

Chapter I

“**A**ndy!”
Even as I screamed, I could tell he was oblivious to all but the splendor of prancing horses, the roar of the crowd, and the pounding of marching feet.

As the lead horse reared skyward, I flung myself into its path and grabbed my youngest son by the shoulders, shoving him blindly away from the flailing hooves.

On the wooden sidewalk again with one hand clutching Andy’s arm, I felt the color rising in my face, conscious of many eyes upon me, and heads wagging in disapproval.

Then the parade was marching past, and all

attention was focused on what was happening before us. I lifted my head, searching—searching for the only face that mattered. *Oh, David . . . David. Do you have to go?*

“Victory! Victory!” The whole town seemed to have gone wild. The cry was picked up on both sides of the street, and the chant grew and swelled around me. Bands played, handkerchiefs waved frantically from the cheering crowd; little boys raced alongside the columns of marching feet. These were local men, Staunton’s own flesh and blood!

I swallowed hard. Was everyone naive? Didn’t they know many of these soldiers, polished though they were, would probably never see their families again?

And then I saw him . . . how I wanted to run to him. But I dared not waver. We had already said our good-byes. He must remember me as I now tried to appear—smiling and strong, as convinced as everyone else that with men of this caliber, a speedy victory was certain.

For months trainloads of men had been arriving from all over the South. The lights from their campfires on the surrounding hills had given a glow to hot summer nights, and by day their white tents could be seen scattered thickly over the countryside.

Our town of Staunton had become a hub of sorts—a gathering place for men preparing for an invasion.¹ Not an invasion by a foreign nation determined to bring us to our knees, but an invasion from within, from our own countrymen.

I kept smiling blindly, waving until the last of the column had turned the corner and the spectators were surging into the street behind them. Then I

turned the opposite way toward home.

A Negro pushing a cart and two men in a farm wagon approached us. I stopped to let them pass, reaching out a steadying hand as the panting boys caught up with me.

“Mommy, didn’t Papa look splendid?” Davie’s head, thrown back, was flushed and laughing, his dark hair damp with sweat.

Andy pulled his chubby fingers from his brother’s grasp and tugged at my skirt. His eyes sparkled. “Didn’t he, Mommy?”

I forced a smile. “Yes, boys, he did.” I turned my eyes from their eager gaze, letting my bonnet slide back along my neck. The slight breeze felt good against my throbbing forehead.

Splendid? Yes, everyone would have pronounced him a handsome sight—crisp, new uniform, boots polished to a shine, new musket held stiffly erect as he marched past. Yet in my heart, I knew otherwise. He looked worn and grim, his eyes haggard, not the clear gray I knew.

The heat had left the hair on my forehead limp and disordered, and I shoved it roughly back. Squinting against the bright September sun, I quickened my step, pulling Andy along. I had to get away—away from the frantic, milling crowds that had thronged Staunton’s dusty streets the entire afternoon. I needed to be alone.

In the growing shadows of evening, a killdeer burst into flight, skimming low overhead, its plaintive call trailing after it. The boys stopped kicking up dust to watch. “Let’s catch it!” Davie bounded forward. “Look, it’s landed already.”

The bird poised in mid-step, its colors blending

with the shriveled grasses of the field, then a sudden thrust of wings lifted it again. It caught Davie off guard, and he craned his neck to watch it wheel gracefully against the brilliant blue overhead.

I waited a bit impatiently. The smell of fall was unmistakable, the scent of tangy goldenrod and aster came to me from the roadside along with the sharp muskiness of tangled sumac thickets. Greenbrier stems, with leaves turned red, ran helter-skelter like streaks of blood across the grass. I shuddered and began walking again. Why must I think of blood just now?

The killdeer called once more, and was joined by a second bird, then a third. The boys stood hand-in-hand, watching as the birds rose higher, higher, then dipped out of sight in the direction of the creek.

The clatter of horses' hooves pulled their attention back to the road, and they crowded together, waving, as a stream of buggies swept by. The loud laughter and talking could be heard even from a distance.

"Come, boys, the parade must be over. We need to hurry now." I took them by the hand and set a quick pace along the pike.

Ten minutes of brisk walking took us past my parents' farm and within sight of home. Set on a slight rise of ground on the west side of the thoroughfare, the small frame dwelling was dwarfed by several large maples in the front lawn. A split rail fence, aged to a mellow gray, ran up the field's edge and out of sight to the woods. The barn stood on its stone foundation to one side in the back. A small blacksmith shop had been erected next to it.

The silence of the house reached out to us,

causing the boys' lively chatter to falter.

"Mommy, when will Papa come home?"

"I don't know, Davie. We hope it won't be long."

We stepped onto the lean-to porch. Reaching over the jumble of garden tools, I lifted a basket off its nail. "We didn't gather the eggs before we left this morning. Would you and Andy like to do that? John and Peter will be here before long to start chores."

I followed them to the porch edge and lifted my face toward the mountains thrusting their multicolor ridges into the glow of evening. My lips trembled. What had that stubble-faced man, forced against me in the press of the crowd muttered to himself under cover of the noise and confusion?

"Food for gun powder, that's what they are!" he had spat disgustedly, tobacco juice dribbling off his chin and splattering the back of my dress.

I sank down on the step, shuddering as I pulled the folds of my skirt around to brush again at the stain. It seemed I could still feel David's last deep look . . . the quick kiss . . . the touch of his hand.

"You know I don't want to go, Ellen." His face had been hollow-eyed, his hand firm on my shoulder. "If there were any other choice, I wouldn't be doing this to you. If I return, we'll never separate again." His grip had tightened until it hurt.

He turned away, and his voice had become husky. "Maybe Bernice will be kinder to you if I'm gone. At least my going will keep from disgracing your family name."

There was a trace of bitterness in his words, and I flinched.

"I'm sorry, Ellen. I didn't mean to hurt you. I've caused you enough pain already."