

*Emma's*  
ORPHANS



# *Emma's* ORPHANS

LOREE LOUGH



WHITAKER  
HOUSE

*Publisher's note:*

This novel is a work of fiction. References to real events, organizations, or places are used in a fictional context. Any resemblances to actual persons, living or dead, are entirely coincidental.

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

## Emma's Orphans

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*Emma's Orphans* is dedicated to all the men and women who helped parentless children find loving Christian homes between 1853–1929; to Larry for years of enduring my “fiction addiction”; to my daughters for their unwavering support; to my dear friend, author Carolyn Greene for good solid advice; and to Whitaker House editor Courtney Hartzel for her gentle word-guidance.



# PROLOGUE

*Ellicott City, Maryland*  
*September 1, 1865*

Death and dying seemed to dominate her life lately. She'd lost scores of friends in the horrible war between the States that ended just months ago, and now her beloved aunt had joined them. It was not as dramatic a passing as those who'd died in battle; Stella simply went in her sleep. And as the cancer slowly ate away at her, Emma simply devoted herself to caring for the woman who raised her from infancy.

Emma and Jenni Wright walked arm in arm from the cemetery—their first visit to Stella's grave since the funeral—huddled against the unseasonably chilly day. Lost in separate worlds of sadness and grief as they headed for their buggy, neither took much notice of the commotion half a block away.

Jenni looked up at her big sister through tear-clumped lashes. "Do you think Aunt Stella will be lonely in heaven?"

Emma pulled her a bit closer and blinked back hot tears of her own. "No," she said, smiling, "not with all God's angels to keep her company."

Sighing, the girl gave a satisfied nod. "Angels...she'll like that. Mrs. Henderson taught us in Sunday school that the angels make beautiful music, with harps and flutes and—"

The ruckus up the street intensified, and Emma and Jenni jumped onto the wooden walkway, staring wide-eyed as the horses hitched to John Evans' wagon reared up, ears flattened and teeth bared as they cut loose with several trumpeting cries.

The girl huddled closer to her big sister. "What's got them so spooked?" she whimpered, chewing the knuckle of her forefinger. "I don't see anyth..."

The snake, coiled and ready for attack, rattled its deadly warning, freezing the question in her throat. Time seemed to freeze, too, and the next moments passed at a painfully plodding pace.

Grabbing Jenni by the hand, Emma darted into the church. Her boot heels echoed as she ran down the center aisle in search of the pastor, a deacon...anyone who might help the blacksmith regain control of his team.

She stopped at the altar. "Pray for them, Jenni," she whispered huskily. "Ask God to send them help!"

The melee outside punctuated Emma's instructions, and she raced back down the aisle. "Maybe someone has heard the noise by now," she said, half-dragging the terrified girl behind her.

From opposite sides of the street, James Griffen and Walter Turner charged up to the horses, hollering "Whoa!" and "Stop!" as they reached for the harness. But the crazed beasts' rock-hard hooves stomped the ground and clawed the air, preventing them from getting close enough to take hold.

Drawn by the blacksmith's agitated voice, Emma focused on his face. "Are you mad?" John shouted at the men. "Get back! You'll be trampled!" Unconsciously, she winced with him as the reins dug bloody gouges into his bare hands.

John Evans had won the county fair's Muscle Man contest eight years in a row, single-handedly built his house, and the



two-storied blacksmith shop behind it as well. But even his formidable strength seemed feeble in comparison to the power of the panic-stricken animals. Their eyes rolled wildly in their twitching, pitching heads as spittle foamed at the corners of their mouths. The wagon lurched and creaked as they tried to sidestep the hissing, slithering snake, tossing the wagon's passengers about like rag dolls.

"Oh, John!" Mrs. Evans shrieked, gripping the seat back as she looked behind her into the wagon bed. "The children..."

The words were no sooner out of her mouth than both front wheels lifted from the ground, teetering in the air for a silent, eerie moment, as if suspended by cables from above.

And then, despite John's attempts to restrain them, the horses bolted, yanking him from his seat. He tumbled forward and quickly disappeared in the thick cloud of dust, as did his screams.

Instinctively, his wife reached out to save him, but in the futile attempt to pull her beloved from the thundering holocaust of hooves, she lost her balance and met the same grisly end.

"Dear God in heaven," Emma whispered. "Help them."

And then, seemingly from out of nowhere, a man dressed all in black rode up beside the runaway team and, crouched low in the saddle, guided his big black steed until he matched the team's furious pace, step for frantic step.

His wide-brimmed hat blew off when he reached out to snag a breast harness, and it zigzagged lazily on the autumn breeze before floating to the ground. With a groan, he leapt onto the nearest horse's back. His mare slowed to a trot as her master was carried away by her terrified cousins, then meandered to the water trough beside the road.

Emma held Jenni tighter still, trembling with helpless fear. Had it really been just two days ago that she'd removed splinters from their boyish hands? Splinters put there by fishing poles they'd fashioned from branches felled in the last thunderstorm?

Ten years before, Matthew Evans had been the first child the inexperienced young nurse had helped bring into the world. Two years and a dozen babies later, Emma delivered Billy on her own. *Lord God Almighty*, she prayed, *let the stranger stop the horses in time to save the boys*. She could only hope there was time enough for her prayer to reach God's ear.

During one tick in time, the wagon hit a rock in the road; in the next, all four wheels left the ground, breaking Billy's death grip on the side rail. As the vehicle crashed back onto solid earth, he was catapulted high in a graceful arc, as though he was taking a frolicking summer leap off Great Rock Gorge to swim in the refreshing waters of the Patapsco River. A small dust cloud puffed up around him when he landed, slowly blanketing him with a powdery veil.

Emma hung her fingertips from her bottom teeth, waiting for him to show any sign of life. But the boy did not cry out in pain or clutch a broken limb in agony: time had stopped for Billy Evans.

In the next millisecond, residents of Ellicott City threw open windows and doors to investigate the violent noise that cracked their peaceful September morning. All eyes zeroed in on the wagon, now a half-mile down the road.

Men, women, and children alike rushed forward as the stranger brought the team to a grinding, grit-spewing halt. He sat for a moment, head hanging and shoulders slumped, as if in prayer, then slid down from the horse's back and quickly secured the glassy-eyed, sweaty team to the hitching post outside the general store.

Without a word, he walked around to the back of the wagon and held up his arms. After one intense moment, Matthew sagged into them.

"Who is he?" Jenni whispered as he headed toward them. "He looks like someone I know."

As he made his way nearer the murmuring crowd, Emma admitted to herself that the girl was right; the stranger *did* look strikingly familiar.

The townsfolk gave him a wide berth as he walked determinedly up to the boardwalk and put the boy into her arms. "Get him inside," he growled. With a jerk of his dark-haired head, he gestured toward the street, where three rumpled bodies lay sprawled in silent, motionless heaps. "He doesn't need to see that."

Emma glanced in the direction he indicated, but the gruesome sight caused her to quickly avert her eyes. Why he chose hers from all the worried faces staring into his, Emma didn't know.

The dark brows dipped low in the center of his forehead. "Well," he grated, "what're you waitin' for? Can't you see he needs tendin'?"

Somehow, Emma sensed his rage was not intended for her, but for the event that ended three lives, for she saw in his near-black eyes compassion and concern for the boy he'd saved.

She focused on Matthew, whose heaving chest and rumpled clothes told of the physical ordeal he'd survived, whose trembling hands and quivering lower lip stated the emotional trauma he'd suffered. She stood him on his feet, then knelt to make herself child-sized. Placing both hands on the boy's shoulders, Emma turned him to face her. Though he made eye contact, Matt seemed unable to see her. *Dear God*, she prayed, *tell me what he needs to hear*.

"Matthew," she began quietly, giving his shoulders a gentle shake. "Matthew?"

As the fog lifted, the boy struggled to stanch the tears that filled his eyes. His voice seemed deeper and far too raspy to belong to one so young. "Are they...are they all...dead?"

"We'll know soon enough," answered the stranger.

Jenni leaned forward to whisper into Emma's ear. "He talks funny, like Mr. O'Neil; I think he must be Irish."

Ignoring Jenni, Matt looked away from Emma to focus on the man's face. "My pa always says you shouldn't sugarcoat the truth. You won't feed me a line of nonsense, will you?" He stiffened his back. "'Cause I ain't no baby, y'know. My pa says men don't cry."

Jabbing a thumb into his chest, he added in a gravelly whisper, "I can handle the truth."

The man was covered in dust from boots to beard, and the palms of his hands were raw and bleeding. If he noticed, he didn't seem to care. Down on one knee, he gently chucked the boy's chin. "Good or bad," he said softly, "you'll get nothin' but the truth from me, son. You've got me word on it."

None of the onlookers had budged since he approached, carrying the hefty lad like a babe in arms. Emma scanned their faces and saw that though they likely didn't recognize him either, they also instinctively believed his word.

Matt nodded and put his hand into Emma's. "I'll be inside," he said as she led him into the bank, "waiting to hear..."

Emma and Jenni, Matt and the stranger seemed oblivious to the mayhem in the street behind them. The doctor stood over Billy's body, somberly shaking his head. The undertaker knelt beside John, frowning. And the town barber crouched beside Martha, hiding his face behind one hand.

As the man in black headed for his horse, someone hollered out, "You saved that boy's life. You're a hero, man!"

He scowled into the crowd. "Hero?" he snarled. "Didn't save the brother."

Grimacing, he climbed into his saddle and drove the horse hard toward the Patapsco.

# ONE

*February 1, 1866*

I've decided to change my name to Matt Evans Wright."

The boy made the announcement over supper, six months to the day after burying his entire family. He popped the last of his biscuit into his mouth and washed it down with a generous gulp of milk. Breathing a whispered "Ahhh," he drew his sleeve across his mouth. "Ma and Pa and Billy would have wanted it this way, I'm sure of it." And then he smiled calmly, awaiting Emma's response.

But she had no idea how to respond. As she looked into his clear blue eyes, her heart ached with love for him. Someday, she knew, he'd become a fine, strong man, and the proof of that was the stoic way he reserved his grieving for the deepest, darkest hours of the night. Last night, when his tormented moans awakened her, she hurried into his room and pulled him into her arms. "There, there," she'd cooed, running her fingers through soft blond curls. "It's all right, sweet boy; it was only a bad dream. You're all right now. Emma's here."

When at last he roused from the nightmare, and realized where he was, Matt had scrambled sleepily into her lap and tucked

his face into the crook of her neck. In the bright light of day, he would never have clung to her that way. Emma smiled fondly, remembering the way he wrinkled his face and held up his hands in mock defensiveness each time her motherly instincts compelled her to reach out as he passed, to lovingly muss his hair, or press a kiss to his cheek.

As his tears abated, a smile curved his lips. It seemed a peaceful smile, Emma thought, but how peaceful could it really be for this brave boy who'd lost everything and everyone in two quick ticks of the clock? "Peaceful enough to fall asleep," she whispered gently, tucking the covers under his chin and kissing his cheek before tiptoeing from his room.

"Well," he said now, tucking in one corner of his mouth, "what do you think? Matt Evans Wright. Isn't it a fine, strong name?"

His question snapped Emma back to the present. Her heart swelled with growing love for this rough-and-tumble boy, for his question was proof positive that he thought of her as his substitute mother....already! Much as she'd love to keep him with her forever, it would be cruel to give him false hope. She already begun the process of finding a proper home for him, with a mother and a father and...

In a more serious tone, she said, "Yes, it's a fine, strong name, but let's see what Judge Thompson says before you start writing it at the top of your school papers."

Matt's nose crinkled as though he inhaled the telltale scent of a skunk. "Why does that old buzzard have any say in it?" He jabbed a thumb into his chest. "I'm the one oughta be decidin' where I'll live, and who I'll live with."

In a perfect world, Emma would have gently corrected his grammar. But theirs was far from a perfect world. She took a deep breath and laid her fork beside her plate.

"In a perfect world," Emma cautioned, "children would have complete control over such things." She shook her head sadly. "I'm afraid we don't live in a perfect world."

Matt pointed at Jenni, who sat quietly at the other end of the table. "Then, how come that ol' judge let her live here when her mother died?"

Jenni shoved her plate forward and folded her hands primly on the table, then pursed her lips. "For your information," she began, "Judge Thompson didn't decide, because he wasn't around when my mama died."

"Then who decided?" he demanded, his voice rising in pitch and volume. "'Cause that's the fella I want to see!" As if hearing his own distress, Matt took a deep breath and looked at Emma. "I want to live here," he said softly, calmly. "You're a good mother. What more should matter to that old—"

"Now, now," Emma interrupted, smiling slightly. "Judge Thompson isn't an old—"

"He's a mean old grouch," Jenni chimed in. "I've never seen him talk to children except to scold them. I'll bet he doesn't even like children. He's the last person who ought to be deciding things that will affect them for the rest of their lives!"

The boy raised both brows and nodded gratefully. When he looked at Emma again, fear glinted in his pale blue eyes and his lower lip quivered a bit. "I want to stay with you," he whispered hoarsely. "I want to stay here."

Before the accident, Matt had been a rowdy, hardy boy, who thought nothing of climbing to the top of the tallest oak, or balancing precariously like a tightrope walker on the fallen tree that connected Great Rock Gorge to Swan Point. She never saw him cry, not even the time when he was four, when he fell halfway down the stairs in the choir loft and broke his arm.

Since losing his family, he hadn't been so inclined to take little-boy chances with his safety. Oh, he made a great show of puffing up his chest and poking out his chin with male bravado when his pals were within earshot. But he also made sure to keep Emma within his sights.

Narrowing one eye, he crossed both arms over his chest. "How much pull do you have?"

"Pull?" Emma giggled. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"How much weight is in your word? How important is what you say to the people of this town?"

He sounded so much like his father! Many times, she heard John Evans ask similar questions at town hall meetings, or as the men gathered in the feed and grain, discussing politics. Matt needed a man's influence, as evidenced by this attempt to emulate his pa. Would it be in his best interests to intervene on the boy's behalf, and insist that he remain in her care? Or would Matt be better off in a home led by a strong Christian male?

"I heard them talking in town the other day," Jenni was saying.

"You heard who talking?" Emma wanted to know.

The girl shrugged. With a slight nod of her head, she said, "Oh, just a bunch of old hens."

"Jenni!" Emma scolded. "Is that any way to talk?"

Blushing, she swallowed. "Well, that's what Mr. O'Neil called them, right to their faces," the girl said in her own defense.

Emma frowned and shook a finger at the children. "Mr. O'Neil needs to exercise a little restraint. Just because he's an old man doesn't mean he can go around saying whatever pops into his thick Irish skull!"

Matt and Jenni hid childish giggles behind their hands, inspiring Emma to cross both arms over her chest as she silently admitted that in taking them to task, she had spoken ill of O'Neil!

"All right, you two," she said, lifting one brow.

"Don't you want to hear what the old..." Matt snickered, then wiggled in his chair to assume a more serious posture..."what the dear ladies were talking about?"

*If the truth be told, she thought, doing her best to hide a grin, the good ladies of Ellicott City can sound like a bunch of old hens when they get together for one of their gossip-fests! She feigned a bored*



expression; it was just as true that she was curious. "Out with it, then. What did they say?"

"They said no one would object to you taking care of me, because I'm a girl and you're a girl." Jenni glanced at Matt. Then, eyes on Emma once more, she continued. "But Matt is a boy, and he needs a man's firm hand, they said."

"A man's firm hand?" Matt repeated. "What does that mean?"

"Someone who'll wallop you a good one when you get out of line," Jenni explained.

He gasped, then licked his lips. "But...but..." His eyes misted as his lips formed a tight line. "I didn't mind it when my pa walloped me," he said, shaking a fist in the air, "'cause he always said he was doin' it for my own good. But nobody else better try, or I'll wallop 'em right back!"

"Oh, as if you could stand up to a man twice your size," Jenni pointed out, rolling her eyes.

"I could if I had to!" he persisted, stubbornly blinking back the tears that welled in his eyes.

Emma hurried to his side and, while kneeling on the ground, wrapped her arms around him. "Matthew," she began, "no one is going to wallop you if I have anything to say about it."

He studied her face. "You mean it?"

Standing, she assumed a boxer's stance, crouching and balling her own hands into fists. "I mean it!"

A tiny giggle bubbled from Jenni's lips, and she clamped her hands over her mouth to silence it. Grinning, Matt met the girl's eyes. "Remind me to be on my best behavior around here, 'cause if she did take a mind to wallop me, I might end up in Carroll County!"



Emma paced the floor that night, in deep concentration as she tried to figure out what she might do to ensure Matt could remain

in her care. Her heart beat double-time and her pulse raced. She hadn't been this upset since that letter came...the one delivered in person by Horace Talbott, barely a week after her aunt's death. She slipped into her room, and opened the tiny cedar chest that held her few pieces of jewelry and the letter. She brought it into the parlor and sat in the big wooden rocker near the hearth. Splaying the pages across her lap, she remembered...



She had risen earlier than usual that morning, and was taking a batch of biscuits from the oven when Horace rapped at her back door. He was the only man in town who'd invited her to a church picnic, or a holiday party—or anything else for that matter—in two years. It didn't seem to matter one whit to him that she towered over him the way an adult towers over a child, or that she likely outweighed him by fifty pounds. It was getting harder and harder to find polite ways to turn him down, and she hoped he hadn't come to ask her to accompany him to the Valentine's Day social; had she been out of bed long enough for her brain to come up with another kindly reason to say "No"?

"What brings you out so early?" she asked, opening the door wide to admit him.

But Horace had stood on the tiny porch, touched a finger to the brim of his black derby and said, "I'm afraid this is not a social call, Emma." He lifted his pointy chin and held out an official-looking envelope. "Your aunt asked that I..."

The sharp knob of his Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he ran a bony finger under the starched collar of his white shirt. "She asked that I deliver this to you upon her death." Pulling a red bandana from the inside pocket of his suit coat, he blotted perspiration from his furrowed brow and sighed. "I'm terribly sorry," he said, waving the envelope under her nose, "but I've had it in my wall safe so long, I forgot all about it until last evening. I found it while—"

"What's in it?" Emma interrupted.

"I'm afraid I have no idea."

"But...but you were Aunt Stella's attorney. Surely..."

He held up a hand to silence her. "She only asked me to hold onto it for her. Nothing more."

Emma gave him a suspicious, sideways glance. "I don't believe you for a minute, Horace. You didn't earn the nickname 'Lion Pants' because you don't take well to bad news, yet look at you, sweating like a pig, and on this thirty-degree morning no less!" She tucked in one corner of her mouth to add, "I don't mind telling you, I'm not looking forward to reading any message that's had such an effect on the likes of you!"

He removed his hat, and, holding it by the brim, tapped it against his thigh. "You're probably right to suspect there's bad news in here," he said, holding out the envelope. "Stella was greatly distressed the day she brought it to my office. Her face was all puffy and her eyes were red from crying, and it was all she could do to get the request out without starting up the waterworks again."

Horace looked away then, and focused for a moment on some unknown spot across the room. When he met her eyes again, it was to say, "She was so upset that I never asked about its contents. I simply agreed to keep it in my safe until her death, nothing more."

Emma took the letter, trembling.

"If you...if you...need to talk," he stammered as he headed down the walk, "or need any advice...you know where to find me."

"Thank you, Horace."

"Just doing my job," he said, climbing into his buggy.

But Emma knew better. Horace Talbott was the county's most prominent attorney. He could easily have paid a messenger to deliver the letter. She opened her mouth to say so, but he was gone before the first words formed on her tongue.

She closed the door quietly, then crossed to the table and thanked the Lord she had already filled her mug with steaming

coffee, because her hands were shaking so badly, she'd have burned herself if she'd poured a cup at that point.

On the envelope, Aunt Stella had written "Emma Wright."

A glance at the clock told Emma that Jenni would awaken soon. If the letter contained bad news—and everything in her told her that it did—she'd best get the matter dealt with now, so she'd have time to get her emotions under control before the child woke up.

Emma slumped onto a nearby stool and broke the envelope's seal. Taking a sip of coffee, she removed the crisp pages and read:

June 2, 1860

*My dear, dear Emma,*

*We have suspected for some time now that these pains in my stomach were caused by more than cabbage and beans, and now that we know it's the cancer, I feel obliged to set a few things straight before the end comes. Doctor Farley says it could be years, but I will not take the chance; it might only be months. It seems right and just that I'm setting the record straight on your birthday, the day my lies began.*

*My life is complete for having loved you, for having been loved by you. You were a beautiful child, sweet Emma, with a beautiful soul, who trustingly put yourself in my care. You never demanded to know how it came to be that you were being raised by a maiden aunt, and for that I will be eternally grateful. But now, you have a right to know everything, everything I had no right to keep from you. The time has come, as they say, to come clean.*

*As you know, I was raised on a farm in Lancaster, Pennsylvania—Amish country, through and through. The simple life was good enough for me, and I lived it without complaint until my sixteenth birthday. I went into town that day, as I always did on Tuesday to deliver eggs for my mother, and*

there I met the most handsome young man I'd ever seen. His name was Emmit Wright.

He had all the things to turn a young girl's head. He was a life-loving twenty-one-year-old man with sparkling blue eyes and honey-blond hair. That wide, easy smile seemed painted on his face, and he had the voice of an archangel. But mostly, Emma, he had such a big heart! I could talk to Emmit about anything, and he to me. We shared our hopes and dreams and fears... and we fell in love. On one Tuesday, it seemed, we were talking innocently; the next, we were holding hands, and before I knew it, he completely surrounded me with the warmth of his love.

And then all that was bright in my world turned dark, for I learned that I was going to have Emmit's baby. The family was angry with me for committing the sin of fornication. I knew that I had sinned, yet I was deeply hurt by their response. After many long and serious meetings with the church elders, my penance was decided: I would be shunned.

They sent me by stagecoach to York, where I would stay with Doctor Zachary Josephs and his wife Jane. They had no children of their own, and cared for me as if I was their own. Not a word of recrimination was spoken regarding my condition. They seemed to understand (though I never told them) that I grieved not only for the family I had been cast out of but for the young man I loved too much. The only proof I have that they understood these things was the gentle looks they gave me each time I came from my room, eyes red and puffy from crying over my losses.

When at last you were born, they fussed and cooed like real grandparents. I called you Em and I think the Josephs knew why: so that each time I spoke your name, I would be reminded of my one true love.

I'm told Emmit searched nearly two years for me. It did my heart good knowing that he loved me that much. I have sent

*prayers heavenward every day since then, hoping he found peace and contentment in his life, wherever he chose to live it.*

*You were only three when we moved to Maryland, dear Emma. I had abused the good doctor's kindness far too long as it was. I overheard him telling his wife about an old friend, who'd written about a clinic he would open in Ellicott City. I pleaded with the doctor to write the friend on my behalf: Mrs. Josephs was a nurse, too, you see, and had trained me well. I convinced them it would be a fresh new start for you and me, and he sent a letter of introduction ahead.*

*We rode our first train to Baltimore, and Doctor Aubrey Farley met us there. Oh, but he was a grim-faced, straight-backed man! I don't think I've ever been more frightened than I was that day when he greeted us at the station. He never smiled, not even with his eyes. As he talked from the city to our new home, it became apparent that Dr. Josephs, knowing his rigid and judgmental personality, had stretched the truth about me a bit in his letter.*

*Dr. Farley was of a mind that I was a maiden aunt who'd taken in an orphaned niece. I could see right off that to tell the truth was a surefire way to end up alone and unemployed in a strange city. I had no money to get back to York, and couldn't impose further on the Josephs, who had already been so kind to me.*

*And so I decided on the buggy ride between Baltimore and the new clinic that while I wouldn't further deceive Dr. Farley, I wouldn't offer the truth until I'd earned enough money to set up housekeeping in another city.*

*Sadly, sweet Emma, that day never came. There always seemed to be some reason why Dr. Farley couldn't pay my full salary. Either the medicines for the clinic cost more than he expected, or equipment to furnish it was more expensive than anticipated. Things routinely broke down and fell apart, had*

to be repaired or replaced. And how could I complain when he explained his reasons for not paying me; he was providing us with clean lodgings, three meals a day, and a young girl (who also lived in their house) to care for you while I worked.

It took years to save enough money to get an apartment of our own. And just when it was looking like we could hold our heads above water, there was one more expense: Jenni came along.

You never asked a single question when I brought her home. Not "Where did she come from?" or "Why is she here?" You simply sat on the sofa and opened your arms wide. "Can I hold her?" you asked. When I laid her on your lap, your eyes filled with tears. "She's beautiful, Aunt Stella," you said. "Like one of the cherubs in the stained glass windows at church... only prettier." And from that day on, you opened wide your heart, and shared what little you had with Jenni. It is you who are the angel, my sweet Emma. So now you shall know the answers to questions you never asked:

I was alone in the clinic that morning when the constable brought Jenni's mother to me. She was young—perhaps fifteen or sixteen—and dressed like a beggar. The officer found her in the train station, alone, with no ticket and not a penny in her pockets. I sat with her for hours, patting her hand and pressing cool cloths to her forehead as she talked about nothing in particular...and I talked about you. No matter what words of comfort I spoke, she would not tell me where she came from or who her family was. To tell, she explained, would be to shame them, for her parents were good Christian people who did not deserve a daughter who committed the terrible sin of fornication. That dreadful word again! My heart went out to her, of course, for I understood exactly how she felt.

Jenni's mother was not a healthy girl, as I was when I learned you were on the way, nor was she blessed with a loving

*couple to care for her as the baby grew within her. I don't imagine she ate well during her long months on the road, and likely hadn't rested much, either. Her weariness showed in the hollows beneath her blue eyes.*

*The baby came after many hours of hard, agonizing labor. Afterward, some members of the church said her pain was her well-deserved penance for sin. I will not presume to know the mind of God, but I'm certain she had not done anything in her short life to deserve what came next.*

*The poor child began to hemorrhage, and nothing I did stanch the flow of her life's blood. Sensing the end was near, she whispered into my ear, "Call her Jenni, not Jennifer" she said, "just Jenni." It was her own name, you see. "When you call her Jenni, it will be as if a part of me lives on."*

*She took for granted I would keep her baby. I suggested the child might be better off with a loving couple who could give her far more than me, an unmarried woman raising a child alone. "You love your Emma," she whispered. "I see it in your eyes and hear it in your voice. I want my Jenni to grow up with love like that." She was dying, and we both knew it. How could I have refused her?*

*So now you know the truth, my dear Emma. The whole truth, and nothing but, as they say in the courtroom. For as long as I can remember, I have gone to bed each night with a pain in my stomach for keeping the truth from you. Perhaps God will ease the pain of my sickness now that I have, at long last, unburdened myself. They say confession is good for the soul; I say it does nothing but burden the listener.*

*Oh, dear Emma, I pray you can find it in your heart to forgive me for not having told you everything sooner. I've lived the lie so long; I didn't know how to set it right. I have no courage, I've discovered, and it was my weakness that kept me quiet. I feared that if I told you, and saw disappointment in your eyes, it would have killed me.*



*I know in my heart you will continue to take care of little Jenni, just as you've always taken care of her. Yes, my life has been complete for having loved and been loved by you. You, however, deserved a better mother than I could ever have been. Still, you did well with what God handed you. Just look at how you've turned out! I love you now, and when I am gone, I will love you still. I am proud, so very proud, to have been,*

*Your mother*

Dabbing at her damp eyes with the corner of a lacy handkerchief, Emma leaned back in the rocker and sighed. She read the letter a hundred times already, and understood only too well why Stella believed it necessary to keep the truth from the Farleys. They were, as Stella described, a grim, judgmental pair. But even if she read the letter a hundred times more, Emma didn't think she'd ever understand why Stella felt the need to deceive her.

She lived her whole life with the woman. They laughed and cried together, worked and relaxed together, prayed and planned together. How could she have spent twenty-six years under the same roof with Aunt Stella, and not have known her at all! It shook Emma's world to learn that she was so deeply and deliberately deceived by the one person she trusted the most.

Admittedly, some good things came from those years—Jenni, for one. There was no denying Emma loved the child who'd been raised as her little sister. They resembled one another enough to have been born of the same parents, with their gleaming blond hair and glittering blue eyes, pale freckled skin and tall willowy builds. Indeed, if Emma married at fifteen, she might have had a daughter who looked just like Jenni.

Before the letter arrived, Emma believed herself to have been orphaned at birth. But each time she read it, she was forced to admit that, like Matt, she, too, had recently been left alone in a world filled with families.

Lips taut in grim determination, Emma resolved to do everything in her power to keep Matt with her. They were two of a kind. Soul mates, sharing a recent aloneness. He needed her love and guidance, protection and care. Who could understand him better than the woman who had experienced his pain...twice!

"I've decided to change my name to Matt Evans Wright; a fine strong name, don't you think?" he'd said at supper. "Matthew Evans Wright," Emma whispered. After rolling it over and over on her tongue, she smiled at the sound of it. *It is a fine strong name, and I want it to be his name.*

She had no idea how, but she would make it happen. And she'd begin the process first thing in the morning.



While Jenni was off spending the day at her best friend Carolyn's house, Emma brought Matt with her to the bank. It was time, at last, to do as her aunt—her mother—had instructed in the will, and put Emma's name on the woman's account.

Matt, bored after the first five minutes of waiting as Emma discussed the matter with the bank manager, asked the woman behind the counter for a pencil and a piece of paper. Madeline Campbell handed him two sheets of fancy bank stationery and a matching envelope. She leaned over the counter and looked both ways, then narrowed her eyes and spoke in low tones.

"Be careful not to make a mess," she warned, waving the pen like a wand, "when you dip this into the inkwell."

Matt smiled up at the pretty young teller. "Thank you, ma'am," he said softly. "I'll be careful, I promise."

He tiptoed across the marble-floored space and chose the counter farthest from where Emma and Mr. Prentice sat talking. The surreptitious mood created by the teller's conspiratorial whispers enveloped Matt. Hunched over the table, hiding the pages between his arms, he touched the point of the pen to the ink.

To: Lee

From: Pickett

Squinting with concentration as he considered what to write next, Matt watched a spider climb up the plaster wall and disappear behind the huge oil portrait of the bank's founder.

Sir,

*We have succeeded in fooling the Union army! The foolish northerners think they have won the war! Ha, ha, ha, the last laugh will be ours!*

Matt glanced at the grandfather clock near the double entry doors and took note of the time: ten thirty-six.

*Our spies have informed us that the Yankees have a huge savings account at First Bank and Trust on Main Street in Ellicott City. If we blow up the bank, they will not have enough money to buy cannonballs for their cannons or shot for their muskets! So we will attack at precisely ten forty-five. If any of your men are in the First Bank and Trust building, get them out of there quick or they will be blown to smithereens when we aim our big guns at the bank!*

Very truly yours,  
Mr. George Pickett

"Oops!" he whispered, drawing a neat line through "Mr." and writing "General" above it. Grinning mischievously, Matt blotted the page, folded it in thirds, and slid it into the matching envelope. "Top Secret!" he wrote in big bold letters across its front. "Do not read unless you are General Robert E. Lee!"

He walked to where two elegant divans faced one another on opposite sides of a gleaming cherry wood table, and stuffed the envelope between two cushions, making sure one corner of it stood

out conspicuously from the green leather upholstery. Hand over his grinning mouth, Matt dashed back to the wall, where he pretended to be engrossed in reading the newspaper he'd found folded on the counter, and waited to see the response his message would get.

Three grown-ups passed the sofa before one took note of the envelope. The bespectacled chap slowed his steps as he raised a curious brow. Then, frowning, he resumed his pace and didn't stop walking until he stood at the teller's window.

The heavy wooden doors squeaked as another customer entered the bank. Matt's heart lurched when he saw who it was. It had been six months since he saw him last.

He'd been garbed in black when he so gently lifted Matt from the wagon bed. Today, he wore blue trousers and a collarless white shirt under a black jacket. He'd lost his hat that day; evidently, he'd found it. Almost as if he read Matt's mind, the man whipped it from his head. In the boy's eyes, the man who risked his own life to save him stood taller and broader, even, than his pa.

Though the beard was just as black and the hair a bit longer, his eyes seemed darker and his mouth set tighter. Matt wished he'd smile again, the way he smiled when he'd said, "You'll get nothin' but the truth from me, son; you've got me word on it."

That day, the stranger went into the street where his parents and brother laid dead, and stood, head bowed as in prayer for so long that Matt wondered if he forgot his promise to deliver the truth. But when he turned and faced Matt, the bank's wavy windowpane gave their eye contact an eerie, dizzying effect, like the mirrors in a carnival fun house. But there was hardly a carnival countenance on the man's careworn face. In the minute or so it took him to cross to the boardwalk, Matt almost wished he never demanded to hear the truth.

Emma hadn't left his side, not for an instant. Matt could almost feel her hands now, squeezing his shoulders as if to remind him she was there, right there.

"The news ain't good, son." The man's soft, gravelly voice had washed over Matt like an ocean wave. "I'm afraid...they're gone."

He remembered how it galled him the way his lower lip refused to stop trembling. He wanted to appear strong—manly—as much in control of his emotions as this handsome hero seemed to be. "Gone?" he'd asked.

The dark brows drew together, and for a moment, he averted his gaze. When he looked into Matt's face again, he said one word, a word the boy knew would echo in his head 'til his dying day: "Yes."

The dark brows were drawn together now, too, as though the stranger might be wondering why the boy on the other side of the bank was studying him so intensely. *Does he remember me?* Matt wondered as his ears and cheeks grew hot. Several of the newspaper's pages slipped from his fidgeting fingers and fluttered to the floor, and when he bent to pick them up, he thumped his noggin on the table leg. "Ow," he whispered, wincing as he pressed a palm to his forehead.

He looked up in time to see the man pull the message from between the sofa cushions. Gasping, Matt did the only thing he could think to do, and darted to the desk where Emma and Mr. Prentice sat talking.

"Matthew," Emma said, smiling and patting his hand, "we'll be finished in just a minute. Be a good boy and wait for me on the sofa over there, won't you?"

His eyes darted from Emma's gentle face to the stranger's, and back again. "But...but I..."

She laid a hand on his forearm. "I've a penny in my pocket," she whispered. "It's yours if you do as I ask."

"I'm so sorry for the interruption," he heard Emma say to the manager.

The manager chuckled. "Think nothing of it. The child has been through a lot. Does my heart good to see a smile on his face for a change. Besides," he added, "boys will be boys."

*See him smile for a change?* Matt repeated to himself, tucking in one corner of his mouth in disgust. *Why, I smile plenty!* With a huff of breath, he crossed both arms over his chest. *That man will obviously say anything to keep a customer happy.*

Indeed, Matt had been working hard to act every bit the care-free boy God intended him to be. How else was he going to keep the nightmares from haunting him during the daytime, too?

The man stood a few yards away, reading Matt's letter. After a moment, he glanced at the clock, then straightened his back. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said in a loud, clear voice, "there's somethin' I think you should know."