

DREWRY'S
Bluff

DREWRY'S
Bluff

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.

DREWRY'S BLUFF

Loree Lough
www.loreelough.com

ISBN: 978-1-60374-847-6
eBook: 978-1-60374-848-3
Printed in the United States of America
© 1995, 2013 by Loree Lough

Whitaker House
1030 Hunt Valley Circle
New Kensington, PA 15068
www.whitakerhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lough, Loree.
Drewry's bluff / Loree Lough.
pages cm
ISBN 978-1-60374-847-6 (alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-60374-848-3 (ebook)
I. Title.
PS3562.O8147D74 2013
813'.54--dc23

2013008302

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical—including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system—without permission in writing from the publisher. Please direct your inquiries to permissionseditor@whitakerhouse.com.

Dedication

To my husband, for his support and encouragement,
to my children, for their cooperation
and understanding,
to my Lord and Savior, who called me to write.

PROLOGUE

Baltimore
Autumn, 1854

Little Drewry Sheffield missed her mama and papa nearly every minute of every day since they'd died, months earlier. A snake had frightened the roan mares that pulled her father's grand carriage, overturning it and pinning her parents beneath its big, iron-rimmed wheels.

She wished they were here with her now, to explain why she had to sit in this huge room, filled with black-suited, stern-looking men. She hugged her rag doll tightly and met her uncle's clear blue gaze.

"Come sit here on my lap, precious Drew-girl," James said, smiling gently as he patted his thigh. "You look like a scared rabbit, and there's absolutely no reason for you to be afraid."

Drewry snuggled against his big, broad chest. The steady thump, thump, thump of his heart comforted her. "Uncle James," she whispered, "why are we here in this big, dark room? And when can we go home?"

He'd be honest with her; he always had been. She remembered the morning of her fifth birthday, when Muffin disappeared.

Everyone at Plumtree Orchards told her, in sweet sing-songy voices, that her pup had run off to live a happier life in puppy heaven.

But James, seventeen at the time, had waited until the sun was high in the sky, then took her hand and led her along the banks of the Gunpowder River. There, on a ridge overlooking the valley, he told her point-blank that her dog died of distemper. "You're not a baby anymore," he said. "You deserve to know the truth."

She would never forget that. Many times since then, she'd returned to the place Uncle James had dubbed "Drewry's Bluff," since it was there that he hadn't bluffed her about the truth. If only she could go there now!

"What's going on?" she asked again. "Why do they all look so angry?"

"Hush," he soothed softly, patting her slender back. "See there? Mr. Taylor is about to call this meeting to order, at long last."

Dubiously, Drewry eyed Mr. Taylor, a man she'd known her whole life. He and his family had taken dozens of Sunday dinners at the massive mahogany table in the elegant Sheffield dining room. Usually, he had a friendly grin and a mischievous wink for her, but not today. On this bleak, rainy morning, his long, narrow face seemed paler than usual, and the black, bushy brows above his blue eyes were drawn together in a frown. Drewry couldn't decide if he was angry or sad, and couldn't decide why he'd be either....

In fact, every man in the room wore an expression similar to Mr. Taylor's, Drewry noted. Sweet old Mr. Bartell, who snuck her a chip of rock candy each time she stood with her mother at the counter of his general store, wouldn't meet Drewry's eyes. And Pastor Carter, whose friendly smile never failed to produce one of her own, wasn't smiling now. Why, even Mr. Mossman, who always had a red lollipop waiting for her when she went with her father to the bank, was scowling. She felt small and helpless...and very frightened.

Drewry hugged her doll tighter still and squeezed her eyes shut tight. *Sweet Jesus*, she prayed silently, fervently, *please get me out of this scary place!* She held her breath and waited for the magic of God's awesome power to transport her to the cozy comfort of her room. But she wasn't really surprised, when she opened her eyes, to find herself still in the dim, stuffy office....

Her mama had told her time and again that if she was very, very good and prayed very, very hard, the Lord would fill each and every one of her needs. Well, she was as good as she knew how to be. And she prayed harder than she ever prayed in her whole life. Yet God hadn't brought her mama and papa back. Drewry believed His refusal meant she wasn't good enough, hadn't prayed hard enough, to be worthy of His answer.

Joshua Taylor cleared his throat. "I think it's time we get on with the reading of the last will and testament."

The men sat straighter in the red velvet wing chairs that surrounded the lawyer's large oak desk. A rustle of paper whispered through the otherwise silent room as he slid a one-page letter from a white envelope. Drewry knew who had written it, for she recognized the dark scrawl of her father's powerful hand.

"To whom it may concern," the lawyer began reading. "In the event of the simultaneous deaths of George Ethan Sheffield and Margaret Mary Sheffield, we, being of sound minds and bodies, do hereby instruct Joshua Taylor, trusted friend and attorney, to dispose of our worldly possessions as follows..."

Taylor stopped, cleared his throat, glanced once around the room. His gaze lingered for a moment on the wide, long-lashed eyes of the child who shuddered involuntarily when he continued reading. "It is our wish that James Johnson Sheffield shall be executor of our estate and guardian of our only child, Drewry Margaret. All assets and monies now held by First Freeland Bank and Trust shall be made available to him as he deems fit and proper to ensure the financial success of Plumtree Orchard Plantation and all other

Sheffield holdings listed herewith, in order that our daughter shall be guaranteed a secure future....”

Mr. Mossman inhaled sharply, and Drewry’s gaze lighted on him. Why did he seem so upset? Why did he look so very angry? “What does it all mean, Uncle James?” she whispered, leaning still closer against his broad chest.

“Shhh, Drew-girl,” James cautioned. “I’ll explain on the way home.”

With the unabashed scrutiny of youth, Drewry studied her only relative’s handsome face and lively blue eyes. The honesty and affection she saw there eased her mind. Yes, she’d be quiet, because Uncle James had asked her to. She’d do anything for Uncle James.

“Excuse me for a moment,” he said, standing. And putting Drewry in the chair where he’d sat, James added, “I’ll only be a moment.”

Drewry watched him cross to the big, double doors at the back of the room. If he said he’d be back in a moment, then he would. So why did the men look as though they didn’t believe him?

James had always been her favorite grown-up. He seemed to understand better than other adults the fears and yearnings of a child’s heart. Perhaps it was because he was born a full ten years after her father, and, being the “baby” of the family, was protected from life’s burdens and responsibilities, first by his parents and then by his big brother George. Perhaps it was because he’d only recently turned eighteen himself that he lived life like a carefree boy. Whatever the reason, Drewry sensed she could trust her uncle. So, yes, she’d save her questions for the hour-long ride home.

The men who’d gathered to witness the reading of her parents’ will moved to a spot near the window. “What was George thinking, leaving his estate in the hands of a ne’er-do-well like James?”

“Now, now,” soothed Pastor Carter, “James means well. He’s... well, he’s a happy-go-lucky sort, is all. Besides,” he added, “I don’t

imagine George really believed James would be taking on such a responsibility so soon."

"You've got that right," the lawyer agreed. "Why, George and Margaret were barely thirty when that carriage overturned." Joshua Taylor shook his head. "Surely they expected to live to a ripe old age...James, too."

Amos Mossman snorted. "He's a hail-fellow-well-met, that's what James is. Why, the boy will likely squander George's entire fortune within a year." He pointed a bony finger at the group. "You mark my words!"

His eyes widened with surprise when he glanced around the room and caught Drewry looking at him. "Goodness!" he whispered hoarsely. "The child's heard every word we've said."

Mossman stepped away from the group and went to Drewry. Crouching, he put his hands on her narrow shoulders. "Drewry, my dear," he said, "everything is going to be all right. You'll see." He gave her shoulders a little squeeze. "But if you ever have a problem...of any kind...come tell me about it, and I promise I'll help in any way I can."

Drewry nodded, but she didn't understand his concern, what "problem" he was talking about, or what "help" could he possibly be, since her Uncle James had promised to take care of her, always...?

Mossman rejoined his cohorts, still huddled near the window. They were her parents' friends. She knew them all her life. So Drewry smiled politely, though their whispers and head shaking sent shivers up her spine.

She searched for her Uncle James, and found him in the outer office, laughing and chatting with Mr. Taylor's pretty young secretary. The minute he spotted Drewry, he sent a merry wink her way, and immediately, a sense of relief flooded over her.

God didn't love her, of that Drewry was sure. He'd proven it when He didn't bring her mama and papa back. She must be a bad

girl indeed if even sweet Jesus, who loved all the little children, didn't love her enough to answer such an important prayer. Still, she pondered, she couldn't be all *that* bad...

...not if someone as wonderful as her Uncle James loved her.

ONE

Freeland, Maryland
October, 1868

“Don’t you dare contradict me, you ungrateful hussy!” James Sheffield snarled as he raised his hand.

Drewry shrank back from the tall, black-bearded man who reeked of whiskey and cigars. “Uncle James, I can’t...you can’t...”

“I can and you will!” He let his arm drop heavily when Drewry sprang back out of his reach.

Accustomed to her uncle’s drinking bouts, Drewry knew that his intoxicated state would prevent him from pursuing her. This time, however, like a trapped bird, she huddled against the massive walnut sideboard, her blue calico dress and layers of white petticoats billowing about her slender body like a cloud.

“After all I’ve done for you!” he roared, his words slurring. “Now, don’t you go hidin’ on me, girl. I need you to save the estate.”

“Uncle, I’m grateful to you for raising me, but I will not marry Porter Hopkins,” she said, putting as much determination into her words as she could muster. Her body stiffened. “Not even to save Plumtree Orchards.”

"He won you as his bride, fair and square."

Drewry felt the bile rise in her throat. "I can't believe you would gamble me away at a poker game, like a cow or a donkey!"

"Believe it."

He lurched toward her again. For the first time in her life, Drewry was truly afraid of her uncle. Seeing an opportunity to escape, she sprang from behind the sideboard, grabbing a heavy, silver soup ladle as she went. Could she use it to defend herself? *Only if I must*, she thought, darting past him and into the butler's pantry.

"Don't come any closer! I'm warning you!" she cried, brandishing the soup ladle like a weapon.

"Sweetheart, surely you don't want your daddy's plantation to go to Hopkins and his good-for-nothin' relatives," Sheffield wheedled, his voice suddenly as soft as melted wax. "Once you're legally Mrs. Porter Hopkins, that ol' coot will give me back the deed, and—"

"Stay away!"

Drewry knew her uncle's drunken tricks. If he couldn't get his way through anger, he sweet talked. Usually, she humored him, listening to his wild ramblings about the War until Old Jeb took him off to bed. Tonight, she was having none of it.

"He's coming to get you at noon. And you'd best be ready—if you know what's good for you."

Suddenly, the red, puffy face of Porter Hopkins flashed before Drewry's eyes. Why, the man practically lived in the saloon! Even the thought of the lout sickened her. She recalled the tobacco juice stains in his mottled beard and his foul, disgraceful language. She shuddered. Marry one of the Freeland's low-life gamblers? Never!

"I won't marry him. You can't make me. I'm nearly twenty-one."

"I can't?" He smirked. "Well, we'll just see about that."

James snatched the key to the dining room door sitting atop the sideboard. In a heartbeat, before Drewry could jump from her

hiding place on the other side of the long, narrow room, he stepped outside the heavy door, pulled it shut behind him, and locked it.

As the iron key creaked in the lock, Drewry imagined the sound of a Yankee jailor locking up a Confederate in his cell.

She pounded on the door. "Uncle, for mercy's sake," she wailed, genuinely frightened now, "please don't ask me to marry a man I don't love!"

"Oh, hush your weeping, girl. It isn't as though you have any husband prospects in sight. Just thank God someone will take you."

Drewry slid down the door and crumpled into a heap on the pine wood floor. She crouched there, sobbing into her soft cotton skirts. She shivered as she heard her uncle's brass-capped cane tapping unevenly down the hallway, heading toward the library... and his seemingly never-ending whiskey supply. The eerie sound echoed in the high stairwell as he limped away.

In all her years, Drewry had never felt such deep and utter abandonment. Its icy fingers tightened around her stomach. Her horror at Uncle James's cruelty turned into despair. A raw grief overwhelmed her as she realized he was right: She was alone, and no one wanted her.



Drewry checked the brass timepiece perched on the mantel of the white marble fireplace. Two hours past midnight. How long had she laid there, weeping, before falling into exhausted slumber? She scrambled to her feet. It wouldn't do any good to pray. She knew that by now. And she had wasted enough precious timefeeling sorry for herself. If she had any hope of escaping marriage to Porter Hopkins, she'd best hurry.

Drewry eased the window open. The beveled glass panes distorted the bright light of the moon that burnished the dark apple and pear trees in her father's orchards. She lifted her hands to

either side of her mouth and drew a deep breath. Moments later an owl's hoot keened over the dusty yard and filtered back to the servants' quarters near the barn. Three times she mimicked the cry—the code she and Old Jeb had been using for years whenever she needed his help with her uncle.

And she had needed the faithful servant's help more times than she cared to remember.

Since returning home from the Civil War, Lieutenant Colonel James Sheffield hadn't been the same. The loving uncle who'd reared Drewry since her parents' death had, for all intents and purposes, perished alongside his men on the battlefield at Gettysburg.

Oh, his body hadn't died, she thought bitterly; instead, it seemed he'd lost his soul. James blamed himself for bad decisions that led to the bloody slaughter of so many Confederates under his command. He came home a haunted man—his hair gone gray, his left foot half shot away, his face scarred, and nearly blind in one eye.

He often woke screaming in the night. Unable to live with the deeds he'd done, he sought solace in the golden elixir of a whiskey bottle, hoping it would hold at bay all the demons that tortured him.

Drewry knew that her uncle had gambled away much of her inheritance at The Silver Dollar Saloon, playing poker with Porter Hopkins and other layabouts who were too busy with drinking and games of chance to tend their crops. Two years earlier, her old friend, banker Amos Mossman, told her that the money her father had worked so hard to earn was nearly gone. "This isn't exactly legal," he'd whispered, thrusting a small sack of cash into her hands, "but I can't in good conscience watch him destroy you *and* Plumtree Orchards." He told her to hide the money...and keep their exchange strictly to herself. Thankfully, she'd taken his advice!

A gentle rapping on the window startled her from her reverie. Peering outside, she saw the familiar form of Old Jeb—trusted friend, farmhand, and former slave.

"Jeb! I'm locked in! He's forcing me to marry Porter Hopkins in the morning!"

"Don't you worry none, Miss Drew," Jeb whispered. "I'll scout out the house and see what Mr. James be up to."

Minutes later, Drewry heard the key in the dining room door. When he opened it, she flung herself against his tall, wiry frame. "Oh, thank the good Lord it's you!"

"There, there," Jeb crooned, patting her shoulders. "The good Lord ain't gonna abandon you in your hour of need. Mr. James be passed out on the liberry couch."

Drewry stepped back and wiped her tears with a corner of her apron. "Will you drive me to the train station, Jeb?"

"Course I will, Miss Drew. Much as I hate to see you go, you can't marry Porter Hopkins."

"Thank you, dear friend," she whispered, then gave a shudder of revulsion. "I certainly don't want to be a slave of that ol' coot."

"No, ma'am. Ain't right for no one to be owned by another. We is all children of God. Now you go on upstairs an' pack your bags whilst I get the carriage ready."

Drewry threw Jeb a small, sad smile as she slipped out of the dining room. She tiptoed down the hallway, past the library, and up the wide staircase, hardly daring to breathe until she reached her bedchamber.

She dragged her tapestry valise from under the bed and hefted it onto her feather-stuffed comforter. Biting back tears, she threw open the doors of the chiffonier and rooted through her dresses. Velvet, silk, taffeta, brocade—all beautiful gowns, expensive gowns. But she'd have to leave most of them behind.

Quickly, she slipped into a green and gold tartan, a good traveling outfit. She wanted to go far, far away. Far from the fleshy, sweaty hands of Porter Hopkins, far from the terrors of her uncle's post-War madness. She stuffed as many dresses, skirts, and shirt-waists into the valise as would fit.

Next, she opened her rosewood jewelry box, which was empty, thanks to James. Fortunately, she'd hidden a few of the pieces she'd inherited from her mother. There, in the back of her top bureau drawer was the ivory cameo that had come over from England. The ruby necklace and earbobs, a wedding gift from her father to her mother, gleamed in the lamplight. Fighting back tears, she slipped on the jewelry. She didn't want to take any chances on thieves rifling through her valise in the train's baggage car.

Jeb appeared in her doorway, quiet as a ghost. "You ready, Miss Drew?" he whispered.

Almost as an afterthought, she crammed a pair of slippers, an extra pair of button-up boots, and a two-hooped petticoat into the valise.

Jeb hoisted it from the bed. "We'll leave from the gateway so's Mr. James don't hear us...though he be dead to the world, far as I can tell."

As Jeb tiptoed down the servants' staircase, Drewry surveyed the hat-lined shelves in her chiffonier. *I'll wear one and take one*, she decided. Carefully, she placed her best Sunday bonnet in a round flowered box and selected a green velvet hat, decorated with an ostrich feather, for her journey.

At the doorway, she cast one last look around her childhood room. Tears pricked her eyes as she scanned the red velvet window seat and morning chair. She'd never again lounge there, reading romantic stories and the engrossing, melancholy tales of Dickens.

She grasped the thick glass doorknob and quietly closed the door behind her, shutting out the sights of her past. She couldn't bear to look at her grandmother's four-poster bed again. Drewry had been born there, and, all her life, expected that someday, her own children would come into the world in that same fine old piece of furniture.

But it wasn't to be. As the years of taking care of Uncle James stretched out, her girlhood friends married, one by one, and left

Freeland, and Drewry's hope for her own nuptials diminished, like a fading star until, even with a spyglass, a person couldn't see it at all.



"Whoa! Steady there, boy!"

Old Jeb's voice soothed the black stallion, who, unaccustomed to pulling the carriage in the middle of the night, was spooked by a rabbit darting across the road.

"Only another five mile' or so, Miss Drew." Jeb turned to his companion in the driving seat and smiled. "We gonna miss you 'round here, Missy an' me. Not that we don't understand why you gotta go...."

Drewry leaned forward and laid her hand on his shoulder. "What would I do without you, old friend?" She swiped at the traitorous tear that slid down her cheek. "Oh, Jeb, what if I never see you again?"

"I'll be 'round, Miss Drew. Folks like you and me, we got a bond, ere." He tapped his thin chest. "So for a while, we'll jus' have to write one 'nother." The old man paused. "It be thanks to your fam'ly that ol' Jeb know how to write at all. Why, if your daddy hadn't taught me, I'd be jus' as ignorant as them other ex-slaves."

Drewry smiled. "Why, he had to teach you to read and write, Jeb. It wasn't right for you to be deprived of the joy of reading the Word of the Lord for yourself."

"Yep." He drew himself up proudly beside her. "Now I reads two chapters from the Good Book each and every day—one from the Old Testament and one from the New. One thing I do know—" he grew serious, turning to regard her solemnly "—you is in the Lord's hands, Miss Drewry. He ain't about to cast off one o' His own. He got plans for you."

Drewry sighed. She wished her faith were as strong as Jeb's. She believed God performed miracles...for other people. But

rather than admit how long it had been since she'd trusted in God's care for herself, Drewry stiffened her back and folded her hands over the green velvet purse on her lap.

"You'll have to be careful, Jeb, to see that Uncle James doesn't find my letters. We'll both be in a heap of trouble if he finds out where I am," she said, eager to steer the conversation away from herself.

"Don't you worry none," said Jeb as he slapped the reins against the black horse's back. "I be the one to collect the mail in town. Mr. James ain't done that chore for years." Jeb chuckled softly. "Ain't done none o' the other chores, neither."

Drewry nodded. She knew only too well that Jeb carried the lion's share of running Plumtree Orchards. Silence fell over them for the duration of their trip south from Freeland to Baltimore.

Jeb didn't speak again until she bought her ticket and settled herself on a bench to wait for the early morning train. "Good-bye, Miss Drew," he said, his voice low and gravelly.

Drewry could see tears in the tired old eyes. She reached out and hugged him, an action that earned her a disapproving look from the clerk behind the counter. "Good-bye, Jeb. Take care."

"I'll be prayin' for you, miss. The Lord—He gonna take care of you real good. I know it."

Nodding, she thought, *If only I could believe that...*

Drewry sat near the window in the drafty depot waiting room and peered through the lumpy glass until Jeb's gentle whip prodded the fine black stallion into action. It was a sad moment when the carriage left the train station.

The night was dark as pitch and a moaning wind sighed through the trees. Drewry shivered, though it was an unseasonably warm night. *The Lord—He gonna take care of you real good.* Drewry repeated Jeb's departing words in her mind, vainly trying to draw some small measure of comfort from them. Suddenly, by the light of the flickering oil lamp, she caught her own reflection in the window.

Who was that worried-looking woman?

She tucked wisps of hair under her hat and sat up straighter. *You may be down, Drewry Sheffield, but you're not finished. Not by a long shot. So you were gambled away by your only living relative. You've still got your health, your youth, and enough money to start a new life.*

And where there's life, there's hope....