

# Chapter 1

## Early Fall, 1860

**“I beg of you. Let me go!”** Felicity Phelps desperately struggled to free herself from the men who held her from the burning building, not thirty feet in front of her.

**“Oh, please, Mama and Papa are trapped inside!”**

Again, the young woman fought to free herself from the steely grip of the two men holding her captive, yelling fiercely, **“You’re killing them!”** Seeing no response, Felicity tried to scream louder over the cheering crowd.

**“Don’t you hear me? They are dying!”**

Looking at one of her captors, Mr. Kincade, a long-time friend of the family, she begged, “Oh, please Mr. Kincade...Why are you doing this?” All the while thrashing about to be freed.

A wave of new enthusiasm erupted from the crowd as the thick, black smoke and red flames intensified, rising high above the wooden structure. The heat from the raging fire was so intense that even from this distance, Felicity could feel it on her face. As she watched in horror, the fire ravaged the wooden structure that had once been a safe haven for runaway slaves.

Agonized screams for help had long ceased from within. All that remained were the snapping and popping sounds of dry wood as the flames rolled across the rotted boards in a thick fog that now completely engulfed the wooden structure. Dark gray and white smoke bellowed out from where a door and small window on the second story once stood.

Dumbfounded and dazed, Felicity looked up at the men who held her captive. Nothing seemed natural. Was it possible that a trusted friend of the family was now responsible for the murder of her father and mother?

Unable to fathom such a horrible thought, she pleaded again, looking directly into James Kincade’s eyes. “Please, Mr. Kincade, I beg of you, let me go to them. Mama and Papa are trapped inside.”

The man tightened his grip around her forearms, eyes narrowing as he peered down at her. “I’m warning ya girl, hush up, or I’ll let them have you,

*Linda Daly*

too.”

Felicity quivered, seeing the hatred for her in his eyes, which had once been filled with love. Shaking her head in denial, she mumbled, “Mr. Kincade, it’s me, Felicity... Your best friends’ daughter.”

In her confused state, Felicity’s mind found it difficult to accept that a man, who had been a loyal and trusted family friend for decades, was now taking part in committing such an unimaginable act of honor. Felicity’s eyes traveled back to the engulfed building and she whimpered, “Mama, Papa...”

Within seconds, a thunderous roar echoed through the back woods of the Phelps property, as the roof of the engulfed dwelling gave way, shooting redhot ambers into the night air, some landing only inches from her feet. Felicity stared at the charred fragments, mystified. She watched the scattered remains of the building turn from bright red to charcoal black. Looking up and over to the demolished building, where her parents had been trapped, Felicity wondered if the same were true for those buried under the burned pile of rubble. *Had the life drained from them, too?*

Such a thought was so unbearable; she tried to pull free from her captors once more, her head thrashing back and forth in denial. Through her confusion and shock, she tried to make some sense of what had just happened.

How could one of the most respected families in this peaceful coastal town off the Chesapeake Bay, be treated now with such disregard and worse, probably killed for aiding runners?

Her back stiffened at this new thought. “The runners...” she whispered; “Oh dear God, not the children, too!”

In trying to comprehend her personal loss, which was so immense, she had forgotten about the others who surely had died along with her parents. The thought of their tiny frames consumed by the fire, along with their parents was unthinkable. *Those poor children...you killed them too. Why?* New waves of shock jolted through her tortured mind. The images of their sweet faces haunted her, and she cried out in agony.

“Oh sweet Jesus...help them!” Her words barely audible through her tears of regret. “They were innocent children!”

Watching the angry mob in slow motion, no longer capable of distinguishing their words, she viewed their expressions of hate. She pleaded with them one last time.

“Please. Let me die too. Please, let me go...”

In her grief-crazed state, unable to think clearly any longer, she stopped in mid-sentence. Felicity’s head rolled toward her chest, her body no longer struggled, and she slumped forward, lifeless legs dangling behind her limp

*Virtuous Dove*

body. With a satisfied grin, the stranger wiped beads of sweat mixed with black ash and soot from his sunken cheeks, and called over to James Kincade who still gripped Felicity's forearm.

"Well, what the hell do we do with her?"

James Kincade, noticing that Felicity had fainted, shrugged his shoulders and said coldly; "For all I care, she can go to the devil, the damned abolitionist."

Chuckling, both men simultaneously released the unconscious Felicity. Seeing her body fall unceremoniously to the ground generated new sneers from the crowd that resonated into the smoke filled field.

"Serves them all right!"

"The high and mighty have fallen!"

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Weeks had passed, yet the sights and smells of that fateful evening never left Felicity for an instant. Poised in front of a mahogany secretary, all in black, with quill pen in hand, Felicity sat silently and pondered. *How should I describe the events that changed my life forever, to a distant relative?* Unable to think, she placed the pen back into the ink well. Hiding her face in her small, cupped hands, she gently began to caress her wrinkled brow.

From a distance, an onlooker might not see anything unusual from this sight. Only at a closer look, would someone realize that something was definitely amiss. Any other fair maiden from these parts would be wearing something far more cheerful in color on this unseasonably warm, humid, late fall day. Yet, this young southern belle, easily recognized to be in mourning, sat silently in her black gown, with a lace fan resting on her lap. Slowly her long fingers trailed down her arched neck and then to the lace fan. Opening the fan with a flick of her wrist, she slowly began to move it back and forth in front of her troubled face. Under her breath, she mumbled,

"Mercy, where do I begin?"

Receiving no inspiration, she began thinking about her beloved parents, William Erasmus and Rachael Phelps. *Oh, Mama and Papa, I miss you so! Thank heavens you are not here to see how Erasmus is behaving. As hard as I try to understand his point of view, it is so hurtful to hear what he has done. Do you know that he refuses to have anything to do with me?* As if waiting for an answer from her dead parents, Felicity looked out the lace curtains of

*Linda Daly*

Reverend Bishop's study.

Immediately following her parents' demise, Erasmus, her older brother, the only son of William and Rachel Phelps, insisted on dropping his father's name entirely. Proclaiming that from hereafter, he was to be known strictly as Casper Phelps, after his paternal grandfather, Casper William Phelps. By making such a declaration, her brother made it seem as if their father, William Erasmus had never existed.

Shaking her head in dismay, her eyes trailed back to the blank sheet of paper before her. Still feeling uninspired, she stretched her neck. *My, but it sure is hot today. How can a body be expected to think in all this heat?* Rather than waiting until later when the sun had gone down to write the letter, Felicity remained at her post, certain that suffering from the heat was less severe than the wrath of Mrs. Bishop.

Since the death of Felicity's folks, Sally Bishop had made it painfully clear how she, along with other townfolk, felt about her family after discovering they were abolitionists. *How could one word, deemed a 'traitorous' act by her community, destroy the reputation and legacy that her grandparents had worked so hard for?* Felicity wondered in despair.

Their place in the community, off the shores of the Chesapeake Bay in Mathew County, Virginia, founded by Casper William Phelps and Elizabeth Mary Robbins Phelps, provided a prosperous existence. However, the legacy that her grandfather had built had long ceased, leaving behind contempt for the once revered family name. Felicity's entire life had changed in one day.

The Phelps family shipping business and family home, along with most of the furnishings, had been sold at auction. Even her grandparents' heirlooms, brought with them from England, were now only memories.

The proceeds were given to the plantation owner whose slaves had been killed in the fire, as restitution for losing his property. All that remained were a few dated gowns that were out of season, which someone anonymously packed in carpetbags and delivered to the steps of the rectory of St. George's Parish, where Felicity was now forced to reside.

Soon after her parents' deaths, she discovered that Erasmus insisted on staying in town. Where? Felicity had not been told. All she had managed to find out was that her brother had secured a position in a tobacco factory, and was determined to stay in the prosperous shipping town that he loved, formerly known as Gloucester.

Then came the final blow of humiliation when Reverend Bishop suggested she contact relatives in England for further help, rather than be sent to a poor

### *Virtuous Dove*

farm. At first, Felicity hesitated, recalling the ill will that remained with her grandfather even to his dying days, toward his family back in England. However, the thought of herself living amongst the poor as a field hand left her no alternative but to write and ask for help, despite knowing the ill feeling her grandfather had for his family back in England.

From an early age, she had known that her grandfather was born near Plymouth, England, and that his family had disowned him when he made the decision to migrate to the colonies. Trying to contact any of them now was nearly impossible and surely would not be proper, especially since her grandfather, while alive, was so adamantly opposed to such a suggestion.

She vividly recalled the scene at her grandfather's deathbed, when her father had asked, if there was anyone he should contact. The weakened, dying, Casper Phelps had sat up and shouted, "NO! They can all go to the devil as far as I am concerned. My only family is here!"

Whatever bad blood existed between the elderly Phelps and himself, Casper took with him to his grave. Felicity had always known her grandfather to be a stubborn man, but she surmised that the Phelpses, whoever they were, must be wretched, terrible people, if even on his deathbed her grandfather reacted in such a manner. Felicity's only recourse was to contact her deceased grandmother's side of the family, her only brother, a Mr. Edwin Robbins of London, England.

"This is certainly not getting that darned old letter wrote!" she scolded herself. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself and write for goodness sake."

After what seemed like hours, pondering what was appropriate, Felicity cautiously composed a brief letter explaining the position in which she now found herself. Careful not to include the reason for her parents' deaths, she instead explained that they had been tragically killed in a fire and all was lost, including the family home, business, and most of their belongings. Realizing that this was perhaps misleading, giving the impression that the fire destroyed her home, Felicity rationalized that it would be far wiser to explain their roles as Abolitionists later.

Shaking her head, she whispered, "Yes, this is more suitable! Surely after we have the opportunity of getting to know one another better, he will understand more clearly."

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