



New York City traffic whizzed past George as the exhaust fumes, the rattles of wheels, and honks from autos mingled together like smog. Drowning out the noise, his thoughts swirled into a numbness worse than emotion.

Rather than catch a taxi, he had chosen to walk home. Each step on the sidewalk only grew heavier. He passed the shops and weaved through the other pedestrians. Sweat beaded under the brim of his hat, yet it wasn't from the heat.

*I've destroyed a family.*

His steps quickened as though he could outrun the thought.

“Hey, you. STOP.”

A hand seized his forearm and jerked him to a standstill.

George winced and blinked into a scowling policeman's face.

“Are you deaf? I yelled three times at you. You're about to walk into the traffic.” The officer pointed a billy club under George's nose.

George's attention snapped into focus. Not ten feet ahead, automobiles rolled through the intersection.

“I'm sorry, officer. I wasn't paying attention.”

“That’s evident enough.” His Irish brogue clipped the words. “I’ll not be walking you home like a young lad, so keep your eyes open.”

George pasted on a polite smile. “Thank you. I will.”

The officer released him. “See that you do.”

When the traffic stopped, George crossed to the next sidewalk. Past the streets and blocks, he traveled until he reached his neighborhood. Flatbush. Some of the finest, well-to-do families in the city lived here, their houses nearly crushed together.

As he lifted his head, his gaze unwillingly sought the last house at the street’s end—Lilith’s home. A mix of buggies and autos lined the curbs. Mourners gathering already.

It was bad enough it had happened, but why did it have to be someone from his neighborhood? Why did he have to be the cause? If he closed his eyes, he could see Lilith skipping toward him, her raven curls bouncing, her eyes sparkling with a greeting.

Pain twisted his heart.

A man standing in the yard turned toward him. Tucking his chin into his collar, George dashed up the steps to his home, thrust the keys into the door, and stumbled inside. With a firm click, he locked the door and released a breath.

“Dr. Curtis, you’re home a bit late.” Mrs. Taylor, his housekeeper, hurried toward him to take his hat and suit jacket.

“I walked.” He failed to keep the strain out of his voice.

Mrs. Taylor put his things into the closet and turned. “I heard about what happened. I’m so sorry.”

The sympathy in her eyes and voice almost overwhelmed him. In the years since his wife’s death, Mrs. Taylor had become like a second mother to him. A rock in the household. A buffer between him and his son.

Stephen. No letter from him in three months.

George’s heart constricted. “I don’t know what to say.”

She stepped closer and tilted her head to one side. “There’s no use in telling you not to blame yourself. Words like that won’t help right now. You’re pale. You need to eat. Come—”

“I can’t eat.”

“I know. I made my broth instead. You’ll have a bit of it with one of my rolls. You’ll be ill if you don’t.”

George forced his feet to move. “I don’t have the energy to argue.”

“It wouldn’t do any good this time, Doctor.”

In the hallway, the grandfather clock chimed the half-hour. George entered the dining room to find the bowl of broth waiting. Steam curled upward. The aroma of chicken and vegetables filled his nose and failed to comfort him.

“Mrs. Taylor?” he called.

Her steps crossed the threshold. “Sir?”

“Would you mind joining me?”

“Not a bit.”

Moments later, sitting at the other end of the table, Mrs. Taylor sipped a cup of tea, her gray eyes direct and incisive.

“Dr. Curtis, I wish there was something I could do.”

“Nothing will help this.” The warm broth rolled over his tongue but failed to soothe him.

“Only God above.”

Wincing, George clinked the spoon against the bowl harder than he intended. “Please, Mrs. Taylor.”

The teacup clinked in the saucer as she set it down. A sigh slid through her lips. “I know, but I’ll be praying just the same. For you and the poor girl’s family.”

She meant well, but George couldn’t bring himself to thank her. At every turn in his life, when he had needed God the most, he had been left alone. However, now wasn’t the time to argue. Of all people, he would never want to hurt her.

Mrs. Taylor cleared her throat. “A letter from Miss Steen came today.”

*From Ella.* George closed his eyes and pressed his thumb and forefinger against them. “You and she might be my only friends left.”

“Nonsense, sir. I put the letter on your desk. Could be that it might lift your spirit a little.”

George doubted it. “I’ve canceled all my appointments for the week. It’s better if I stay out of sight for a while.”

After another sip, Mrs. Taylor set the cup down. “I know you’re trying to be respectful to her parents, but you can’t stay inside forever. Your patients need you.”

“My partner has things well in hand. To tell you the truth, I don’t know how this is going to turn out.”

“What do you mean?” A frown pinched the skin between her eyebrows.

“Thomas threatened to stop me from practicing medicine.”

“Surely not. He’s your friend.”

“I killed his daughter.” There it was. Stark. Brutal.

Mrs. Taylor cringed and yanked a napkin from the placemat. “Don’t say it like that, sir.” She dabbed her lips.

“I did. And that’s exactly how he sees it.” George pushed his bowl away. “Can you blame him?”

“I won’t listen to that kind of talk.” Mrs. Taylor stood and swept her hands across her skirt as if it would dismiss the thought. “You’re one of the best doctors in the city. Your reputation is impeccable. He can’t stop you. Nor should you let him, Dr. Curtis. Naturally, he’s devastated and angry right now, but I can’t believe he would try to destroy your life’s work.”

Unable to meet her confident gaze, George looked down at his feet. “You didn’t see his face or hear Claudia’s screams,” he murmured. His glass clanked against the bowl as he pushed it away, his mind filling with the memory of Lilith’s ashen, lifeless face. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Taylor. This is delicious, but I can’t eat right now.”

Like a blind man, George stumbled out of the room and

down the hall into his study. With his fingertips, he clicked the door closed while the other hand wrangled with his necktie. He whipped it off and tossed it on the desk. It landed on a white envelope, stained at the corners.

Ella.

After rounding the desk, he lowered himself into the chair and stared at it, a groan filling his tight chest.

Since they had parted in Valley Creek over a year ago, Ella had kept her promise to write. He smiled sadly at the memory of the awkward way she asked if they could correspond with each other. Every week her letters came, detailing life in that witty style so typically Ella. Presumptuous lass.

At first, he had no intention of answering. After all, she told him he didn't have to reply. Word by word, line by line, she tugged the way a fisherman lured a catch. Before long, he had found himself with a pen clutched between his fingers, firing back his opinion on ladies wearing trousers.

*I think it's a grand idea. To be free of these heavy skirts would be invigorating.* Ella's voice lived through the words.

*Grand idea indeed. Where are your manners, woman?*

*Apparently, my manners are keeping company with yours, sir.* Her tart reply still brought a slight twist to his lips.

Reaching for the envelope, George slid his thumbnail under the flap and opened it. Moments ticked away on the mantle clock as her voice breathed life into the words she had written. And in those moments, he forgot the anguish of the day.



ELLA TWIDDLED a fountain pen in her hand as the fringes of a headache settled behind her eyes.

“What good does it do, anyhow?” Her voice filled the empty bedroom. Even here, surrounded by trinkets and dolls from her childhood, cheer fled. Her legs, like heavy, wooden logs, lay stiff

and immobile on the mattress. Even wiggling her toes required concentration.

Ella's throat ached, yet not from pain. From wanting Mother and Father. From craving for more than life had given her. Glancing down at the lap desk, she eyed the letter she had begun.

*Dear Curtis,*

And that was all. No more words, nothing else came. George Curtis was nothing more than a scrawl across a piece of paper and a bittersweet sting in her heart. An urge to wad the stationery and hurl it across the room needled Ella. Was it because of him, or her condition? Pulling in a deep breath, Ella laid the pen in the lap desk and snapped it shut.

Curtis didn't care about her, not really. More than a year of writing brought no change in his letters. Not one spark of feeling or emotion toward her.

He longed for someone else. For Lorena.

If Lorena weren't her best friend and sister-in-law, Ella would've despised her. How could she fight against unrequited love? Especially now?

She needed to clear her head. Ella flung the bedcovers away, but reality crashed into her as she remembered she couldn't go for a walk.

Someone tapped at the door. "Miss Ella?"

"Yes. Come in." Ella forced a smile as the housekeeper entered.

"A visitor is here to see you. The new minister's wife, Mrs. Calloway. Do you want me to send her away?" Mrs. Hawthorne fussed with the lavender bedspread and pulled it up around Ella, smoothing it around her feet.

Ella tucked a few wayward locks into her bun. "I'd like to meet her, especially since I've heard how young she is."

"A sweet child with much responsibility, I've heard." Mrs. Hawthorne tucked her chin with a nod. "I'll get her."

Minutes later, she introduced Mrs. Calloway and left the room with a promise to bring tea.

Ella gestured to the cushioned chair near the bed. "Please have a seat. I'm very glad to meet you."

The minister's wife smiled and crossed the room, a shy flush creeping into her cheeks. "Thank you, Miss Steen. I'm happy to meet you as well."

Her vivid blue eyes reminded Ella of the blue pools near her brother's Ozark home in Valley Creek. Deep, inviting, serene. Mrs. Calloway's golden hair glistened in the sunlight streaming through the window. My! She couldn't be a day over twenty.

Mrs. Calloway glanced down at her folded hands, then back at Ella. "I hope I'm not intruding. I hesitated because I'd heard about your illness. I didn't want to bother you, but when I learned your name, I couldn't wait any longer."

"My name?" Ella frowned.

Mrs. Calloway grimaced, a nervous laugh parting her rosy lips. "I'm sorry. I'm bungling this up." She smoothed her navy skirt. "I meant your last name. My best friend was a Steen before she married. I wondered if you might be related. Her name is Lane Steen."

Like a beam of sunlight through a thundershower, joy washed over Ella's heart. "Do I know her? She's my niece, and you must be Tabitha. I can't tell you how delighted I am to meet you." Ella held out her hands, and Tabitha grasped them, her nervousness dissipating in giggles.

Ella released her. "I should've known. Lane talked so much about you that I feel as if I know you already." Unexpected moisture burned her eyes as she watched tears well up in Tabitha's.

"I feel the same. Lane described you in her letters. It's almost like being home again."

"It truly is. What would I give to be in Valley Creek now to

see my brother and all those dear people.” Ella’s smile dimmed. “Of course, I can’t now.”

“What does the doctor say, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I don’t mind.” Ella swallowed a sigh. “He isn’t sure what will happen. Some people recover, some regain the use of their limbs, others don’t. If I recover, it will take months at least. The fever is gone, but I still ache and feel weak. Dr. Weaver says it takes time.”

“Time can be a friend. May I pray for you?” The sincere compassion on Tabitha’s face soothed Ella’s spirit.

“Yes, please.”

As the young woman bowed her head, Ella grappled with her doubts.

For now, time was her enemy.