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Chapter One

Monday, April 22, 1861
New York City

When Charlotte and Alice told their mother they were taking the omnibus down Broadway, they weren't lying. They just didn't tell her where they would be getting off. There was simply no time for an argument today.

Boarding at Fourteenth Street, the sisters paid the extra fare for their hoop skirts, as if they were separate passengers, and sat back on the long wooden bench for the ride.

"This is against my better judgment, you know." Alice's voice was barely audible above the clatter of wheels and hoof beats over the cobblestones.

"Don't you mean Jacob's?" Charlotte cast a sidelong glance at her sister.

Alice twirled a ringlet of her honey-blonde hair around her finger—a nervous childhood habit she never outgrew—but said nothing.

She didn't have to. Ever since she had married the wealthy businessman a few months ago, she had been even more pampered—and sheltered—than she had been growing up. Heaven help her when they reached their destination.

"I'll have you home by teatime and none the worse for wear." Charlotte's voice was softened by just a hint of guilt. "I promise."

The omnibus wheels jolted over a broken cobblestone, bouncing the passengers on their benches. Releasing her grip from the edge of the bench, Alice raised an eyebrow at her sister. "Just tell me why I let you talk me into coming."

Charlotte grinned. "I've got an idea."

"Why do I have the feeling it isn't a good one?" Alice planted her palms on the bench beside her again, bracing herself against the jarring ride.

"Whatever you do you mean?"

"Do you remember your idea to adopt that lame squirrel we found?"

"I did let it go." And there were more important things on Charlotte's mind. She squinted at the front page of *The New York Times* held up by the man seated across from her. *Washington Still Isolated—New York Seventh Regiment Arrives in Annapolis by Steam—*

"Only after it chewed through five of Mother's best doilies and made a nest in the velvet armchair."

Charlotte turned from reading headlines to face her sister. "I was ten!"

"And I was eight, and still old enough to know better. There were other times, too, like when you chose that outrageous reading on the value of a woman's education to recite for our class at finishing school. Completely at odds with the context of the school."

Charlotte chuckled. "Exactly why it was so perfect! But today's idea is even better. I've found a way to actually *do* something for the war effort."

"And what do you call knitting socks for the troops? Rolling

bandages? Doesn't that mean anything?"

"Of course it does. But I mean something else. Something *more*."

Alice's eyes narrowed, but she let it rest as the omnibus slowed to a halt and more passengers squeezed beside the sisters. Any further conversation would soon be drowned out by the cacophony of Broadway.

The avenue throbbed with life, like an artery coursing down the island of Manhattan. Ten days into the war, recruiting offices for the Union army had already cropped up along the avenue, their entrances clogged with eager young men. Between Canal Street and Houston, the street teemed with gentlemen in spats and ladies in silks, their musk colognes and lavender perfumes cloying on the warm breeze. The white marble façade of St. Nicholas Hotel between Broome and Spring Streets dominated the west side of Broadway. In front of The Marble Palace facing Canal Street, porters in their brass-buttoned, blue uniforms opened carriage doors and escorted their elite customers inside, where they would no doubt spend staggering sums on the latest Parisian fashions.

But Charlotte and Alice did not get off at any of these places. At least not today. For just a few blocks south of The Marble House, and just a few blocks east of the German-Jewish secondhand clothing shops on lower Broadway, the steady pulse of polished society gave way to the erratic beat of Five Points, the world's most notorious slum.

Alice squeezed her sister's hand so tightly Charlotte couldn't tell if it was motivated by anxiety or anger for bringing her here.

If Broadway was Manhattan's artery, Five Points was its abscess: swollen with people, infected with pestilence, inflamed with vice and crime. Grogeries, brothels, and dance halls put private sin on public display. Although the neighborhood seemed fairly self-contained, more fortunate New Yorkers were terrified of Five Points erupting, spreading its contagion to the rest of them.

This was where the Waverly sisters got off.

Competing emotions of fear and excitement tugged at Charlotte's heart as she hoisted the skirt of her amber-colored day dress above her ankles and began heading toward Worth Street. "Come on, Alice," she

whispered, cocking her head at her dumbstruck sister. A foul-smelling breeze teased strands of hair from their coifs, crept into their noses, and coated their throats. Charlotte had forgotten how the smell of poverty would stick to her skin. Swallowing her distaste, she vowed to scrub herself with sugar and lemon-infused olive oil as soon as she returned home.

Pressing a violet-scented handkerchief to her nose, Alice held her parasol low over her head, blocking out as much of the view as possible as she began walking. “Where are we going?” Her words were muffled, but her discomfort was not.

A disheveled drunk leered at the sisters from a rotting doorway, raising the hair on Charlotte’s neck. “The House of Industry. It’s just up ahead.”

With her parasol in one hand and a fistful of skirts in the other, Charlotte set a brisk pace. As they turned onto Worth Street’s littered sidewalk, Alice skirted a child leaning against a lamppost, hawking apples from a broken crate. Charlotte stopped short.

“Maggie?” She reached out and touched the girl’s soot-smudged cheek while Alice gawked from five feet away. “It’s me, Miss Waverly! I used to teach your mother sewing. How is she?”

Maggie peered up with eyes too big for her face, too old for her nine years. “About the same as usual—only there’s not enough sewing to go around, she says—so Jack sweeps the streets and here I am. Say, wouldn’t you and the miss over there like a nice red apple?”

“Of course!” Charlotte reached into her dress pocket and traded several coins for two small, bruised apples smelling of fermentation.

“Charlotte!” Alice gasped while Maggie’s dirty face brightened. It was far too much money to spend on apples—especially rotting ones.

“Go on now, Maggie. Give your mother my best.”

With “Bless you Miss!” ringing in her ears, Charlotte joined Alice with both apples in one hand, skirt now dragging on the sidewalk.

“Can we hustle, please?” Alice’s voice was still muted behind her handkerchief. Charlotte was eager to comply. Virtually every tipsy

wooden building on this block—including Crown’s Grocery—housed a brothel, and none of them bothered hiding the fact. Bareheaded and bare-chested women stood in doorways quoting their rates to passersby, even in broad daylight—which was a dirty yellow, like a fevered complexion. By the time they stepped into the slanted shadow of the six-story House of Industry, Charlotte noticed she had been holding her breath. The vapors in this area could truly make one sick.

“Ah, there you are!” Mr. Lewis Pease, founder of the charity, had been waiting for them in the shade of the brick building, and now waved the sisters inside, away from the seedy, star-shaped intersection for which Five Points was named, half a block away. “And who is this lovely young woman?”

“Forgive me, this is my younger sister Alice—Mrs. Jacob Carlisle.” Charlotte and Alice entered the building ahead of Mr. Pease, who closed the door behind them. “She’s in town visiting for a spell while her husband is away on business.” She set the apples down on the hall stand and wiped her gloves on her skirt.

Pease bowed slightly. “A pleasure to meet you, madam. Mr. Dorsheimer is already here,” he added in a whisper just as the visitor’s barrel chest entered the room ahead of him. “Ah, Mr. Treasurer. Allow me to make the introductions. Miss Waverly, Mrs. Carlisle, this is Mr. Phillip Dorsheimer, Treasurer of the State of New York and the New York State Military Board. He’s here all the way from Buffalo, and we’re so fortunate he’s making time to meet with us.” Mr. Dorsheimer ignored Charlotte’s outstretched hand, fading both her smile and her confidence.

Mr. Pease continued. “Mr. Treasurer, Miss Waverly here was the one who suggested we make a bid for the contract. She used to be a sewing instructor here.”

Without even the slightest acknowledgment, Mr. Dorsheimer frowned at his pocket watch. “Can we get on with it?” His jowls quivered as he spoke. Charlotte took a deep breath and squeezed her parasol handle. So far, this was not going as she had hoped it would.

A thin smile tipped Mr. Pease's lips. "Yes, quite. I'd like to give you a tour of the facility before discussing the terms of the uniform contract. Unless you've been here before?"

Mr. Dorsheimer cleared his throat. "Oh, I've been to the Points before, but not here in this building." Of course. Well-to-do New Yorkers often came down to see Five Points for themselves to satisfy a macabre curiosity. "Well, allow us to show you around," said Mr. Pease, leading the way. "This is a fairly new headquarters for us, and we're rather proud of it. This corridor leads to the workshops where neighborhood teens and adults learn several trades. At first we taught only basic sewing, but now we also teach baking, shoemaking, corset making, basket weaving, and millinery. Go ahead, look around."

Mr. Dorsheimer tossed cursory glances into a few of the workshops.

"We have more than five hundred workers currently. Five hundred!" Mr. Pease beamed. "I pay the workers according to what they produce. Sewers can earn up to \$2.50 a week—now I know that doesn't sound like much to you and me, Mr. Treasurer, but it's a lot more than needlewomen normally earn. We've also opened a day school for the children so they are educated, fed, and even clothed while the parents work at their trades here."

They walked a little farther and turned into a large open room. "This is the chapel where we hold religious services," Mr. Pease continued. "Of course there is also the Five Points Mission just across the street, whose primary objective is to feed the souls and point them to new life in Christ. The House of Industry began as a branch of the Mission, because I found they had a hard time hearing the Bible when their stomachs were growling. And what better way to feed the multitudes than to teach them a trade so they can feed themselves?"

If Mr. Dorsheimer felt anything, he hid it well in those doughy folds of skin. The palms of Charlotte's gloves began to dampen with sweat.

"One last thing I'd like to show you." Climbing a set of stairs brought them to a well-ventilated floor with spacious dormitories, each

with iron beds that termites couldn't penetrate. "We started out housing our worker women, so they wouldn't need to go back to the brothels at night. But now we also shelter dozens of abused, neglected, and homeless children who are waiting for adoptive parents."

Mr. Dorsheimer, winded from the exertion of the climb, did not look impressed.

"These rooms are humble enough, indeed," Charlotte added, "but when you consider many of these people are used to sleeping on the bare floor of a room with no windows and laid out like sardines in a can, you can understand the charm of a bed and some—air, can't you?" Calling it "fresh air" would have been a lie. With human waste collecting in trenches behind most Five Points tenements, no air had been fresh here for decades. At least windows allowed circulation.

Dorsheimer glanced at his pocket watch again, a scowl sagging on his face. "This is all very well and good," he huffed, "but can we get to the bottom line? How much would it cost to give you the contract? I need twelve thousand uniforms, and I need them as quickly as possible."

Mr. Pease turned to Charlotte. "Yes, of course," she said. "We propose a payment from the state's Military Board of thirteen cents per shirt, so that would be a total of \$1,560.00. Total." She bit her lip.

"Fifteen hundred dollars?"

Charlotte stole a glance at Mr. Pease. *Was that a lot? Or not very much?*

"Fifteen hundred *sixty* dollars, sir. To be precise. Plus, you'd supply the flannel and buttons," she said.

"I need more than just shirts, miss." Dorsheimer's tone was sharp, biting. "I need trousers, jackets, and overcoats, too, and I need it all in three weeks. Twelve thousand sets. And *you* provide the material. Not me. Do I look like I'm in the garment business?"

Alice's eyes widened into large pools of cornflower blue. Charlotte's narrowed into slits.

"Twelve thousand complete uniforms in three weeks. I wish I could

say we could do that, Mr. Dorsheimer, but you're asking for a huge sum on an extremely short deadline. Not only can we not perform miracles, but I doubt any single company in New York could do a satisfactory job under your specifications."

"I'm sure if we joined together with a few other sewing organizations, we could do it," said Charlotte, swiveling between Mr. Pease and Mr. Dorsheimer. "But we need a little more time to make the arrangements. This contract would mean a great deal to the House of Industry and to the workers in a financial sense, but it would also be a perfect way they could serve their country and their fighting men at war. You could be guaranteed of fine quality products made by conscientious workers."

"Not possible. The boys are going to war, and they need to be clothed."

"Mr. Dorsheimer, please. Consider the greater value of giving a charity the contract. The House of Industry has made a profound impact on Five Points, rescuing people from poverty—and the immorality that sometimes goes with it—and helping them walk a better road."

Mr. Dorsheimer raised a hand to stop her, but she didn't slow down.

"I'm sure you know President Lincoln came to Five Points just last year, just before his Cooper Union speech that launched him toward the presidency. And what did he choose to see in Five Points? Not the brothels or grogeries, but the House of Industry."

"Miss—" He tried again, but she couldn't stop.

"Maggie's mother, and dozens like her, needed this contract. Sir, the good work we do here inside these walls is becoming even more famous than the degradation outside of them. Invest in the House of Industry with this uniform contract, Mr. Dorsheimer, and you'll be getting the products you want and doing society a favor at the same time."

At the end of her speech now, Charlotte caught her breath; Alice stared at her in disbelief. No one said a word until Mr. Dorsheimer jabbed a stubby finger at Charlotte.

“My responsibility, young woman, is to the State of New York, not to your pet project here in the slums.”

Charlotte’s face burned as she, Alice, and Mr. Pease watched Mr. Dorsheimer trudge out of the building, taking her hope with her.

“It was worth a try, Miss Waverly,” Mr. Pease said.

Alice leveled her gaze at Charlotte. “Another good idea, right Charlotte?”

Frustration swelled in Charlotte’s chest. “Why? Why would you say such a thing? It was a brilliant idea! It made so much sense!”

“Charlotte, when will you ever realize that not everyone sees the world as you do? You act so surprised when others disagree with you, when you are the one stepping out of the range of normal.”

Charlotte crossed her arms tightly across her waist. “You used to look up to me.” Her throat grew tight with the unshed tears of bitter disappointment. “You used to believe in me.”

Alice laid a tentative hand on Charlotte’s arm. “I believe your intentions are good. But once again, you spoke too boldly. Perhaps if you had not been so vehement with your outburst, Mr. Dorsheimer would at least have considered giving you the contract.” Alice sighed, resignation in her eyes. “You must—you *must*—know your place, dear sister, or one of these days, you will stand to lose much more than a sewing contract.”

Charlotte opened her mouth to deny it, but could make no reply.



Chapter Two

New York City
Sunday, April 28, 1861

Curling up on the plush cushioned bench inside the parlor's bay window, Charlotte welcomed the bundle of marmalade and cream fur that bounded onto her lap.

"So there you are, Dickens!" Purring vibrated beneath her hand as she stroked his glossy coat. She had named the cat with her favorite author in mind, but quickly realized the little feline was beautiful on the outside but a dickens on the inside. *Probably the way everyone sees me—especially men!*

Still stinging from the news that the uniform contract had gone to Brooks Brothers, Charlotte was in no mood to be courted today. But courting season had arrived with the daffodils, and it would not be put off, even for war. No, courting was serious business. She should know. She had been through ten years of it herself, and not one had produced a suitable match. Still, she couldn't help but assume some of the blame for that.

This year will be different, her mother kept telling her. Perhaps she was right. Even so, by the time Phineas Hastings took his leave of her front parlor this Sunday afternoon, she was more than ready for some solitude.

Charlotte held nothing against Mr. Hastings. In fact, she had respected the law professor ever since she had met him at a guest lecture given by Frederick Douglass at the Broadway Tabernacle. Mr. Hastings was intelligent, charming, educated, and a regular churchgoer. His parents—God rest their souls—had brought him up well. *Not quite as tall as*—She shook her head as if to erase the thought. Comparing every suitor to a ghost from her past served no one.

Importantly, her mother approved of Phineas. A wry smile lifted Charlotte's lips. Little did Caroline know, however, that as soon as she had put an end to Charlotte's work at the House of Industry, Phineas had given the charity a large donation—all the proceeds from a recent lecture he had given—just to cheer Charlotte up. Since then he had made a few more donations, perhaps more to win Charlotte's affections rather than from his own concern for Five Points, but she didn't care. Regardless of his motivation, his generosity to the charity endeared him to her.

In addition to teaching law, Mr. Hastings was one of New York's most well-known crusaders for abolitionism. His fiery rhetoric—and the fact that he had shared the stage with Douglass, even if only for a moment—left her in awe of him from the start. Most men didn't understand why Charlotte attended lectures, but Mr. Hastings had actually seemed to enjoy conversing with her about politics and culture, religion and philosophy. It was what had attracted her to him in the first place. He wasn't afraid of a woman who used her brain.

"Then again," Charlotte told Dickens, "I imagine I would be happier if I just didn't think so much." She leaned her head against the windowpane, her cat still warming her lap. Discontent seeped into her, like the cold air through the glass. Large, wooly clouds sagged in the air, snagging on church steeples and streetlights as they drifted across a grey flannel sky. Every roll of thunder echoed the rumblings of her spirit.

The passionate preaching from the pulpit this morning and the

newspaper at her side she thumbed through now deepened her unrest. Since the attack on Fort Sumter almost two weeks ago, New York City had rallied together for the Union cause, but the news headlines did not support the city's optimism. Virginia had seceded on April 16. Troops on their way to Washington were attacked in Baltimore. Southern sympathizers had burned several railroad bridges to prevent Union troops from passing from Baltimore to Washington, and the rioting continued. Col. Robert E. Lee officially resigned his commission with the U.S. Army to lead Rebel troops in the Army of Northern Virginia. A Southern attack on the Federal capital was imminent.

And she wasn't doing a thing about it.

Sighing, she reached for the Blue Willow teacup on the walnut table next to her, and breathed in the fragrance of orange and cloves. She picked up today's *New York Times* and froze. Without taking her eyes off the paper, she rattled the cup back on its saucer.

CALL FOR NURSING CANDIDATES BY THE WOMEN'S CENTRAL ASSOCIATION FOR RELIEF

Women have not hitherto been employed in military hospitals as nurses. The nursing is done by soldiers drafted out of the ranks for that purpose. . . .

Nursing in military hospitals is a very different thing from nursing in civil hospitals, and still more from private nursing. The class of patients to be nursed, the character of the under nurses, who will always be men, the social isolation of the position, and the absolute necessity of enforcing military discipline, combine to render nursing in military hospitals a service of peculiar difficulty which can only be accomplished successfully by a select and disciplined band of nurses.

The following regulations for selecting candidates have been drawn up—these regulations being approved by the Hospital Association to whom they were submitted.

Age.—Each candidate must be between the ages of thirty and

forty-five years, exceptions being only made in the case of nurses of valuable experience.

Health.—Only women of strong constitutions will be received; chronic disease, or other physical weakness, disqualifying for service.

Character.—Every applicant must present a written testimonial or introduction from a responsible person who can be seen. Only persons of the highest respectability will be received.

Discipline.—A promise of cordial compliance with all the regulations of the service will be required.

Dress.—A regulation dress will be appointed by the board, which each nurse will be required to adopt, no hoops being allowed in the service.

Number of Candidates.—Ten Bands, or a class of one hundred, will now be enrolled, due notice being given in the daily journals when the lists are full. Should a second corps be needed the call will again be published in the papers.

The Registration Committee meet daily in the Cooper Institute in the Philosophical Rooms, on the fourth floor, between the hours of two and four P.M. They earnestly invite all ladies possessing the necessary qualifications to present themselves for registration.

Those who are fitted by nature and position to engage in this new and difficult work, will render invaluable aid to their country by devoting themselves to its thorough accomplishment.

Signed,
Drs. Elizabeth Blackwell,
Edward Delafield,
J. R. Wood, and
Elisha Harris.

She read the notice again.

Are they crazy?

As the first woman to earn a medical degree in the United States, Dr. Blackwell could be expected to come up with such an outrageous plan to insert women into the men's sphere of work. But there were three other doctors names attached, all highly distinguished men.

Wincing from being in the same position for too long, Charlotte unfolded her legs from under her, sending Dickens to the floor, and began to pace the room, the ribboned hem of her skirt skimming the French rug beneath her feet. Just imagine. Women serving their country so close to the action! She had read all about England's Florence Nightingale and her work in the Crimean War, but never dreamed such a thing would be possible in this country. They must be desperate for help.

But she was too young, according to the requirements printed in the paper. And even if she were old enough, she would be useless as a nurse. She could scarcely stand the mention of blood, let alone the sight of it, ever since her father's death. And besides, her mother, Caroline, would never allow it. Well-bred women had no business getting their hands dirty, she could almost hear her say. It was the reason Caroline had discouraged her from continuing her work at the House of Industry.

Thunder grumbled outside, and the clouds, finally ripped open from beneath, released their cargo. Raindrops fell fat and heavy on the cobblestones, the rooftops, the carriages out for a Sunday ride, like a drummer boy's steady tapping, calling the men to war.

And the women to opportunity.

Like a bolt of lightning, the call to nurse jolted through her. Her eyes darted around the room, surveying the evidence of affluence to which she was accustomed. Crystal and candlesticks. Heavy velvet draperies. A black marble fireplace veined with gold. Tufted chairs the color of fine wine, a cream and gold chaise lounge, claw-footed tables topped with delicately scented orchids. Gilt-edged paintings on the wall, Roman busts on mahogany pedestals. As a nurse, she would surely trade it all in for the most Spartan of lifestyles. Could she still be a true lady without all of the trappings? Without her hoops and jewelry?

Her fingertips resting on the windowsill, Charlotte stared at the bleary world beyond her parlor as her own desires came into focus. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips as energy coursed through her body like the electric charge in the air outside.

Am I crazy?

She had no loved ones fighting in the war—no husband, no brother, no father. So why did she feel compelled to give of herself in such a personal way to strangers?

Charlotte reached into the writing desk for paper and pen so she could sort out her thoughts in front of her. Instead, she pulled out a small black leather Bible—her father’s Bible. It fell open where it was bookmarked, and a single underlined verse jumped out at her. Luke 6:36: “Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.”

Yes, her heavenly Father was merciful, and so had been her earthly father. Until it killed him.

Hugging the well-worn Bible to her chest, she rocked back and forth on the edge of her chair, trying desperately to fill her mind with something—anything—other than the memories that came unbidden now.

She was sixteen years old when the cholera epidemic ravaged New York City. The worst breakouts were in the slums. Most wealthy people were in no danger, as long as they avoided the contaminated areas of the city. Esconded in their brownstone, the Waverly women believed they were safe. Charles Waverly, for whom Charlotte had been named, went to his work as a bank executive on Wall Street at the same time every day, and came straight home. The disease would never touch them if they just stayed away.

Then Charles Waverly didn’t go to work one day. Or the next day, or the next. He couldn’t even get out of bed, but stayed near the bathroom day and night. Diarrhea and vomiting that sometimes lasted hours at a time sucked the life from his body. Dr. Shaw was summoned and pronounced it cholera.

“How can that be?”

He was barely strong enough to answer his wife. “The new hospital for cholera patients on Orange Street, above the tavern. I visited them to read to them, pray with them.”

“You what! But Charles, that’s in Five Points!”

“You know as well as I do that New York wouldn’t stand for a cholera hospital being built anywhere else. Of course it’s in Five Points.”

“Those people led harsh lives. Everyone says the disease is God’s judgment on them; they got what they deserved. Why would you visit them?”

“We don’t get to choose who deserves to hear God’s Word, Caroline, or who deserves comfort in their last days. Aren’t we to love our neighbors? Aren’t these people our neighbors?”

“You called this down upon yourself, then, Charles, and now you have brought it into our home.”

“Take the girls to your aunt Mabel’s house outside the city. You’ll be safe there.”

But Charlotte, her daddy’s girl, refused to leave her father’s side. Someone had to stay with him and care for him. Her mother’s pride would not allow him to go to the cholera hospital along with all the slum’s worst cases. Charlotte remained and followed the doctor’s orders for his care the best she could.

Soon his face was sunken, his teeth and eyes appearing too large for his face. She sat by his side as they bled him, first with leeches, then with a lancet. Time after time, she watched the scarlet ribbon flow out from his veins. The doctor wouldn’t stop until her father fainted. Sometimes the bleeding ended after only ten ounces of blood had been drawn, sometimes it went on until twenty-four.

Nausea plagued her nearly every moment, from the stench of disease, from the sight of his blood escaping his veins, from the palpable fear that all of this misery would not be redeemed, but would end only in death.

Their family friend Caleb Lansing was the only other person who ventured inside the Waverly home during that time, for ever since Caleb’s

mother had died, making him an orphan, Charles had been like a father to him as well. He helped Charlotte clean up after her father, disposed of the soiled sheets, and scrubbed the floors, since the servants had all deserted the house. He brought food for Charlotte and urged her to eat. He insisted she sleep while he took watch with Charles.

Nothing worked.

Charles continued to decline until his bones pushed against his skin like twigs ready to poke through parchment. His skin turned an unearthly shade of blue, and still they bled him. And bled him.

And still Charlotte watched, with nothing to distract her from her morbid vigil save Caleb's regular visits. Her world shrunk down to the size of her father's bedroom and the bathroom that joined, and it was colored with only a few shades of nature's kaleidoscope. Black: the long nights of watching. Yellow: her father's eyes and teeth. Blue: the tint of his skin. And red: the blood the doctor felt sure was the problem, the blood that had to flee his body, the blood that fell in a ragged crimson stream. The blood that stained her hands, her clothes. Her heart.

Until one day, Charles never woke up from his faint. His agony was at an end, and all that was left was his shriveled-up shell.

The next time Caleb arrived, he had to pull Charlotte off her father's disease-ridden body. Gently, tenderly, he led her to the kitchen, heated water on the stove, and sponged clean her face and hands. He scrubbed the blood and filth from beneath her fingernails and brushed her hair. Her hands trembled as she accepted a cup of tea, sloshing it over the cup's edge and onto her hands. She barely felt the burn.

"What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?" Her mind could form no other thought, and like a child, she repeated herself over and over and over.

"You breathe in. Now breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out, Charlie," he said, using her father's pet name for her. "You put a bite of food in your mouth. You chew it up, and you swallow it. Even though you won't be hungry, even though you won't be able to taste a thing. You go to bed when it's dark, you wake up when it's light. You clean yourself up and get

dressed. These are the things that living people do. And you are still alive.”

His words were firm, but tears spilled down his cheeks. “A part of you will be buried with your father. But not all of you has died. You live.”

Charlotte did not feel alive. She was numb to everything but grief. He took her hand. “You live. You live. . . . You live.”

She looked at him and realized he had felt this pain before.

“You have to help me,” she pleaded.

He engulfed her in an embrace then, and the full force of her grief exploded against his shoulder. Racking sobs shook them both. He didn’t let go, even though her dress was stained with a dead man’s filth and she hadn’t taken the time to bathe in days. Still, he held her, stroked her greasy hair as if it was the softest down.

“I miss him,” she choked out.

“I know what he would say to you if he could,” Caleb told her. “This is what he said to me when my own mother died: ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. . . . My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.’”

Finally, Charlotte’s shoulders had stopped heaving. She had fallen asleep on Caleb’s shoulder to the whispered lullaby of God’s Word.

That was twelve years ago.



The room flashed brighter for an instant as lightning cracked the sky, bringing Charlotte back to the present. She focused again on the open Bible on the desk.

Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

By now her tea was cold, but her heart was on fire. Dickens sat like a sphinx on the writing desk in front of her, watching her with unblinking eyes, as if waiting for her decision.

She couldn’t please her mother, but maybe she could please her father. She had to try.