

# *Chapter One*

*Charles City, Virginia  
Adams House  
July 1895*

Amanda Adams walked out onto the front porch wearing her best blue dress with leg o' mutton sleeves and waited for guests to arrive. She was having a birthday party and had invited a few of her family and friends to attend that day.

Her actual birthday was in June, but she had delayed a party so that her cousin Jason could have a proper honeymoon with his new wife, Belle Wellington. Belle had worked at the boarding house where the three of them lived and took care of Adams House. Most guests were just passing through town, but one guest had been a particular nuisance and caused a lot of trouble to all three of them at the boarding house.

Mister Wade Brewster aka Wayne Trueman, Jr., had forcibly raped Amanda back in February when he first came to visit the boarding house. He'd been handsome and charming, and she'd made a terrible mistake. She had ended up being with child and called on a doctor in Richmond to try and get rid of the baby. She didn't think she could bear looking at a baby every day who had been the result of such a brutal act of violence and violation. She found a Doctor Gardner, and he'd come to the boarding house in May to perform the surgery.

However, Mister Brewster had returned, found out what she was doing, and tried to stop it. Doctor Gardner ended up having a heart attack and died before completing the surgery, before sewing her up. She'd bled a lot and the next day, Doctor William Brown and his wife Ginny had taken over her care. She'd taken a long time to heal, both physically and emotionally, and had eventually moved out to the country to stay at her Aunt Paisley's plantation for a while. Her savior had been Bertie.

Albert Wellington, whom everyone called Bertie, had come to visit her at Carter Manor on a regular basis, and the two of them started taking walks outside on the plantation. First they walked in the garden, then the walks got longer and they'd walked around some of the crops and even over into the woods a little. He was the sweetest man she'd ever met, and he knew how to make her laugh. He seemed to care a great deal about her.

Truth be told, she was in love with him. The day he saved her and his sister, Belle, from Mister Brewster, by shooting him after he'd shot Belle in the stomach, was the day she realized she loved Bertie. He'd sacrificed his life, which he did quite often being deputy of Charles City, but she knew he would do it for her at any given moment, should the need arise. He'd told her so on one of their walks. That he would do anything for her to prove to her that there were good men still left in this town.

Amanda had felt guilty about Belle getting shot and that it was her fault since she was the one who had gotten involved with Mister Brewster. It took her a while to forgive herself, even though Belle said she didn't blame her at all. She'd insisted that since Mister Brewster had lived in the boarding house when he was growing up, he would've been back anyway, whether Amanda had taken up with him or not. Amanda knew that was true, but it didn't help assuage her guilt sometimes.

She also felt guilt for getting rid of the baby. She had been the cause of an innocent life being terminated. Essentially, she had committed murder. Not actually with her own hands, but it was still her fault. She was the one who'd asked Doctor Gardner to perform the surgery that terminated the baby's life.

She felt just awful and dreaded that she might not ever have another baby again, either as a result of the procedure or as punishment.

She tried most days not to think any of those thoughts and quickly pushed them out of her head as she straightened up her dress. It was her best dress, one she had gotten at Belle's sister Lillie's shop. She first wore it to the Wellington's Spring Ball last year. She hadn't been able to go this year because of all the mess with Mister Brewster. She was happy she could wear it now. She'd sent it out to the lady who does their laundry, and it had just barely arrived at the boarding house in time – that very morning!

She rested a hand on one of the white porch columns and looked around the town until her eyes paused at the Sheriff's Office where Bertie worked and then the small house down the street from it where he lived. He said he would ask for the whole day off so he could attend the party. She couldn't wait to see him. And dance with him.

"Amanda, everything is nearly ready," Belle said behind her.

Amanda turned around as Belle walked out onto the porch. She looked so much happier since she'd married Jason. Amanda was happy for them both but felt a twinge of jealousy. She wished she could feel so completely happy. She thought she just might be able to, someday. Maybe with Bertie.

"Wonderful," Amanda said. "Thank you so much for all your hard work."

Belle had cooked all the food for the party, including a ham, a large roast turkey, a round of beef, and scalloped oysters. Also served would be four kinds of finger sandwiches – cucumber, egg salad, ham and goat's cheese, and tomato-and-basil – as well as fresh vegetables from the garden, tomatoes, cucumbers, and carrots, which would be served alongside peach cobbler, ice-cream, and a three-layer cake made with strawberry jam inside the layers.

When Belle first started working for Amanda, she was tasked with cleaning the rooms, cooking, checking people in and showing them to their rooms. After Belle married, she recuperated from her gunshot wound and had only recently started cooking again as her sole duty. Amanda was checking people in, and another lady, Malynn, was cleaning the house.

Malynn Selman had been involved with Mister Brewster out in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and had followed him to Virginia just before his tumultuous demise. She had also become impregnated by Mister Brewster and had a baby girl named Mabel who was now two months old. Amanda marveled at the woman's tenacity and ability to make the long arduous journey all the way from Colorado after such a short period of time since birthing a baby. Malynn had helped Bertie trap Mister Brewster and decided to stay in Charles City after the incident. She said she wanted a quieter place to live and raise her baby.

"You're welcome, Amanda," Belle said, stirring Amanda from her thoughts. "It's the least I could do. Jason helped me before he left. Is he back with Aunt Paisley yet?"

Jason had driven a carriage to go and fetch Amanda's aunt, as she was planning to spend a week at the boarding house. Amanda had insisted that she stay in her own room, which was located on the second – main – floor of the house near the check-in area. That room had been Belle's room at first, but after Amanda's procedure and Doctor Gardner's subsequent death, Amanda wanted no further part of the room she used to occupy with all its bad memories, so she had switched rooms with Belle. When she moved back from Aunt Paisley's while Belle was recuperating, she had taken the same room on the second floor, still not ready to face her ghosts in the other room on the bottom floor.

"No, not yet, but I expect them anytime," Amanda said.

"All right. Send Jason to the kitchen when he arrives. I need to check on the beef."

"I'll be sure and tell him. When your brother gets here, I'll have him help carry the food up." The food was going to be served in the dining room on the second floor, while the kitchen was on the first floor.

After Belle went inside, Amanda turned around and saw Bertie walking her way. She broke out into a big smile and pushed a loose strand of her copper-colored hair behind her ear.

Their eyes met, and he began smiling, too.

“Amanda, you’re breathtaking,” he said upon reaching the top step of the porch. He took her hands in his, leaned in, and kissed her temple.

She blushed a shade that competed with the color of her hair. “Thank you, Bertie. You look very nice yourself.” She was used to seeing him in his deputy uniform, though he had worn a rugged Norfolk jacket or cutaway morning coat on many occasions when he came to visit her. This time, he wore a more formal dark dinner jacket with a shawl collar over a light gray waistcoat, white shirt, and a dark tie. “You didn’t have to get so dressed up for the party. It’s not a big to-do, just a nice quiet little party.”

“I know, but you weren’t able to attend my family’s party in the spring, so I wanted to look nice when I dance with you.”

She smiled and her stomach fluttered a little bit at the thought of dancing with him. “I can’t wait, Bertie.” She straightened his collar, just wanting to touch him somewhere.

He closed his eyes briefly and took her hand in his. When he opened his eyes, he looked troubled.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“No, I, uh, no, nothing at all.” He seemed nervous all of a sudden.

A carriage pulled up then – it was Jason and Aunt Paisley. After him was the Wellington carriage which held Bertie’s parents, and another carriage behind that which belonged to Bertie’s brother, Godfrey.

Amanda felt herself getting nervous at the thought of mingling with Bertie’s family because of how close she felt to him now. She barely knew his family at all, had only met his mother once. It was time she got to know them.

It was time for the party to begin.

*A*n hour later, the party was in full swing. A string band played inside in the parlor, and with the windows open, the music could be heard inside as well as outside on the wraparound porch. Food was spread out in the dining room at the back of the house in a room with red walls, white trim, and windows on three sides, which afforded views of the garden and cottage out back. Jason and Belle were the perfect hosts, making sure the food and drink were plentiful.

Bertie mingled with Amanda as well as his family who were there – his parents, his older brother Godfrey and his wife Cecilia, and his three sisters – Lillie, Lizzie, and Belle – along with spouses Ian and Jason. Lizzie was visiting from Boston and would be going back home the following morning. She was found out to not actually be a blood relation to the Wellingtons, but he still considered her a sister. Her husband, Josiah, was actually the one who was a Wellington, and even though they were nearly the same age, Josiah was his uncle. He didn’t travel down for this visit, as Lizzie wanted to stay for four weeks and Josiah could not be away from his occupation as a banker for that length of time.

The only other people present were Amanda and her small family – her cousin Jason and her Aunt Paisley. She had lost her parents in an accident three years ago and Bertie knew she missed them a lot, especially her mother. Especially on her birthday. That was one of the reasons he decided to propose marriage to her at her birthday celebration, so that she would have a new memory to think about and something happy to celebrate instead of feeling sad.

He was nervous and tongue-tied around her. He’d been engaged before, had been in love before, but the woman had broken the engagement and he swore off women for many years. Until he met Amanda. In all his twenty-six years, he had never met a more formidable and yet vulnerable woman before. He loved her

for her sweetness, her determination, and her courage. She'd been through a lot and he wanted to take care of her, more than anything, for the rest of his life.

She was on the back side of the wraparound porch looking over the garden when he walked up behind her. "Amanda, there you are."

She turned quickly, looking startled.

"Hey, Bertie. I was just looking out over the garden...thinking about my mother."

"Oh. Would you rather be alone?" Although he thought he would die if he put off proposing to her any longer.

She looked at him and smiled. "No, I'm glad you're here. We haven't danced yet."

"Oh, yes. Dancing. Could we, uh, talk for a minute first?" he asked her.

"Of course. What did you want to talk about?"

Bertie cleared his throat and fumbled inside his pockets for the ring he was going to give her. He found it and kept his hand on it for the moment until he worked up the courage to present it. "Would you take a walk with me in the garden?"

"Now?" she asked. "Can we not talk here where we can still hear the nice music?"

"We can most likely still hear it out there," he said. "And then we will dance after, um, after we walk in the garden. It'll only take a moment, I promise."

He took her hand in his and kissed it, hoping she would comply. He was so nervous that she would decline his proposal.

"All right," she agreed. "A little walk and talk, and then we'll dance."

"Yes."

He followed her around to the back of the porch, past the dining room windows where Bertie knew others would be watching. He glanced inside and saw Jason looking his way. He smiled broadly and gave him a thumbs-up. Bertie quickly looked away and nearly stumbled as he followed Amanda down the outside stairs leading towards the garden and stables. When they got to the last bottom step, he placed his hand on the small of her back and pointed towards the cottage and they walked behind it where there was a black wrought iron bench. This was a secluded spot away from view of the house, and it overlooked a tall group of sunflowers and the woods beyond. They walked over to the bench and he motioned for her to sit down on it while he kept standing. She looked at up him curiously, and he looked around them nervously, not wanting an audience for this.

"What is it, Bertie?" she asked him. "Just tell me."

He reached into his pocket again and pulled the ring out, not showing it to her yet. He might as well get this over with before he exploded. He dropped down onto one knee and Amanda looked stricken. Did she know what he was going to ask? Why didn't she look happy?

"Amanda," he squeaked and cleared his throat again.

"Yes?" she whispered.

He took one of her hands in his and with the other he presented her with a silver-banded ring with a square-shaped small diamond on the top. It was brand new; he'd ordered it at the mercantile a month ago.

Amanda gasped.

"I know this is sudden," he said, licking his lips. "We've only known each other a short time, but I...I love you and I want to spend the rest of my days with you. Would you...will you marry me?"

She closed her eyes, looking like she wanted to cry. Why was she sad? "Oh, Bertie. I would love to, but..."

He felt like he'd been slapped. "But what?" he whispered. "Is it too soon after...your ordeal?" He cleared his throat again and spoke louder. "Because I'll wait as long as you want to. We can have a long engagement."

She brushed tears back with her free hand. "It's not that, Bertie. I don't...well, it is partly because of that. I'm not good for you, Bertie. I'm not...pure."

His jaw dropped momentarily and then he recovered himself. "You think I don't know that? I know what procedure you had done and how you got that way. I'm not naïve."

"I know you're not, but I'm just not good enough for you, Bertie. You deserve better."

"Not good enough? Amanda, how could you think that? You are a beautiful woman who cares about other people. You have gone through many challenges in your short life and yet you smile and wear a happy face. And you have made me happy in the short time I have known you. You absolutely *are* good enough for me. You're all I'll ever want."

"You have made me happy, too, Bertie, but I hide my feelings a lot. I...I have a lot of burdens in here," she said, putting her hand over her heart. "A lot of sadness."

"I know, but I can change all of that. Haven't I made you happy at all in these past few months? Don't you care about me?"

She closed her eyes and sniffed, opened them and said shyly, "Yes, I have come to love you dearly, and yes, you have lightened my burdens a lot, but I still don't feel that I deserve you."

"Amanda. No marriage is perfect. Even my own parents had difficulties. My father took another wife when my mother had lost her memory for a year and couldn't be found. I'm not perfect either and I'm not looking for perfection...just love. And I love you like no other. Won't you please be my wife? We'll lighten each other's loads and fill our lives with love. I'd like no one but you to share my life with."

She looked at him, then at the ring, and then back at him. "Are you sure your family will approve?"

He could tell she still felt down on herself for her past mistakes.

"They already like you, and once they find out that I love you and want to marry you, they're going to love you, too. Belle already does."

"What if I can't have any more children? You know what I did to Brewster's baby." She looked down again and he saw tears in her eyes again, which she tried to hide.

"I don't care. We don't have to have any children. It won't change my love for you."

She glanced up at him under her long lashes, her green eyes making his insides melt.

"Please?" he whispered. "Please say yes. I'll treat you better than any man ever has before."

She finally smiled. "Yes," she whispered.

"What's that?" he asked, grinning happily.

She smiled even more. "Yes," she said louder.

He pulled her into a quick hug, released her quickly, and then stood up. "Thank God! My knee is killing me, and I didn't know how much longer I could stay on it like that."

Amanda laughed, making him so happy. He pulled her up against him. "Thank you," he whispered. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Bertie."

He placed the ring on her left third finger and then leaned down and kissed her sweet lips.