at Emme's uncharacteristic behavior. She contemplated if her friend had truly forgotten about the hidden Bible.

Perhaps Emme considered me undeserving of the book due to my lack of diligent churchgoing, Ginny thought.

With a glance at the waiting pie crusts, Ginny carried her mother's Bible, hers now, into the bedroom, where the breeze stirred the white cotton curtains. The sounds of Charlotte waking from her nap drifted down the stairs. Ginny put the gift on the dark dresser her husband had crafted and hurried to her child.

Later that night, the farmhouse creaked and whined in the wind. As Ginny prepared for the deep slumber the body demands after physical labor, she scribbled her greatest worries concerning the crop, the debts, and her future. She placed her written prayer in the Bible. Then she enjoyed one of the few restful nights she had experienced since her husband's passing.

Hovering once again on the edge of sleep, Ginny's thoughts traveled from the farmhouse back to being on the brink of another year older. The lamp light bounced off her gold bracelet. The Bible remained wrapped in her arms. After a few minutes, it slipped from her grasp to rest beside her, with Lydia's plea for Nathan still inside.

Before the clock reached midnight to mark a final, uncelebrated birthday, Ginny dreamed of standing by Davis. They watched the sun serenade the farm fields with farewell colors. When her husband strode toward the whispering crops, Ginny did not feel sad that he had left her. She knew she could follow. A warm wave filled her body. Sharp regret pierced her, but just as quickly it was gone.

CHAPTER TWO

Sara and Dillon

The Last Words

A steady rain marked the burial of Ginny Meyer. This downpour kept quite a few of her friends from watching her polished casket disappear into the muddy darkness of a cemetery plot. Sara Bennett clung to her umbrella. A horrific tightness pushed against her ribs as her grandmother's body dropped downward. Sara's hands shook on the plastic umbrella handle. At twenty-four, she had lost one of the few people in the world who loved her unconditionally.

Two days after the funeral, Sara's mother, Charlotte, dropped off several boxes at her daughter's brick-front condominium. They were packed with items Ginny had left to her granddaughter. Sara avoided opening the boxes for a few days, choosing to simply navigate around them in her less-than-spacious hall. She assumed the containers simply held knick-knacks and remembrances.

Sara knew peering inside the boxes would inspire tears to fall again; yet she eventually eased her body onto the hall's wooden floor for a closer look. She opened the box in front of her, pulling a few items out with care, keenly aware they represented her grandmother's life. She discovered a delicate dish edged with pink roses. It announced the location of "a happy kitchen." Also in the box were two silver candlesticks in desperate need of polish, several coins that probably held limited value,

a few holiday ornaments, three huge cookbooks complete with stains, a photo album that traced Sara from birth to high school, and two silver-framed photos of Sara with her grandmother. When these contents were removed, a smaller box called to her. Across its lid, the words “For Sara” were written in her grandmother’s beautiful penmanship. Sara’s eyebrows scrunched together. She leaned against the wall and twisted a strand of her wavy brown hair, a strand that did not have the reddish highlights of her mother but did carry traces of gold from her father.

The young woman remembered her mother saying to unpack the boxes carefully, but there had been no mention of this shiny one hidden inside. Sara pulled it onto her lap. Her short nails pried off the tight-fitting lid. She removed a layer of white tissue paper to reveal a rose-colored envelope on top of her grandmother’s Bible. Knowing this old book to be Ginny’s most treasured belonging and a family heirloom, Sara was confused as to why it had been entrusted to her and not her own mother. She set the envelope on her lap and opened the Bible. Its age spoke a crinkling warning to touch the pages gently.

On the inside cover, a list of names appeared in different cursive handwriting styles. The names represented the women of her family from the recent past and long ago. Sara noticed a similarity in the signatures. Each one, though distinctive, shared an elegant lean. There it was: “Sara,” recorded in her grandmother’s cursive hand. Seeing her name among those of her ancestors caused goosebumps to pop up on Sara’s arms.

Harriet, Lydia, Andrea, Margaret, and Genevieve. These women marked the generations that came before her. Each of them had held the Bible, as Sara did now. It bothered Sara that her mother’s name did not make the list. She wondered if an explanation might be waiting in the envelope. Upon opening it, she found a message penned on pale pink stationery:

“Sara,

When your mind has a great worry or your heart great fear, ask for assistance in writing and place it in the Bible. Few words are needed. You may find peace. When

you feel the events are resolved, take the note out.

As you prepare to move on from this life, give this book to a woman in our family. I will be watching over you. Be strong and good in the challenges ahead.

Love always,

Grandma Ginny

P.S. don't take the note about Nathan Shaw out. Just leave it."

Sara's eyes filled, the tears highlighting their color, which Grandma Ginny always described as "sea-green blue, like mine." Holding the letter, she stared at the Bible with guilt jabbing her gut. Sara had avoided telling her grandmother of her own struggles with faith.

But I can still take care of this book, she thought.

Sara valued her family's past and adored her grandmother. The Bible belonged to her now, and she would do right by all the women who once treasured it. Her grandmother always kept the book on her nightstand, and Sara decided she would do the same. Working her feet around the other inherited items she had temporarily abandoned on the floor, Sara walked into her bedroom and set the rich leather cover on her rustic furniture, where it looked somewhat out of place. She laid her hand on it.

"Grandma Ginny?" Sara asked. She felt as if she were a child again and calling to her grandmother in the big farmhouse. At that time, a strong voice would have responded in a sweet tone, but today, only the wrens outside answered.

Sara decided she should also place the pink letter in a safe spot since it held her grandmother's last written words to her. She opened her nightstand drawer and tucked it inside. Her plans were to make a memory album to honor her grandmother, and this final correspondence would be included. The postscript on the letter came to mind regarding Nathan Shaw.

Sitting on her bed, Sara opened the book again to flip through the pages. She wanted to see the note that her grandmother had mentioned, but found nothing. She merely saw where Ginny had marked her favorite psalms in red pen. Sara frowned. This could take some time. She skipped ahead to the New Testament, checking each page resolutely. Strangely,

three pages were missing from the Book of Luke, and they appeared to have been torn out deliberately. The remaining inside margins of these pages bore jagged edges.

“Who would do this?” Sara asked.

Her fingers insisted on searching for the note about Nathan. They turned a few more pages and found a small paper, folded to shield its words and browned to the point of fragility. The book cradled the note protectively. Sara gently pulled the small message from its hiding spot and unfolded it carefully. She read the fading words: “Please protect Nathan from his enemies. Give me faith as I wait for my love. In your grace, let us be one forever. L.”

Part of the message had worn away. Sara’s mind replaced the missing letters and words to read: “Please protect Nathan from his enemies. Give me faith as I wait for my love. In your grace, let us be one forever.”

The petitioner had not added her full name, just the initial L. Sara flipped back to the list of women on the inside cover. One name began with that letter. *Lydia*. Sara knew that Lydia lived during the second half of the 1800s, so she was curious why the book still shielded her words. As she held Lydia’s prayer, a tingling sensation traveled over her arm, and her thoughts flowed: *Why not remove the note? Obviously, Nathan did not come back to Lydia but back from where? The 1800s? Enemies? The Civil War?*

Sara imagined that Nathan had probably been a soldier and Lydia’s love, as Dillon was a soldier and her love. She repositioned the paper in Luke and closed the Bible because she suddenly wanted to talk with her mom. The other items stacked in the hall could wait.

Charlotte opened the door of her ranch-style brick house and enveloped her daughter in a hug. Sara closely resembled her mother. They were both a touch under average height with wavy brown hair and blue eyes. The two even spoke with similar inflections.

“Hey there, girl; glad you caught me,” Charlotte said. “I am finally home from the infernal rat race.”

“First day back since the funeral was tough, huh?” Sara asked.

“Yes, my mind wanted nothing to do with work, which overflowed

my desk. Did you get your father to the airport?"

"I did. He is on the way to his insanely busy life. I wish he lived closer."

"Well, as long as he keeps working, he'll be across the country."

Sara nodded. Though her parents had been divorced for years, she still longed for a more cohesive family unit. Sara moved into the den and dropped her body on the leather sofa. Charlotte detoured into the kitchen where she could still see and talk with her daughter, thanks to the home's open floor plan. Sara heard ice clinking against glasses.

"Have you heard from Dillon?" Charlotte asked her daughter from the kitchen. "Does he know about your grandmother?"

"I sent an e-mail, but I wish he would call. I need to hear his voice right now."

Charlotte entered the room and extended a glass of iced tea to her daughter. "Yes, talking to him would give you a big lift. Imagine years ago when families waited for letters from loved ones who were fighting in distant places."

"The waiting grates on my nerves," Sara said. "Dillon said he would e-mail me as often as he could and send some real mail too."

Her mother smiled. "Good. Words in his handwriting that you can hold and save."

"Yes, although his handwriting can be a nightmare to read. It's a strange mixture of cursive and print."

"I got the contact info you sent on him," Charlotte said. "I'd like to mail a package next week. Want to send one together?"

"Definitely, but don't laugh. I've already sent him two."

Charlotte did laugh but was not surprised. She knew her daughter was head-over-heels for Dillon.

Sara sipped her drink. "Mom, why didn't you tell me about the gold box in Grandma's stuff?"

"The Bible? Your grandmother left instructions for me to pack the book in that small box whenever she left us and to make sure I gave it to you. She said she included a letter to explain what you needed to know, but I am not sure this family tradition could ever be explained in a letter."

"Why didn't she give the book to you?" Sara asked.

Charlotte toyed with the fringe on a throw pillow. “I agreed with her decision to leave it to you,” Charlotte said. “Her motivation came from Dillon.”

“Dillon?” Sara’s voice reflected her surprise.

“My mom dug into her past trying to find out more about her great-grandmother, Lydia.”

Sara placed her drink on a coffee table coaster. “Yes, her name is on the inside cover.”

“Well, after Lydia died,” Charlotte said, “the Bible passed to Lydia’s daughter, Andrea. Then Andrea passed it on to her oldest daughter, Margaret, who had my mother, Ginny...”

“And Grandma Ginny got the book finally,” Sara said.

“Right. Grandmother Margaret became ill when my mother was still young. Margaret left it with her friend, Emme, with instructions to pass it on later. My mother got the Bible in her thirties.”

“Mom, how does any of this relate to Dillon?”

“Lydia wrote a message about a man she loved, Nathan, and left it in the Bible.”

“The note is in there.”

“Really!” Charlotte exclaimed. “My mother showed it to me once, but I thought it would have been removed or disintegrated.”

“Grandmother left instructions for me to leave it alone.”

“Then, of course, you will,” Charlotte said.

Sara remembered the strange feelings that encompassed her as she opened Lydia’s message. “I guess, but how is Nathan in any way linked to Dillon?”

“My mother never learned the complete story about Nathan and Lydia,” Charlotte said. “She found out that his name was Nathan Shaw, that he fought in the Civil War, and he never married Lydia. Mother assumed he must have died in battle or from disease. She wasn’t sure why the women before her left Lydia’s note for Nathan in the book, so she left it too.”

“Maybe Lydia kept the message in place because his body never came back. He might have been buried near the battlefield.”

“Definitely makes sense,” Charlotte said. “But there’s no way any

of us could find or relocate his body. And it's strange no one ever tossed the paper. I mean, Lydia actually married another man and had children."

"True," Sara said. "But gosh, I would hate to be the woman who removed a written prayer dating back to the Civil War!"

"I know, but your grandmother thought you should place a message about Dillon inside the pages."

"That's why she gave it to me?"

"My mother believed Lydia created this legacy of the Bible comforting women who had loved ones in harm's way." Tears teased Charlotte's blue eyes as she spoke. Ginny's sudden death while sleeping was unexpected.

Sara reached out and covered her mother's hand with her own. "You could've slipped a prayer in for me," she said.

"Your grandmother wanted you to be this book's caretaker."

"Mom, I don't get it. If these women possessed all this faith, why didn't they pray for their needs or for the protection of their loved ones?"

"Putting it on paper symbolized their absolute faith in letting the problem go," Charlotte said. "I remember I asked my mother once, 'Weren't you afraid the farm would fail, and we'd be penniless after Daddy died?' She told me she agonized over those very things until the Bible came into the house. You see these women transferred their fears into writing. My mom saw a connection between the challenges Lydia faced and those you are facing."

Mother and daughter sat silently for a minute, immersed in their own reflections. Charlotte dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. She broke the lull in the conversation. "From the details Mother gave me, if the women of our family put their words in the Bible, it wasn't done lightly. They didn't seek wealth or possessions, but they did ask for strength."

Charlotte tapped her manicured fingernails against her glass of iced tea. As she did so, the antique bracelet Ginny had left her shimmered into sight from beneath a silky sleeve. "I think the faith surrounding this book for over a century makes it a true gift to have, especially in unique circumstances like when a loved one could be facing an enemy."

"As Nathan did and Dillon does," Sara said.

Charlotte sighed. "History repeats itself when it comes to war."

Sara rubbed her hands over her face. “I almost wish she hadn’t given it to me. Isn’t that awful? I can read it for comfort while waiting for Dillon, but what if a tragedy occurs? If I lost Dillon, I might have difficulty ever looking at a holy book again.” The torn section of the book flashed into Sara’s mind. The jagged edges could represent an accident, but they could also be a reflection of someone’s piercing pain. “Plus,” she added, “I’m not close to being secure in what I believe about a higher power.”

“Don’t carry on a tradition of faith you aren’t comfortable with.”

“It might help to know more about Lydia’s Nathan,” Sara suggested.

“It might,” Charlotte agreed. She reached for her glass of tea. “Let me look at Mom’s genealogy research from years ago. Maybe it’s time for a little of my own digging.”

The bracelet on Charlotte’s wrist shifted again. It caught some of the overhead light and sent a few soft glimmers toward Sara, who responded by hugging her mother.

CHAPTER THREE

1861: The Cousins

Edward Shaw was not disappointed that his cousins, Andrew and Nathan, did not join him in the first months of the nation's fight. After all, Edward lived the military life, and his cousins had chosen other professions. As a member of the regular Army, Edward knew he must answer the call to duty he was trained to accept.

Although he considered himself a committed soldier, the idea of war did not get Edward's heart pounding with anticipation. The young man truly enjoyed everyday things—a piece of red meat sizzling in brown juice; a morning ride on a fast horse; his dog's chin resting on his boot; the stars burning against their black canvas; or his father's bursting smile greeting him home.

Edward appreciated the little wonders and simplicity of his existence. No horrid cruelty had ever marred his life until his superiors beckoned him to war. His mind obeyed the beckoning without hesitation, though with some trepidation, and then his body followed his mind.

He had qualms about the green volunteers, but he answered the call confidently when the battle began. He obeyed the orders to charge and fire, as commands were shrieked from dry throats. Edward expected the Federals to win and his life to continue. The Union did outnumber the rebelling southern enemy after all.

Instead, the Federals collapsed like wilting foliage on a dying bush. Edward did not receive the courtesy of an honorable shot leading him to

heaven. He was not granted the privilege of falling to the ground. In the spitting smoke and hissing haze, he never saw death coming. A flash of cannon fire took him. It flew into the middle of his frame. As if destined to annihilate his being, the shot soared past every obstacle to destroy what the young man had physically been.

His body responded to this personal attack by releasing astonishing quantities of blood. The fluid spun through the air to mingle with the blood of others. This blend adopted a life of its own, becoming a cruel paint splashed upon the dirt, trees, and leaves.

Once Edward's spirit spun from his body, a few of his friends dropped like dominoes as they fled in retreat. He did not see this. He learned of it later in his new home. Here, Edward asked and was told. And here, he also decided that he had been a fool to think his regiment could handle the fight. He had been beckoned to his death.

As soon as Edward arrived on the hushed Hill and his name was added to the precious white list with deep black ink that could not be smeared or erased, he demanded to know from the first person he saw, "Tell me how to return. You see, I must be going back, since I am needed in the fight."

Once the great shock of dying eased, Edward came to realize returns were impossible. A nagging dread replaced his desire to rejoin the living. He feared his passing would inspire the premature end to the other men in his family.

Edward sought out the old-timer assigned to assist him and begged, "I have no brothers, only sisters, but I need to get word to my Shaw cousins, who are like my brothers, and tell them not to get into the fight with the Confederates. Andrew may jump into it rashly, and Nathan could follow. I cannot have their names on the List and their losses on my conscience."

The older general covered the young man's hand with his own. "The decision is theirs," he murmured. "You have no guilt. Besides, there are great things to be done after life. If your Shaw cousins join you here, you will be ready to greet them, as you have been greeted by your loved ones. There may come a time when you and your cousins will work together."

"What?" Edward asked. "Stop talking in riddles. I've left the world,

but you must let me look after these two men.”

“If they are determined to take up arms, you cannot interfere,” the general said. “You can see Nathan and Andrew periodically, but you cannot change their way.”

Edward's head drooped onto his chest.

“Don't despair,” the general said. “You understand the soldier's pain. Your services will be needed in the coming days. Imagine how you can console those yet to arrive.”

Edward ignored the words. He sighed, feeling frustrated, impatient, and powerless. A tear fell. The older man stayed beside the younger soldier with a silent presence that offered comfort, but no real resolution to his despondency.

CHAPTER FOUR

1862: Lydia and Nathan

The Request

Lydia met Nathan in the park, where they strolled unchaperoned among the tree canopies. Their bodies did not touch, but their spirits were united the moment they greeted one another on a ghostly gray morning.

Despite this, Nathan had decided to leave Lydia, and she could not fathom this decision. She saw his love for her as an incredibly strong commitment. Lydia wondered if she could have been wrong in thinking they created a dynamic outside of themselves, greater than each of them individually. Her mind questioned this as they moved deeper into the park. Nathan shortened his steps to keep fluidity between their strides. Lydia glanced at him and knew immediately that she had not been wrong about this love. A quick look gave her reassurance of the bond that existed between them, yet it did not explain why Nathan chose a path away from her.

As the couple walked, a steady breeze buffeted the air and inspired restless branches to bend in greeting. Few people moved about, as it was early on a weekday morning. So Nathan slipped his fingers into Lydia's gloved hand. The movement took them out of that ethereal place where their love drifted when their spirits were linked but their bodies were not. She felt the welcome pressure of his fingers on the ring of rose-cut garnets he had given her.

Lydia turned and smiled. Nathan responded with his crooked, dimpled grin. Then he released her hand. They were in public after all. The couple reached their favorite spot in the park, where the mature trees were kind enough to arch together, joining their hardy limbs to make the pair less visible to passersby.

"I am on my way this week," Nathan said. His voice sounded steady, but its low volume hinted this control was possibly forced.

Lydia heard dread in his voice. A tiny piece of anger stabbed her stomach. Fear filled her chest.

And why shouldn't he dread the fight? Lydia thought. *Men are expected to be brave, but what if it is not in their nature to kill others?*

"I am ready, I believe," Nathan said. "Ready to complete the task and come home to you."

His comment propelled the anger from Lydia's stomach into her throat where it festered into an irritated reply. "The task?" she asked. "You talk as if you are publishing a longer edition of your family's newspaper. You will be standing a much shorter distance from heaven there than here."

Lydia's anger did not shock Nathan. He understood it. Her shades of temper were part of her, and he loved all of her. "Lydia, I have dwelled on it and dwelled on it. I think of the son we will have someday. What if he asks me if I lived with honor during the rebellion? I have pledged myself, and I will see it through."

Lydia's brain railed against his decision. *Nathan had a choice*, she thought, *and he did not choose me*.

"You must know I will leave my heart here," Nathan murmured, noting the tension in her face.

Lydia had no response. Nathan frowned. His words sounded trite in comparison to the wave of loss bearing down on him. His explanations to her were always wrong ever since his cousin, Edward, died in battle, leading to his own decision to join the Union Army. Nathan did not want to be separated from Lydia. He wanted to watch those few wisps of dark hair fall into her face while the rest of the hairs on her head remained obedient. He wanted to see her resituate the rebelling strands with a natural grace. He wanted to hear her laugh at something he said, something

no one else in the world would find funny. He understood he could not make her laugh right now even if he stood on his head in the park. This knowledge made him ache.

“We will have to get better at letter writing,” Nathan said.

“I plan to reach for my pen so often your officers will demand that I stop.”

He squeezed her gloved hand again. “And you will receive so many envelopes from me that your father will call me a fool.”

The air did somersaults in Lydia’s lungs. She saw the sky above her swirl into a dizzying blur. Nathan did not know, or would not admit to knowing, what she knew—he did not seem to be the type of man who could succeed at war.

Nathan and Lydia sat on a park bench with a slight distance between their bodies that neither one desired to be there. Even with her multiple clothing layers, Lydia sensed the sharp contrast between the wooden bench, which held the morning’s coolness, and the delicious warmth which rushed over her skin whenever Nathan’s body came close to hers. Not being able to fall into his arms and lift her lips to his created a torment that was both frustrating and marvelous.

“Why not take me as your wife before you go?” Lydia murmured.

“Lydia, you know your father’s wishes.”

Nathan had asked for her hand and received her father’s conditional blessing. The date of their marriage depended on his return from whatever campaigns were ahead. Nathan understood Lydia’s father, Lawrence Robbins, viewed him as irrational for joining the Army when it was not required. Mr. Robbins stood several inches taller than the young man, and the father drew himself up to full height when he told Nathan that he could not condone a hasty marriage performed during a furlough either. Although the solid Mr. Robbins could be intimidating, Nathan imagined it was Lydia’s mother, Harriet, who did not want her daughter to be a young widow, and Lydia’s mother had an iron will. Nathan could only hope Harriet’s resolve might soften over time.

It was presumptuous of Lydia to ask him for a wedding band, but her determination was one of the reasons he adored her. Little did she know that the band rested in a carved wooden box inside his home, entrusted to

his father's keeping. The inner circle of the ring was engraved with their initials. Not being able to add the date bothered Nathan, as if it were an omen.

God forbid that my time would be done and Lydia would have to coat the band with black as a mourning ring, Nathan thought. *Though I imagine my fate sits in the hands of Providence.*

He pushed mourning from his mind. The wedding date would be engraved on the ring later. For now, he would enjoy sitting next to the woman he loved, a turquoise-eyed beauty who muddled his brain when she walked into the room. Nathan found Lydia lovely whether her hair was in ringlets or pulled back in a chignon. Today, he watched the weak morning light struggle through the trees to reveal touches of copper in its strands. He loved the way her cheeks were more cream than white and that they lit up with a fast flare of color when she became angry.

Nathan knew his love's fingers were small, while her toes were long. He knew she lifted her dark eyebrows in an emphatic arch while discussing a controversial subject. He knew her life was richer because of her passion for science, good books, and big dogs. He knew she loved to kick off her shoes and run as if no one were looking. He knew she would rather have cake or bread than meat and beans. He knew her opinions, and sometimes, he sensed her thoughts. Nathan knew all this because she would be his future, but first, there was the fight.

Nathan leaned toward Lydia and lifted her arm. From his pocket, he drew out a delicate gold bracelet which he draped across her wrist.

"Nathan! It's lovely."

"Look at the clasp." A miniature image of Nathan was part of the clasp.

"It is you!" Lydia exclaimed, as tears formed in her eyes. "I adore this gift because it keeps you close to the beat of my heart here on my wrist."

"Will you wear it when I am away?"

"Every day, every moment." He fastened the gift and then let his hand sit on the roundness of her forearm. She had already given him a photograph of her to carry, as well as a hair-work cross to wear against his chest. He had left clippings of his own hair with her, as well as with

his mother. These could be used in a mourning piece if he fell. Lydia had put the locks of his honey-colored hair away, not wanting to consider the possibility she would ever need to create such an adornment in his honor.

An elderly man moved by the couple, leaning on his cane like it was a friend. They sat silently until he faded from sight. Somewhere in the park, a child cried, and Nathan instinctively turned his blond head toward the sound. His glancing about for the child worried Lydia. She wondered if her fiancé might be too compassionate to kill the enemy in battle—even if his own life were at risk.

Lydia touched the bracelet fondly, raising her wrist skyward to see the struggling morning light radiate from it. “Make me a promise that whatever must happen will happen for you to come home to me,” she said.

Nathan nodded, his unlined face looking confident. She could see the sprinkling of freckles across his nose. He would be exposed to all types of weather. If the generals did not resolve their differences swiftly, the sun would beat red into his skin and transform it to a brown it had not seen since childhood. He sunburned easily, and she worried about this.

Lydia’s mind agonized, knowing the rations would be poor. Nathan was lean. He could become ill without extra padding on his bones. He stood at an average height. Not a big man, not an overly strong man, just the man she loved.

“The war will change men inside and out,” Lydia’s father had warned. She tried to memorize Nathan’s features as they were today—young and smooth, with a hint of a white puckering scar on his chin.

“I have to confess,” Nathan said, “I am unsure about the predictions that we will end this quickly.”

“I have been careless about reading the newspapers, but they are now my companions.”

He chuckled. “You have not been reading the one printed by my family?”

She smiled broadly, but her amusement faded as suddenly as it appeared. “Well, I do read that one now and then, but much of it makes me frightened for you.”

A glance around their park surroundings spurred Nathan’s next ac-

tion. He navigated his nose under her small hat to dot a kiss on the top of her forehead, her cheek, and swiftly, softly on her naturally rosy lips. "I don't want one worry to disturb you. I may be back before you start wondering about me much." As he spoke, his breath caressed Lydia's ear. She sighed.

He rose from the bench and extended his hand to guide her to standing. "You should be on your way."

"You will let me know about your train?" she asked.

"I want our farewell to be at my family's house."

Nathan was traveling with other men to join an existing regiment. He had volunteered after a poorly attended church rally for recruits. He would ease into a tragic scene, as was his way. Nathan did not wish to be a soldier for life, but simply to make his contribution to the Union cause.

Lydia remembered her mother's counsel: "If you make your promise to him, you are bound to stand by him if he loses an arm, a leg, or his sight."

She pushed the comment from her mind as her fingers met her love's outstretched hands. With the contact, images of Nathan suddenly flitted through her head. She saw him sitting among the books in his library, jotting down ideas for the manuscripts he would write one day, or getting bruised playing ball with his friends in a grassy field.

"I hate goodbyes," Lydia said, as they moved down a brick path and out of the park. "But this farewell is causing me pain in body and mind."

"I ache because I am causing you distress, Lydia. But I was compelled to make a promise to my country, my brother, and my cousin, Edward, ever since his life's blood escaped out of him."

Lydia longed to say that Edward could be calling out for Nathan to run away from the battlefield rather than toward it. *Your cousin's spirit might be standing next to us, begging you to reconsider and avoid the same fate!*

As these bitter ideas bounced about her mind, Lydia walked silently beside Nathan. She resisted voicing the ramblings and ruining some of their last moments together. They reached the park entrance, standing respectfully apart, with neither wanting to step away first. Nathan and Lydia were immersed in a trancelike state generated by love. A man

walked around them at a brisk pace, waking them to the realization they were blocking the path and life flowed beyond. A final glance served as their “I love you.” Lydia turned away, feeling his gray eyes too much to bear, and they parted.

Lydia’s legs strode purposefully beneath multiple forms of apparel, including drawers, corset, and petticoat, all hidden beneath her walking dress. The dress displayed a floral pattern, which extended into the skirt’s flounces. Her waist was accented with a lace bow. A cool, overcast day surrounded her, but the various layers she wore felt unneeded. A few tendrils of hair planned their escape from her center-parted bun.

With her mind clicking, Lydia reached her wood-frame home, where six wide steps led her to stand between two white columns, both ornately decorated at the top in a Greek style. These columns held up the covered main entry, while two smaller pillars, to Lydia’s right, supported the side porch. The exterior of the home was essentially painted white, but shutters on the six windows along the front of the house were a royal blue, as was the front door, blue being the favorite color of Harriet Robbins.

With a quick turn of an unlocked, brass doorknob, Lydia entered the home. She traveled down the hall, passing a staircase to her right and the drawing room to her left, before reaching the spacious dining room, where her mother, Harriet, sat breakfasting alone at a walnut table before a sparse plate of bread and honey. Lydia’s mother ate little but drank cups of tea throughout the day. Harriet’s lean figure seemed even slighter seated behind the long table.

“Lydia, where have you been? Is your friend, Beth, still fighting a fever?”

“Oh, no, Beth is improved. I’m sorry to have gone out unexpectedly. I went to take a stroll.”

Her mother eyed her suspiciously, noting her flushed face. “Alone?”

As her mother poured tea, Lydia ignored the question, removed her gloves, and sank into an armless chair. Too late, she remembered the bracelet, but Harriet did not notice it. She was busy smoothing honey on her bread. Lydia tugged at her sleeve to cover the sparkle. She wanted to avoid a discussion of the gift. Lydia needed a favor.

“Mother, I must speak to you,” she said.

The older woman's face folded into seriousness as she chewed a bite of food and swallowed. "Of course." Her wavy hair bobbed as it stood corralled high on the back of her head, still resisting complete gray.

"I need to know about the Bible."

Harriet stirred her tea. "My Bible?"

"Several years ago when that horse threw Clayton, you wrote a prayer and slipped it into the Bible. You told me then that your faith was stronger with the note inside."

"And it was. Thank goodness your brother recovered from those injuries. Now there's just the coming and going of the arm pain."

Lydia sipped her tea, though she still felt warm from her walk. She would have preferred cool water, but the tea at least cleared her dry throat. "What strengthened your resolve?" she asked.

"It's a treasured book to me."

"Can you tell me why?"

"It was a gift from my mother." She nibbled a bite of her bread. Lydia waited. "Why are you wondering about it?" Harriet asked.

"During trouble, we seem to gather around your Bible even more often than our family one."

"Do you recall I placed it at your grandmother's bedside before her passing?"

Lydia nodded. "I do."

Her mother looked into her lap, traveling back, recalling incidents before she voiced them. "I read to her from it for a week. I would leave it sitting on the night table next to her."

Harriet shifted her gaze back to her daughter. "On the final day, I greeted the doctor downstairs. I'd placed the book on the quilt near Mother. When I returned, she had passed on with my Bible open. I almost buried the blessed book with her but brought it home instead. Not long after, I found a message from her inside."

"What did she write?"

"Ask and find peace." Harriet ate another bite, lost in the past.

"I'm sorry to stir up these memories," Lydia said, "but I am glad to know."

Harriet touched the mourning brooch she often wore. Its oval design

included woven strands of her mother's hair, which were separated by thin bands of gold. Harriet remained silent for several minutes, taking small bites of her bread. She regained her composure.

"Lydia, when are we closest to our Maker?"

"At birth and then death?"

"I believe it is as we are about to die. I took my mother's last writing to heart, and when I had an overwhelming tribulation, such as your brother's fall, I wrote a message and placed it in the Bible. It has been interesting to open the book and find an old writing that's no longer a great worry and take the paper out."

Lydia looked directly at her mother. "If Clayton had not healed well, how would you have felt about the book then?"

"But I did not ask for the healing of your brother. I asked for strength in facing whatever came from the injury."

Lydia abandoned the usual demeanor her mother expected. She reached across the table to grasp Harriet's arm. The bracelet with Nathan's image glistened on her wrist. The clasp pressed into her pulse. Harriet still did not notice Nathan's gift. She stared into her child's panicked face.

"Dear, what is it?"

"Mother, I need the Bible," Lydia pleaded. "I hope that Nathan might carry it with him to war."

"What a strange request! The book will be lost, left in some wagon before a battle."

"We have come together as a family to read from this book...when father felt his heart pains, during that great storm, or when we've all been ill with one thing or another. This book carries faith in its pages."

"No, it cannot go with him. This Bible remains a tender reminder of my mother's last hours. We may all rely on it in our times of need, but it stays in our house. You can leave a prayer inside as you wait for your young man's homecoming."

Leaving the table and moving to the bay windows, Lydia perched her body on the cornflower blue cushions of the window seat. Her fingers traced the yellow of the delicate rosettes resting on the wallpaper. She realized Harriet was not as linked to Nathan and did not suffer the same

despair at his departure. In fact, her mother might consider him foolish for volunteering. Lydia decided to keep her argument more in line with Harriet's nature. She understood how silly her plea sounded. She knew the Bible belonged with her family; however, Nathan soon would be a member of their family.

"I believe Nathan needs the book with him," Lydia said.

"I would imagine each soldier receives a prayer book. And for goodness sake, he does not need to carry a Bible into the conflict to ask our good Lord to travel along."

"Though it may not protect him, he might gain comfort from the companionship of a special gift, a gift from his future family in marriage," Lydia said. "Nathan's own family members are not as constant in observing their faith. I don't think his mother shares the beliefs you have."

Harriet frowned. "I want to pass this Bible on to you, and then you can give it to your daughter or daughters. I hope it becomes a tradition for the women of this family who must watch over their loved ones."

Lydia's patience evaporated. "Mother, you can ease someone's anxiety! Nathan will face the horror of bullets that tear out flesh and cannonballs that extinguish men. Can you not make this sacrifice to give him reassurance?"

"I do not understand his decision to go, Daughter."

Lydia's words spilled from her lips in a rush. "Well, you know of his cousin's falling in battle. Next, his brother, Andrew, joined the Army. Andrew sent Nathan a letter about the need for volunteers. Now Nathan's devotion to family honor and country may end his life. He seems to have forgotten his devotion to..." Lydia could not finish.

"...his devotion to you," Harriet said, completing the sentence. "I regret his brother held greater sway over his actions than you did."

"Mother, why does Nathan have to fight?"

"He chose to, and the decision remains his, so you must accept it."

"I am trying to by asking this. Can he please, please take your Bible?"

"You don't know that Mr. Shaw would be comforted by the book. Besides, they say men at war toss out most everything once they've been

in for a time.”

“Nathan would care for the book if I told him the meaning it holds for you, for us.”

“He will be remembered in our prayers each day,” Harriet said. “The war is sure to be short. Mr. Shaw will undoubtedly miss the worst of the fighting.”

Lydia’s body folded over, her forehead dropping into her palms in defeat. “Please ease his burden,” she mumbled.

Harriet rose from the table to stand next to her daughter. Her hand drifted in the air, hovering over Lydia as if it had the ability to decide on its own whether to provide comfort. Harriet contemplated joining Lydia on the window seat and wrapping her in motherly arms. Instead, she left the room, her breakfast unfinished and her second cup of tea growing cold. Harriet knew if she stayed, her determination might collapse. She might be tempted to give in to Lydia’s ridiculous request.

END OF SAMPLE