



Sunlight sifted through the gap between the curtain and window where George peered out. A fine day, indeed, but not for a funeral. Another automobile pattered toward Thomas and Claudia's house. In the hallway, the clock chimed four. The services surely were over, and mourners were gathering to offer comfort.

George swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. For days he had choked on it. A terrible thing. It wouldn't go up and release as tears, and it wouldn't go down and dissolve into relief.

How many years had it been since he cried? He remembered the very hour—his wife's funeral and not since.

"I'd give anything to cry now," he murmured.

Lilith's last words swept like a breeze over his memory. Life was a strange phenomenon, hard to comprehend. Gone in less than a blink, a fragile thread snapped forever. Yet, other times, life seized every breath and kept going past the realm of possibility.

George dug his fingers into the curtain tighter while

another auto filed past. Lilith was gone before she had hardly begun. Here he was, middle-aged, still wondering why he was breathing. Where was the fairness in it?

Behind him, a man cleared his throat. Releasing the curtain, George whirled around.

In the doorway, Joseph Wallace stood. “Mrs. Taylor let me in. She told me I’d find you here.”

Guilt mixed with grief at the sight of the older gentleman, the man whom he’d revered since childhood.

George gestured toward a chair by the empty fireplace. “Come in, sir. Please have a seat.”

“Only if you’ll join me.” As he sat down, Mr. Wallace gestured to a chair opposite. “It’s been quite a while since I’ve seen you.”

Sitting, George avoided the direct, guileless gaze. In truth, he’d only seen Mr. Wallace a few times since his return from Valley Creek over a year ago. After Lorena’s rejection, George hadn’t the heart to keep up a strained friendship with her father. He had missed it, though.

George rubbed his chin, his mind grappling for a reply. “You know how it is. Work and all that.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Have you come from the funeral?”

Mr. Wallace sighed. “Yes. There’s no need to go into all of that. I came to look in on you. I’m told you haven’t left the house in days.”

Surprise jolted George, but he covered it with a cough. Why on earth would Mr. Wallace care, especially after he had defied him concerning Lorena? George ventured a glance in his direction. “It didn’t seem right under the circumstances.”

“I understand.” Mr. Wallace rubbed his knee. “I’ve been concerned about you. If there’s anything I can do, George, please don’t hesitate to tell me.”

The offer was too much. Other than Mrs. Taylor, no one else had bothered. Once more, George gulped against the knot that seemed to grow larger with every breath he took.

“I appreciate it, sir.”

Mr. Wallace studied his fingernails a moment before pinning him with a look. “Of course, I don’t expect you to ask, but I’ll be checking just the same. No matter what has happened between us, I’ll always care about you. I ... I wanted you to know that. Especially today.”

Heaven and earth. How could he speak after that? George dipped his head, unspoken words trapped below the knot, begging for release.

“Dr. Curtis, there’s a police officer here to see you.”

George looked up at Mrs. Taylor standing in the doorway as she folded her hands together, her lips forming a flat line. The leather chair squeaked as Mr. Wallace turned around to look.

“Excuse me just a moment.” George rose, unsure whether or not to be relieved.

As George approached the entryway, the officer shifted toward him, his arms hanging stiffly at his sides. In one hand, the officer held an envelope.

“Dr. George Curtis?” The man raised his dark eyebrows.

“I am.”

“I’m instructed to give you this.” He held out the envelope, and George accepted it. “Good day, sir.”

Mrs. Taylor shut the door and latched it. “Whatever is it for?”

“I’ll know soon enough.” As George reentered the parlor, Mr. Wallace stood.

“I’ll see myself out while you attend to your letter.”

Suddenly, without explanation, George knew he didn’t want to be alone when he read that letter. “Wait, sir. I’d like you to stay a moment. That is, if you can.”

“I will.” Mr. Wallace sat down again.

With the edge of his thumb, George slit the envelope and drew out the papers. Unfolding it, he scanned the words, each one like a branding iron searing his heart. His mouth grew as dry as sand.

When he finished reading, George handed it over to Mr. Wallace and clasped his hands behind his back.

Knitting his brows, Mr. Wallace plucked his reading spectacles from his waistcoat pocket and scanned the pages. A dark frown tugged down the corners of his mouth, digging more deeply into his skin with every page he read.

At last, Mr. Wallace looked up with disbelief in his eyes. “Thomas Henderson is suing you?”

“He said he’d see to it that I’d never practice medicine again.” George curled his fingers into a fist and planted them in the palm of his other hand. “The amount he’s after will take everything I have.”

Swiping a hand over his iron-gray mustache, Mr. Wallace peered closer at the papers. “I know he and his wife are grief-stricken, but this? It was an accident, a risk they took.”

“Risk or not, the result is the same. Lilith is gone.” George kneaded the taut muscles in his neck. “I’d feel the same if I were in their place.”

Mr. Wallace folded the papers and handed them back. “Yes, but this doesn’t make it right. I have a lawyer, a good man, who can help you. Allow me to contact him. Perhaps they’ll settle instead.”

George’s mind swam, his thoughts too quick for him to keep up. “I’d appreciate it, sir, and thank you.”

“You’ll be hearing from me soon.” Mr. Wallace rose and shook George’s hand, his kind eyes crinkling in the corners while the frown dissipated. The familiar expression made George’s heart ache.

Once he was alone, he took the papers to his study and laid

them on his desk. How could he fight it? Nearly every moment since the surgery, George had reviewed every detail of that day just as he would meticulously inspect every surgical tool.

He chafed his forehead with his fingertips. The goiter had been large, causing Lilith difficulty swallowing. The procedure was only one of many he had performed over the years. Yet somehow, his hand imperceptibly slipped, piercing the artery. Neither he nor his assistant could stem the bleeding that followed.

George opened his hands as though they would give him the answers. How did it happen? Why?



“MY LEGS FEEL LIKE LEAD. I have to concentrate as hard as I can to move them.” Ella’s bare feet touched the rug beside her bed as Dr. Weaver lifted her into a sitting position.

He placed the earpieces of the stethoscope in his ears and pressed the diaphragm against Ella’s back. She took deep breaths as he moved it from one spot to another before listening to her chest. Although she scrutinized his face, the doctor’s bland expression revealed nothing.

At last, he stepped back and removed the earpieces. “I’m pleased that the paralysis hasn’t affected your lungs. Move your arms for me.”

Ella obeyed.

“Grasp my hands as hard as you can.” He held out his hands to her, palms extended upward.

She spied the swollen knots bulging between the joints of his fingers and hesitated.

“Don’t mind those.” Dr. Weaver’s brisk command interrupted her thoughts. “They hardly hurt. I need to test your strength. As hard as you can now.”

“I’m sorry.” She squeezed until the blood fled from her

knuckles.

“That’s good.” A hint of a smile brushed the edges of his mustache. “You’re maintaining your upper body strength. Now for your legs. Can you swing them while sitting there?”

A tremor tingled up Ella’s spine. “I can try.” Biting down on her lower lip, she closed her eyes and dug her fingers into the edge of the mattress. An invisible weight pressed against her limbs. First, she lifted her left leg only a few inches before dropping it. Then she did the same with the right one.

Dr. Weaver’s gray eyebrows drew closer together. “I don’t like this. The paralysis is affecting the lower half of your body. Are you in a lot of pain?”

“At times, yes. In my knees and hips. Especially at night.”

“Hard to sleep?”

“Yes, sir.” Ella’s pulse throbbed in her neck. “What does it mean? Will I be crippled?”

Dr. Weaver’s mouth disappeared for a moment under his mustache as he pressed his lips together.

“Doctor? Please, I need you to be completely forthright with me.”

He narrowed his eyes, a hint of trepidation rippling across his face. “It’s hard to know just yet. It sometimes takes months.”

Hope seeped away from Ella the way a river recedes during a drought.

“Miss Steen, the worst thing you can do is give up. Little is known yet about this disease, but I can tell you this from my experience with sickness: you must push through it. No matter what might be ahead of you.”

“And how do I do that?”

“You must exercise your legs, get out of bed—”

“How can I get out of bed when I can hardly stand?”

“Someone must help you. You must continue your normal routine as much as possible. Get dressed each morning and have Douglas take you downstairs. Exercise your legs several

times a day. Rest when your body tells you. Occupy your mind with reading, sewing, whatever you can. Get fresh air on the front porch before the heat of the day sets in.”

“Douglas is busy in the fields. He leaves before dawn.”

“Then rise when he does.”

“He can’t possibly help me get dressed!” Ella’s voice squeaked despite her self-control.

A hint of impatience edged his tone. “Then have him carry you downstairs. Nightgown and all. I suggest you move into the spare bedroom down there at once. Your housekeeper can help you dress.”

“She has enough duties, especially since I can’t look after Caleb.”

“Miss Steen, save your stubbornness for recovery and nothing more.” A wry smile softened the determined set of Dr. Weaver’s jaw as Ella bristled. “Do what you can to look after Caleb, when possible. I don’t care if he isn’t still from morning till night. Perhaps he can help you exercise your legs.”

“The very idea. A young boy exercising my legs?”

“You might as well tuck away your pride and conventions too. You don’t have much choice.”

The truth smacked Ella like a slap across the jaw and smarted with as much pain. “You’re certainly right about that.”

Without replying, he reached down and lifted her legs onto the bed. Using her arms, Ella lifted herself and scooted back against the pillows.

Stepping over to the dressing table, Dr. Weaver set his stethoscope inside his bag and snapped it shut. “I’ll speak with Douglas about moving you downstairs.” He lifted the bag and turned. “Chin up, Miss Steen. An ounce of optimism will do more than any medicine. You may recover the full use of your legs, but you must do everything you can.”

All arguments fled before the deluge of doubts and questions rising within Ella. “I appreciate your words, doctor. I

don't like them, but then, I don't have to, do I?" She forced her lips to curve upward. "I'll try."

"Don't try. Do instead." He moved toward the door. "I'll be back at the week's end."

After she heard the front door sweep open then shut, Ella tipped her head back against the rosewood headboard and closed her eyes.

*Heavenly Father, what am I to do? How can Douglas care for me while working the farm? And Caleb needs a mother's hand, not mine. How can I be of use here? Father, I want to be a helper, not a burden.*

"Aunt Ella?"

Her eyes flew open at the small, tentative voice. A pair of navy eyes peeked around the door.

"Come, dear." She patted the mattress, her heart filling with compassion. With his dark wavy hair and eyes, Caleb was a miniature of his father, coming to the family later in life and more like Douglas than his grown siblings. Caleb's lips turned down as he edged forward.

"Why the long face, love? You know my rule. Never enter my room frowning." She teased.

A ghost of a smile flitted across the ten-year-old's face. "What did the doctor say?"

"Nothing you need worry your head about." Ella gently pinched the tip of his chin between her thumb and forefinger. "I'll be running races with you before long."

"The Good Book says it's a sin to lie."

Wrapping her arms around the boy's shoulders, Ella drew him close and pressed a kiss into his unruly waves. "It's not a lie."

Burying his cheek onto her shoulder, Caleb pressed his nose against her neck, his voice muffled in her collar. "It ain't the truth either."

"Time will tell us." Ella schooled her voice light and nonchalant.



*And I dread the answer.*