

## *Prologue*

*He* tucked the gun into his trousers and headed out into the cold, dark night. The time had come to go get her and bring her back, as he had been told to do. He had made some mistakes in the past, mistakes he would regret for a long time, but this was his chance to make it right. He had to, if he valued his life.

He walked through the black woods that stretched to the plantation house where she lived, down a path he had taken many times before. He looked at his pocket watch; it would take exactly 26 minutes to get there. The woods were quiet, and he skulked around easily on the moonlit night.

Once he reached the plantation grounds, he saw her in the kitchen house by the light of lanterns. He knocked on the back door of the kitchen house and called to her. She didn't answer, so he kicked the door open with his worn dusty boot. She screamed as he raised his gun and drove its butt into her temple. As she fell to the ground, blood oozed from her head. Even in her condition, she was beautiful. He had tried to get her to love him once before but failed. Perhaps now she would. If he protected her from her enemy, she would consider him a savior.

He thrust his gun into his pocket and began to tie her hands in front of her belly with the rope he had brought with him. He then took an old handkerchief and forced it into her mouth, tying it tight in the back above her hair bun. He picked her up and gathered her in his arms and snatched her away into the dark night...

# Chapter One

Chester, Virginia  
June 1866

“Come on, child, wake up. Wake up now, you hear?” I awoke suddenly to a voice I didn’t recognize and felt warm rough hands rubbing my own hand. With my free hand, I rubbed my eyes and opened them, blinking at the dappled sunlight shining on my face.

“There now, that’s the way. Good girl.” Everything was blurry for a moment. The room slowly came into focus, and I looked at a thin black woman who was dressed like a house slave. She smiled at me and squeezed my hand, and then stood up and abruptly left the room before I could say anything. I heard her voice fade away in the distance, “Come quick, Missus Washington. The child is awake!”

I looked around the room and realized that I was in a bedroom I didn’t recognize. I tried to remember where I was, but...nothing. I didn’t even remember what my name was. Panic seized me. I rose up quickly...too quickly. I felt woozy, and my head throbbed terribly, especially on the right side. My arms and back ached like I had fallen out of a tree. I tried to move my legs to get out of bed, but they felt too heavy. *What was wrong with me?* I pushed the blanket aside and looked down at myself. I was wearing a brown and white gingham dress that was soiled with dirt and something reddish-brown. Blood? I didn’t feel like I was wearing underwear or a corset, but I did have on a chemise. My feet were bare, and there were scratches on my hands, nails crusted with dirt. I noticed an old scar on my left wrist. *How did I get that?* I couldn’t remember. I couldn’t remember anything. I didn’t know who I was or what had happened to me.

I looked around to take stock of the room. I was lying in a 4-poster bed of dark wood, and there was a crocheted white blanket spread over me. A high-back chair of dark green cloth and padded arms was to my right beside a small round table with an oil lamp. There was a woven basket and a pair of brown leather lace-up boots in the corner near the chair. The door the black lady had walked through was on the other side of the room across from the bed. There were two windows on either side of the bed, out of which I could see tall trees and a clear blue sky. A collapsible crinoline was leaned against a table with a water pitcher in the corner beside the window to my left.

A moment later, the black lady returned with a pleasant looking older white woman. “My dear child, thank heaven you’re all right. We were so worried about you. How are you feeling?” She walked over to me and touched my forehead. “Oh my, you’re burning up! You poor dear.” She took the blanket off of my legs.

“Where am I?” I asked hoarsely.

The lady walked to one of the windows and raised it up high. “You were picked up three days ago by one of our field workers out near the wheat field,” she said. “You were lying beside the road with no horse or carriage. He said you looked like you were hurt and felt cold, so he brought you up to the house. We cleaned a wound on your head, warmed you up, and you have slept in this bed ever since.”

I touched my head instinctively and felt the wound she had referred to. That must’ve been where the blood on my dress came from.

She picked up a cloth, poured some water from the pitcher into a bowl and dipped the cloth in it, and then wrung out the excess water.

“And you would be?” I asked.

“Oh, I do apologize. Where are my manners?” She sat down on the edge of the bed next to me. “I’m Jane Washington. My husband is Thomas. You are at our farm, called Oakworth, near the town of Chester, Virginia.” She fanned the wet cloth in the air and then folded it and placed it on my forehead.

“Thank you. Did you say Chester? Where is that?”

“It’s southwest of City Point, north of Petersburg, and south of Richmond.” She hesitated. “Our little farm is not much now – after the war. Union soldiers came and burned down every outbuilding we owned. Thomas was wounded in the war, nearby at the Battle of Petersburg, but he came hopping home to this shambles of a house. They took all of our silver, china, even burned my piano for no reason. Oh, it nearly tore me to pieces! But we learned that as long as we did what they wanted – which was mostly just to give them food, cloth for bandages, shelter, and firewood – they left us alone. Mr. Washington came hopping on home, like I said. He was heartbroken. This home has been in his family for nearly 100 years. Since the soldiers ate bread from the wheat out in the field, we were able to keep that, although they did burn 20 acres of it before they left.” She paused for a moment to compose herself. “We lost both our boys in the war. Our youngest was only 14.

“Oh, this is our Miss Cora – don’t know what we’d do without her,” she said, motioning towards the dark-skinned woman. “She and her children drifted here after leaving a plantation in Edenton, North Carolina when the slaves were freed by Lincoln. They weren’t treated too well even after emancipation, and so when her husband was killed, they headed north and ended up here. They live here as servants, and have been helping us build this place back up, but it will be a long, long time, I’m afraid. We lost our own slaves when the Yankees came. They took the men for soldiers, and our house slave died of some disease.”

“So there was a war.” I tried to process this. I couldn’t remember a war, though it did seem vaguely familiar. “Who fought in the war? You mentioned Union soldiers?”

“You don’t remember the war? It was a war between the Southern states and the Northern states, right here in America. Went on for four long years. The South lost,” she said sadly. “It’s been over a year now. We even had to sign a document after the war ended that we pledged allegiance with the union again and that we had freed all our slaves.”

“I see. And do you know who I am? I seem to have trouble remembering anything.”

“You mean you don’t know who you are? Oh, my! You must have really been hit hard on your head when you had your accident. No, my dear, I do not know who you are. There wasn’t a carriage, like I said, but there was something close by.”

Mrs. Washington looked around the room and picked up the basket. “This was the only thing we found along with some dirty, bruised strawberries lying around. I figured this basket had been full of strawberries when you had your accident. See the red stains? Oh, and this fell out of your dress pocket.” She reached over on the table where the water pitcher was and picked up a white handkerchief with purple violets and green ivy embroidered on it along with the initials, “MW”. “You don’t remember anything at all?”

I took the handkerchief from her and inspected it but could not remember what “MW” stood for or where it had come from. I looked at the basket and tried to imagine strawberries in them. Suddenly I remembered being hit in the head with a blunt object, falling out of a carriage down to the ground, pain, and hearing horses whinnying. “I do remember something...getting hit in the head, falling from a carriage, and then everything went black.” I closed my eyes. My head was still throbbing. I panicked again, feeling like I was supposed to do something important. “I have to...” but couldn’t remember what. “I have to...do something. I have to be somewhere.” I tried to get out of bed, but Mrs. Washington laid her hand on my arm.

“Now, now. You just rest. You’ve had a hard time.” She took the wet cloth from my forehead and dipped it back into the water again. She urged me to lie back down and rest and placed the cloth on my brow again. “Don’t worry, child. I’m sure you’ll get your memory back in no time. No time at all. In the meantime, you need to rest so your body and mind can heal.”

*A* fortnight later, I still didn’t remember anything, nor did I remember what was so important I felt I was supposed to do. I was able to walk around, my legs having only been bruised and not broken, thankfully. A country doctor came to check me out the week prior. My pounding headaches were lessening every day. We didn’t know how old I was, but the doctor assumed my age to be around 20. He had offered a more private examination to determine whether or not I had been married or had borne any children, but I refused

that, for now. It didn't seem reasonable that if I'd been married or had a child, I would not remember them. Therefore, I must not have.

Miss Jane gave me the name Melinda Woods, which fit with the "MW" on the embroidered handkerchief. She named me Melinda because Miss Jane had always liked that name, had always wanted a daughter after having two sons. She named my last name Woods because I had been found near the woods. She had offered her own last name of Washington, but I respectfully declined for the time-being, hoping I would remember soon what "MW" really stood for.

Miss Jane took me into the town of Chester where a man from the marketplace sketched my face on a piece of parchment paper. He nailed the sketch up on a post, in case anyone might know my identity, and wrote the address to Oakworth below the sketch. We also went by the Richmond and Petersburg Railroad stations in Richmond, Chester, and Pocahontas to put up notices there, as well as in the town of City Point where we put a sketch of me at the marketplace, and finally down in Colonial Heights, near Petersburg.

Summer passed into fall, with no word from anyone who knew me or where I came from. My memory was no better. I was starting to wonder if I would ever remember. I filled my time by working out in the fields with the Washingtons and Cora's family – two girls, Hetty and Lidia, and her son, Lionel, who was the 15-year-old boy who found me. Cora's husband Eli had been killed by a runaway Confederate soldier who came by the plantation in Edenton, North Carolina early in the war, looking for shelter. He'd had no sympathy or care for slaves, and hung Eli one night in a drunken stupor, after getting into some corn whiskey from the cellar. Cora and her children were not treated too kindly there after Eli was killed. More labor was piled on top of them. Cora was expected to work out in the fields and also to keep the house and cook the meals. Her heart nearly failed her from all the exertion, and she lost a lot of weight. And so after Emancipation, they snuck out one night and stumbled upon Oakworth.

It was hard work trying to rebuild the farm, but we did what we had to in order to survive. Every now and then, I would travel into the town of Chester with bags of wheat to sell in the marketplace, accompanied by one of Cora's children. I had apparently learned to drive a carriage in my past, and so I taught the children how to drive, as well. On those trips, I looked at the homes along the way, hoping to see something familiar but instead noticing how many of the homes had been heavily damaged from the war. Some had been burned, barely left standing, hollowed inside with nothing but bricks left. Others not made of bricks were just a pile of rubble, looking like a cyclone had hit them, with only brick fireplaces standing. Many farmers and big plantation owners couldn't afford to stay in their homes, made nothing out of the worn-out land, and were forced to leave. Some of the richest plantation owners were forced to live in poverty.

On a cool October morning, I was in the marketplace at City Point, trading wheat for some sugar, coffee and other needed items, accompanied by Lionel. As we were walking back to the Washingtons' carriage and packing up our merchandise, I was startled by a man's voice. "Madeline?"

I turned around to see an attractive man with blonde hair that hung in soft layers to his shoulders and big blue eyes. He was wearing a brown suit and bowtie with a brown stovepipe hat on his head, which he took off and held in his hands. I wondered who he was and if he knew me.

"It *is* you," he said.

"Excuse me? Do you know who I am?" I asked him.

"Of course I know who you are. Don't you remember me?" he asked. His smile revealed yellow teeth, stained probably from either coffee or tobacco, or both. His smile turned to a confused frown.

"No, I'm afraid not." I explained that I had lost my memory.

"You lost your memory?" He still wore a frown, but then a big smile came over his face. He touched my arm with his hand, causing me to jerk back. I didn't care if he knew me or not, he wasn't going to lay a hand on me just yet.

"Darlin' it's me, Jefferson. Your betrothed."