

Chapter 1

October 17, 1908

Mingo County, West Virginia

Rain beaded on the church windows which did little to keep out the cold. The pews overflowed in a sea of black. Durwood dug deep in his pockets and hunched. He wanted to stamp, but his feet didn't reach the floor. Though it was cold enough to see the preacher's breath, sweat beaded the man's brow. Every few minutes, the preacher paused to wipe his forehead and catch his breath. What was he so worked up about? It was Durwood's mother who had crossed over the Jordan, not his.

“Every day in heaven, sitting at the foot of our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ, is more glorious than the most beautiful day you can imagine on this here planet Earth.” The spittle that clung to the preacher's lip threatened to untether.

Was Ma already in paradise? Durwood hoped the preacher was right. Ma hated dreary days worse than a toothache. A beach at sunset was her heaven.

Durwood tried to conjure a beach. The closest he ever came was the picture postcard of Virginia Beach Ma kept in her Bible. She promised to take him and Bascom one day. They would make sandcastles and swim in the ocean. Durwood didn't care if he never saw the ocean if it meant he could have Ma back.

“Can I get an Amen?”

“Amen, brother!” Cousin Cesco sat nearby.

“Can I get an Amen?”

Overcome by the Spirit, several mourners leapt to their feet to join Cesco in a chorus of Amens. Folks lined the back wall and sides of the church, more than when the Pentecostal Revival packed the house in June.

Durwood and Bascom crowded their father in the first pew, reserved for the mine superintendent's family on Sundays. Pa said it would be alright for them to sit here today. Durwood was surprised to find this pew as rough and the back as hard as the ones in the rear that he shared with Bascom and Ma on Sunday mornings and during Wednesday night Bible study.

Once, when Bascom complained after jerking a splinter, Ma responded, "We come to church to comfort our souls, not our backsides."

"It would be a sight easier for my soul to find comfort if my bottom didn't feel like a pin cushion."

Though serious about her soul, Ma hadn't been able to suppress a smile.

Pa wore a black suit with a string tie. He'd buttoned a fresh collar and cuffs on his white dress shirt. Durwood couldn't recall seeing him in a suit before. Pa said he'd worn it twice - when he married Ma and when they buried Durwood's older sister five years earlier. That also happened to be the last time Pa set foot in church. Try as he might, Durwood couldn't remember Georgie. He was only three when she died shy of her sixth birthday. Pa sat straight and clasped his hands, rough and knobby as tree roots. Durwood nestled against his arm, hoping Pa would pull him close.

Working harder than a steam engine pulling coal, the preacher led the congregation in prayer.
"Our Father, who art in heaven..."

"Come on, son."

Durwood opened his eyes to the church folk standing and staring. He wished everybody would stop looking at him the same, pitiful way. Been that way ever since Ma took to the bed a few months back. The preacher waited by their pew to usher them out.

"Where we going?"

"Outside to say goodbye to your Ma."

Men from Pa's shift lifted the rough-hewn pine casket off the trusses. Heads bowed, they headed toward the door. The newspaper Durwood had stuffed into his shoes for warmth crinkled as he followed Bascom down the aisle. Over half the folks were either Matneys or Powers - his Daddy's kin. Ma had said he would meet her side of the family when they went to the beach.

In the last pew, a short, erect woman Durwood had never seen nodded like she knew him. Her smooth, ivory complexion stood out in a sea of weathered, sallow faces. Transfixed, Durwood fell off the pace. Her black dress shimmered unlike the shapeless, drab cotton and burlap of the others. Dark buttons anchored a high collar under a ring of lace. The beads of her necklace matched the buttons. Instead of a coat, a jet-black cape draped her shoulders. Even her hat, wide-brimmed with a feather, stuck out like a sore thumb. Ma wore a hat to church, but this was the first he ever saw with a feather. It seemed silly, but it looked good on her. Durwood knew every bird in the southern West Virginia mountains, but try as he might he could not place the big, wispy green one. The woman's gaze held his eyes in an odd way, as if she knew a secret.

Next to her stood a tall man in an ebony overcoat. Beneath the open coat, he wore a black, three-piece suit and necktie. His dark hair glistened with pomade. Except for a neatly-trimmed moustache, his face was supple, like a barber had shaved it that morning. Holding a Fedora, his hands were smooth, nails clean. Durwood couldn't place these folks but they weren't from Mingo County.

Pa nudged his back. Durwood began moving again as the ushers opened the doors for the pallbearers. Cold air chilled his face.

Durwood pulled on his wool cap and tugged at his collar. Trudging to the cemetery on the hill overlooking the single-room church, rain tickled the back of his neck. The trees on the ridge had shed their leaves weeks before, signaling another early winter on the mountain. Everyone gathered around the plot. The pallbearers placed Ma's casket in the freshly-dug hole, next to where Georgie lay. The flowers Ma placed the last time she was strong enough to mount the hill lay undisturbed; twine still held fast the dried stems.

“Lord God almighty, we commend this soul to your heavenly kingdom. May she rejoice in your presence and be reunited with her precious child. We ask that you provide strength and comfort to those she leaves behind. Amen.”

The pallbearers shoveled dirt onto the casket when the preacher intoned, “Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust.” The first few shovelfuls hit with a dull thud until dirt obscured the casket. When the shoveling stopped, the preacher led the mourners in prayer. At the last amen, Tillie McBride, Ma’s best friend, sang “Amazing Grace.” Her haunting voice matched the bleak mountainside. As the last note faded, the preacher thanked everyone for coming and asked them to pray for the family.

Who was going to cook? Help with his lessons and tuck him in? Who was there to hug now? When Durwood had asked if it was true, like folks said, that the good Lord needed Ma more than they did, Pa didn’t hesitate: “If that’s the case, son, then the good Lord ain’t paying close enough attention.”

The crowd dwindled. Folks shared their condolences, then headed home to their own troubles. Durwood looked for the handsome couple, disappointed that only family, the preacher and a couple of deacons remained.

“Uncle Clem, me and Maude come to pay our respects. Aunt Hope was a fine woman.” “Thank you kindly, Cesco.”

“If they’s anything we can do, just say the word.”

“I reckon we’ll make do.”

Cesco bent to hug Durwood and Bascom. “Family pulls together in times of trouble. Don’t you boys forget that.”

“Clem, unless you or the boys need me, I reckon I’ll be takin’ my leave.”

“Much obliged, Preacher. Hope would have appreciated your kind words.”

“She was a woman of faith. I hope we’ll see you back in church with the boys real soon.”

“Don’t take no offense, but the next time you see me in church I’ll be wearing a pine box. When that day comes, I’m afraid your job will be a sight harder than today. Come on, boys, there’s somebody in the church I need to see to.”

Pa headed downhill to the weathered, clapboard church. Durwood and Bascom shook the preacher’s hand and followed. Durwood tugged Bascom’s sleeve.

“Did you see them fancy folks in the back of the church?”

“Sure did. Who do you think they was?”

“Don’t know, but they was all spiffed up. That lady was awful pretty.”

“Dang straight. But the man looked like a dandy. That hat must’ve been the heaviest thing them hands ever lifted.”

Pa climbed the steep steps to hold open the splintered, white-washed doors for Durwood and Bascom. The church stood empty except for the fancy couple. They had not moved from the last pew.

“Hello, Grace. Walker.”

“I’m glad you sent word, Clem.”

“Just done like I promised Hope.”

“I can’t believe she’s gone. How are you all getting along?”

“Everyone has took real good care of us. Ain’t nothing like death or threat of a strike to bring folks on the mountain together.”

How did Pa know these people?

“Boys, this here’s your Ma’s cousin, Grace. And her husband, Walker. They come all the way from Richmond, Virginia, to pay their respects.”

Grace extended her hand. “You must be Bascom. By the look of things, you’ll be taller than your father in no time. How old are you?”

“Fourteen next week, ma’am.”

“I hear you’re already working in the mines with your father.”

“That’s right.”

“Must be hard work.”

“It ain’t so bad.”

“Let me guess. Durwood?” Grace knelt close enough that her sweet breath warmed his cheeks.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Your mother told me all about you. You’re in second grade, right?”

Durwood nodded as Pa stepped forward.

“I need to talk with these folks a bit. You two take a seat.”

Taking Durwood’s hand, Bascom returned to the first pew, their footsteps amplified in the empty church.

“What do you suppose they’s talking about, Bascom?”

“Don’t know. But they don’t want us hearing.”

“Maybe they’s planning a trip to the beach.”

Pa removed from his pocket a wad of cash, more money than Durwood had ever seen. He held out his hand, but Walker refused. Pa turned to Grace. She shook her head and said something. Pa grabbed Walker’s lapel, stuffed the cash in his breast pocket and turned toward the window.

“What do you think that was about, Bascom?”

“Dang if I know. But Pa done give away all our money.”

“Boys, did you know I grew up with your mother in Richmond?” Grace asked as she walked down the aisle. “We were like sisters.”

Durwood nodded. “She said you and her was like two peas in a pod.”

“What else did she tell you?”

“Y’all played in the river during the summer and went to the beach once.”

“That’s right. Your mother loved the beach best of all. Never stopped talking about it.

Durwood, how would you like to come back to Richmond and stay with us? We could show you where your mother grew up.”

Walker moved down the aisle. "And take you to the beach."

Pa stared out the window toward the cemetery. Why wasn't Bascom speaking up? After all, he was the one who had been pining to see the ocean.

"That would be real nice, but I reckon I best stay put. Pa and Bascom will be needing me around here."

Grace said, "Your father thinks it would be a good idea if you came back to Richmond with us."

"That the gospel, Pa?"

Pa dabbed his handkerchief to his nose. Still gazing out the window, he cleared his throat. "That's right, son. Now that Bascom's working in the mines full time, there ain't nobody to care for you. Grace and Walker have a real nice home in Richmond. He's got a good job with the railroad."

"I don't want to go, Pa. I don't need looking after. And I can do Ma's chores."

"It's what your mother wanted. Why don't you read this to him, Clem?" Grace extended an envelope.

"You read it. My eyes ain't so good. Too much time underground."

Grace read the letter. Durwood was to go to Richmond where Grace could look after him and see to it that he kept up his schooling. She was trusting Grace to raise her son in a good, Christian home.

"Like Grace said, your Ma and I discussed it before she passed."

"What about Bascom? He needs lookin' after too."

"Bascom's almost fourteen."

Grace knelt again. She smiled like Ma before the cancer hollowed her cheeks, only prettier. "What do you say, Durwood?"

"Give it a try, son. Just 'til things settle down around here."

"Where would I sleep?"

"You'd have your own bedroom, of course," Grace said.

Bascom sat stone-faced.

"Can Bascom and Pa come visit?"

“Of course.”

“I reckon it won’t hurt none ‘til things settle down.”

Grace grasped Walker’s hand. Bascom sprung to his feet. “Just like that! You’re gonna up and quit your kin?”

Pa turned from the window. “He ain’t quitting us. He’s just accepting a kind offer to help us out for the time being, like your Ma wanted.”

“It ain’t like that, Bascom. Besides, you’ll have a bed to yourself and my helping of supper.”

“I don’t want your dang supper.” Bascom ran from the church.

Grace turned to Clem. “We didn’t mean to upset him, Clem.”

“He’s just missing his Ma, is all. When are you planning on heading back?”

“On the morning train, if that suits you.”

“We’ll meet you at the station in the morning. Know the way back to town?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Come on, son.” Pa blew out the candles and closed the door behind them. The sky was dark.

“We taking the shortcut?”

“We’ll stick to the path. Moon ain’t going to be much account tonight.”

“Why we walking so slow?”

“Hadn’t noticed we was.”

Durwood had questions, but they would have to wait until morning; Pa wasn’t in a talking mood.

Ma liked to say she talked enough for the both of them. He longed to hear her voice once more.

They crested the last hill. Their house lay dark.

“Where do you reckon Bascom is, Pa?”

“In bed, I suppose.”

Durwood raced ahead. Pa entered behind and lit a lamp.

“You go on to bed, son. I’ll see to your belongings.”

Durwood slid through the curtain into their room. “You awake? Bascom?”

“Hush. I don’t feel like talking none.”

“It ain’t like I’m going away forever. Just ‘til things settle down. Besides, you heard them. You and Pa can come visit. When you do, we’ll take that trip to the beach. What was it you said you wanted to eat? Them things like crawdads only bigger.”

“Shrimp.”

“Yeah. Shrimp.”

“You must be a danged fool.”

“How you figure?”

“Where do you think Pa and I are going to come up with the money to travel all the way to Richmond? Didn’t you see he done give all our money away so’s they’d take you in? And even if we had the money, you think the company is just gonna up and say, ‘Have a nice trip. We’ll hold your jobs ‘til you two come back.’ I ain’t going nowhere except back down in that damned hole. Just like Pa. Time’s passing me by.”

“It ain’t gonna be that way. You’ll see.”

“That’s what Jacob thought.”

“Who’s Jacob?”

“You know. The Bible story about them brothers that got crosswise. Their Ma favored the younger one and sent him off to live with her rich relatives.”

“We ain’t crosswise, are we?”

“I don’t reckon.”

“Remind me what happened to them brothers.”

“They didn’t see one another for a long time.”

“I done changed my mind. I don’t want to be like that Jacob fellow.”

“It’s done settled. Now go to sleep.”

“Promise me we’ll see each other. Bascom, promise.”

“Course we will.”