

One

*December 1873
Williamsburg, Virginia*

Ginny Brown started getting nauseous the first week of December. She knew what it could be, but she didn't want it to be. So she chose to ignore it. It could just be a germ she picked up at the academy.

She was attending nursing school at Williamsburg Female Academy. Her husband William drove her there by carriage in the mornings and then picked her up in the late afternoons after he was finished working in the clinic with Dr. Harrison. Some days, when he had to work late, she would start walking the three blocks back to their little cottage at the back of his Aunt Patsy's house, their temporary home for the next two years until she finished school to be a nurse and William finished his doctorate degree by working with the local doctor in clinical practice. Then they would go back to their new home which was being rebuilt in the forest between Wellington Cross and Magnolia Grove Plantations. Called The Forest by its original owners, the family of Thomas Jefferson's wife, it had been damaged, neglected for many years, and once William and Ginny found it, they started dreaming of a future together in it. It was there that they first declared their love for one another and where William presented her a beautiful engagement ring.

This night, on the streets of Williamsburg, the bells rang out at the Bruton Parish Church a few blocks away, and Ginny knew it was getting late. It was almost dark, and the torch lighter had already come by to light fresh pine logs in the high-reaching street baskets for the night. Ginny normally spent time after her last class of the day studying in the library on campus waiting for William, but he was later than usual today, and as the campus needed to lock up, she'd had to leave. She decided to go on and start walking home, taking the shortest route, which unfortunately meant she had to walk past the blacksmith shop where Samuel Bowen worked as an apprentice.

Sam had asked her to marry him last May at the same time she began courting William. She had no desire to court or marry Sam, and after he got violent with her, William came to her rescue, and between him and her step-father, Jonas Chambers, they forced him to leave the plantation. That had been the night of her cotillion ball, which turned out being an engagement ball, for William had proposed to her out by the river just after sunset, and she'd said yes. She'd been smitten with him since she was ten, and once he came back to the plantation after medical school, they fell in love and had a short engagement.

She tied her books up with a buckled leather strap and started walking, her nausea subsided for the moment. As she got closer to the blacksmith shop, she began to get a little nervous. She hardly ever saw Sam any more, but on occasion they would see each other from a distance but not talk. This night, he was outside at the side of the blacksmith shop hammering away. She thought about crossing the street to avoid him, but before she could do so, he looked up and met her eyes. It would be rude now to cross the street. Not that she cared if she was rude to him. He'd slapped her twice and lied to her countless times before, but she made a promise to William that if she were to run into him, she would be cordial. Their reputation as a newly married couple and his future in becoming a respected doctor depended on them both having outstanding reputations and good standing in the community. Even here in Williamsburg, though they would be moving back to Charles City County to start their careers.

And so, she did not cross the street but smiled and waved pleasantly at Sam.

He tipped his hat to her and stared at her as she kept walking. "It's a little late for you to be out walking in the dark, don't you think, *Mrs. Brown?*"

"Hello, Mr. Bowen. How nice to see you. Yes, it is getting late, but Mr. Brown should be coming down the road any time now."

Sam wiped his brow while still holding the hammer. "It's awfully cold out here. Why don't you go inside and visit with mother by the fire and have a cup of tea and some gingerbread – she made some just this afternoon. She has wanted to speak with you for some time now. I'll hail William down for you when he passes by."

Ginny hesitated for a moment. She looked in the upstairs window above the shop where Sam and his mother lived, noting that candles had been lit and placed in the windowsill, a Williamsburg Christmas tradition, along with wreaths decorated with fruit on all the doors. The warmth of being inside was tempting, as she was only wearing a shawl. It had been warm that morning, but the temperature had turned bitterly cold by the time she finished her classes. A nice cup of hot tea sounded wonderful, and her stomach gurgled at the thought of gingerbread.

She didn't exactly want to see Adaline Bowen, however. She'd been avoiding the woman ever since she had admitted to lying for her son in an

effort to move into Magnolia Grove Plantation by getting her to marry Sam. They both told Ginny and her family that Sam owned his own blacksmith shop and that they still lived in their big house that Sam grew up in, when in fact, they'd lost their house and Sam was only an apprentice. It was William who helped them to get out of the boarding house they were living in and to move into the living quarters above the shop. Ginny didn't know what to say to Adaline, and yet William's wish that she be cordial with everyone nagged the back of her mind.

But she didn't think William would want her going inside the blacksmith shop with Sam there on the property. He could be lying again. Adaline could be out, as well as the owner of the shop, Mr. Holmes. If Sam was there alone, she could be putting herself in danger by going inside. No, she would not go in, as she could not trust Sam. As deceitful as he had been, he might not even hail William, as he said he would.

"That sounds nice, but I'm afraid I'll have to pass this time. Give her my regards," Ginny said politely and kept on walking.

She felt his eyes on the back of her head, but she kept going. As she got in front of the hat maker's shop, she heard a carriage turn down the street and turned around to see William in their carriage, pulled by his big black horse, Midnight, and her own tan horse, Buttercup. Her heart leapt, and she felt great relief and warmth at seeing him.

He stopped the carriage beside her and jumped down. She smiled at his handsome face, admiring the dark cropped beard that she talked him into keeping during the winter. After six months of marriage, he still took her breath away.

"Ginny, there you are!" He took her in a quick embrace.

"And here you are!" she said, hugging him tightly, shivering against his warm body.

"My darling, you're cold. I'm sorry to be so late. I was assisting Dr. Harrison in surgery, removing a gallbladder, and it took much longer than anticipated."

"It's all right. You're here now."

He rubbed his hands up and down her arms and then took her hands in his. "Your hands are like ice. Here, I have an early Christmas present for you," he said, his deep blue eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Oh, William, you shouldn't."

"Not another word. This is part of the reason I was late. I had to pick this up on the way over before the store closed."

He reached inside the carriage and pulled out a big long rectangular box.

"William, I don't need another dress," she protested.

"It's not a dress. Though, I'll have you know that if I wanted to buy you another dress, I would," he said, smirking. "I love spoiling you."

She smiled as he handed her the box.

"Open it up." He was practically dancing with anticipation.

“All right.” She pried open the box to reveal a royal blue wool cape with big matching buttons and a high collar. Her eyes lit up. “Oh, William.” She took it completely out of the box. It was long and very luxurious with a silk lining. “It’s beautiful.”

“Put it on.” He helped her wrap it around and button the two buttons in front. “Perfect.”

“It really is.” It was very warm. There were two little slits for her hands, and she slipped her hands through and hugged him again. “Thank you. You’re so thoughtful.”

“When the weather turned cold this afternoon, I knew you didn’t have on anything but a shawl and nothing much warmer than that here in Williamsburg, so I had the idea of getting you an early present. I went straight to your favorite dressmaker’s shop, and sure enough, they had some capes hanging in the window display. I chose this color to match your eyes.”

She wiped a tear creeping out of the corner of one of those very eyes and looked up at him adoringly. “I don’t deserve you.” She reached up to kiss him on the lips, even though they were out on the street where a few other people could see as they strolled by.

He cleared his throat and looked around. As he looked in the direction of the blacksmith shop, he turned around. “Why don’t you go on in the carriage and rest? I need to talk to Sam for a moment about one of Midnight’s shoes.”

She agreed, as she began to feel nauseous once again and stumbled her way in.

“Are you all right, dear?” he asked anxiously.

“Yes, I’m fine. Just lost my footing a little.”

She sat down as he closed the door and walked in the direction of the blacksmith shop. She closed her eyes and willed the nausea to go away, thinking perhaps it was only that she was hungry and thirsty and cold. Yes, that must be it. Or the germ.