

Healing
WITHIN
THE
Pieces



Candace West

For Grandma West who shared her love for family treasures with me.

*But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come
forth as gold.
-Job 23:10*

One



Loudoun County, Virginia
December 1836

Freedom blustered in the winter breeze, sifting through Nathaniel Hawkins's cotton shirt and chilling his skin to the bone. Yet the prison chains still weighed his steps.

Until he remembered he wasn't bound any longer.

Casting a furtive glance at the travelers disembarking the train, Nathaniel turned up the collar of his shirt to block the wind's bite against his cheek. The musty odor of the fabric collided with his nose. When he arrived home, he'd scrub away that smell for good.

If home still existed.

Nathaniel crammed his hat farther down on his head and shuffled toward the end of the platform. Again, he remembered he wasn't wearing chains.

Quickening his pace, he jogged down the steps of the platform, turning in the direction of his farm. An eight-mile stretch of the legs. The smell of snow tinged the air. He scanned the cloudy horizon. Surely, he could arrive before it started

covering the hilly landscape. Would it even matter if he didn't return?

"Hey, young feller, do you need a ride?"

Nathaniel's chest tightened. Slowly, he pivoted to find someone he hoped was unacquainted with the crime that had made him a stranger. "Are you headed for Taylorstown?"

"I am. It's a long walk in this weather." The man shoved a crate farther into the wagon and jumped down. After dusting off his hands, he held one out. "My name's Ben Greer. You're welcome to come along."

"Thank you. I'm Nathaniel Hawkins." He accepted the handshake, forcing himself to meet the man's direct gaze.

With a slight shake of his head, Mr. Greer skimmed Nathaniel's stained hat, unkempt beard, and threadbare clothes. "Never heard of you, but I've just lived here a year. Looks like you forgot to bring a coat."

"I brought what I could." Nathaniel pulled a taut smile over the bitter clip of his words, failing to dull the edge of his tone.

Mr. Greer didn't seem to notice while he rounded the wagon, gesturing for Nathaniel to climb aboard. "The wind is picking up. We'd better not waste time."

The seat jiggled and creaked under their weight. After a flick of the reins, the horses hurried forward as though eager to reach the safety of their barn.

Tucking his chin, Nathaniel crossed his arms to stave off the chill. He glanced at the sky, tempted to whisper a prayer of thanksgiving for the ride. The words jammed his throat instead. For two years, he hadn't been on speaking terms with God.

Truly, though, Nathaniel wouldn't have listened if the Lord had spoken.

"You got kindred waiting on you?"

Family. The word stiffened Nathaniel's shoulders while he shook his head. "No, sir." He fished for something else to say, but conversing no longer came easily. Too many quiet hours in a cell had rusted his manners.

“A shame, that.” Mr. Greer’s bushy, russet eyebrows dipped closer together. “There’s just me and the missus, but it’s better than nothing.”

“You’re a fortunate man.”

“Less than some but more than most.”

Memories of Mother’s sweet singing coupled with Father’s hearty laugh eclipsed the noise of the horses’ plodding hooves on the country road. How were they faring? Were they still among the living?

Nathaniel slammed his eyes shut against a jab of guilt. He’d not written, deciding that silence would lessen their pain. Especially his, most of all. Perhaps a bit selfish. Prison had brought out the worst in him. To survive, he had to forget his folks. Forget everything.

All the while, their faces had trailed him like the hounds that had caught up with him that fateful night.

Mr. Greer talked through the next several miles for both of them, while Nathaniel answered when required. At least he needn’t worry about keeping the conversation alive. The older man’s stories whizzed along with the breeze.

At a crossroads, a horse and its rider waited. Mr. Greer raised a hand. “Hullo!” He reined in the horses.

“On your way home, Greer?”

Nathaniel’s eyes snapped in the rider’s direction. His pulse leaped against the skin on his neck. Would the man recognize him beneath two years of scruff and dingy clothing?

A broad smile spread across Greer’s face. “Mr. Kimball, sir. What brings you out on a day like this?”

“An overdue visit at my daughter’s. The clouds came up rather suddenly.” Kimball’s glance snagged on Nathaniel while Mr. Greer inquired about the family.

“How’s Missus Carrie and the little one?”

Thank goodness his beard hid most of his expression at Carrie’s name. Nathaniel’s pulse ticked harder.

“They’re both doing fine. The babe is the perfect image of her mama. It takes me back to my first days being a new papa.”

Mr. Greer chuckled. “No doubt you’ll be spoiling her.”

Kimball’s stare sharpened, but Nathaniel resisted the urge to dip his head. He held his breath.

Recognition dawned as the man’s watchful eyes hardened like cold flint. He straightened in the saddle. “Nathaniel Hawkins.”

Clenching his jaw, he sat frozen in the seat, his demeanor betraying none of the turmoil inside. He had nothing to say to Kimball.

Mr. Greer shifted sideways, surprise lifting his brows. “You know him?”

“I regret to say I do.” A bit of sneer tweaked the corner of Kimball’s mouth. “Perhaps I should say I *once* knew him. Prison hasn’t agreed with you, my boy, but I trust it has tempered any remaining vices.”

Fire raced along Nathaniel’s veins. He wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of answering or showing his anger.

Mr. Greer sputtered a cough. “Prison?”

“He didn’t tell you?” Kimball’s crafty smile displayed a perfect row of teeth.

“Not a word.”

“He’s well known for his ability to conceal things.”

A frown turned down Mr. Greer’s rotund mouth while he appraised Nathaniel through fresh, wary eyes. “I’ll not take you an inch farther. Get off.”

The sharp words cut deeper than the cold gusts buffeting him. Nathaniel rose. “I thank you for taking me this far.” Without a glance at Kimball, he jumped down.

After a parting wave at his friend, Mr. Greer started the horses toward town, leaving the men to face each other.

The older gentleman adjusted the dark blue scarf around his neck, tucking the ends securely within his coat. “Stay away from Carrie. She’s married, with a family of her own. She has no interest in the likes of you.”

“I have no interest in the likes of her.”

Kimball ignored the remark. “You’d better hurry before the storm catches you. If I recall correctly, you’re not so adept at outrunning things.”

Turning his head, he nudged his horse into a trot and followed in Mr. Greer’s wake.

A tremor raced along Nathaniel’s shoulders, but it had nothing to do with the coming blizzard. Cramming stiff hands into his pockets, he strode into a nearby field. Good thing he could walk this country blindfolded if need be. He’d cut the remaining four miles to two in this direction.

The longest part of his journey, however, promised no shortcuts.