

# **1 - Washday**

April 1st, 1861

Home

*Oh, how I hate mornings, for they tend to arrive far too early.*

Yet, the tantalizing aroma of fresh baked bread and strong brewed coffee nudged sixteen-year-old Alexandria's thoughts to shift from the warmth of her bed to distinct hunger pangs. Lulled by the soft rain as it pattered across the shingled roof, she forced open her reluctant eyes. The room was still dark, but a bright golden slit of lamplight peeked from under the closed door.

*Goodness, Mama allowed me to sleep late.*

After a languorous stretch in her cotton nightgown, she mentally ran through the perpetual list of chores that waited for her. Get dressed, grab a quick breakfast, and then split firewood on the back porch for the humongous cast iron stove. Since this was washday Monday, she and Mama needed to stay ahead of the continuous stack of dirty clothes on the back porch. But, her most important task, according to her always observant mother, was to keep a sharp lookout over her three younger siblings.

Uttering a groan, she pulled the blanket over her head - *Just a few minutes more...*

In her cavern, she smiled. For sprinkled within the daily drudgery were times of pure delight. She enjoyed long walks in the pine woods behind the house and playing with the spring's arrival of various baby animals. Newborn kittens in the barn were her favorite. And especially times like right now, snuggled in bed where she imagined an exciting life away from the backbreaking labor of farming.

*Perhaps someday I shall be a teacher, or a seamstress since most are unmarried and they can travel the world and only live for themselves. I swear on my last dying breath, I will never wed and be a farmer's wife, whose dreary life is exactly the same every day and the only thing that changes is the new baby's name in your lap sucking your life dry.*

Mama hummed a soft melody from the other room and Alex sighed in resignation. *But, these precious moments never last long enough, I must arise. Mama needs me.*

The bed ropes creaked as she stood and smoothed the winter blankets over the thick, down-filled mattress. She opened the door

and permitted the soft glow of the lantern to enter the room. She noticed that Mama placed her work clothes on a chair next to the stove to warm them. Barefoot on the cool wooden floor, she walked into the large, brightly lit kitchen.

Mama sat in the oak rocking chair while she fed six-month-old baby Oliver. When he heard his sister's footsteps, he pulled aside the delicate, crocheted shawl, crinkled his pale blue eyes, and gave her a wide, milky grin with one new bottom tooth glistening.

Mama greeted her with a smile as well. "Good morning, dearest. Your father and brother already left for the barn, but we need to get the laundry done today or there will be nothing for them to wear tomorrow. With spring planting already upon us, those two can dirty coveralls worse than a pair of hogs in a wallow. The water is ready, so after breakfast, you will help me?"

Arms stretched high overhead, Alex muttered amid a yawn, "I think not today. What I really want to do is saddle old Brownie and ride him to Uncle and Auntie's. After all, you are the one who wanted the responsibility of a large family, not me."

Mama's large, dark brown eyes widened in shocked disbelief. "What?"

Alex's soul flooded with regret, for it seemed she always spoke without thought for others. After her older sister Emily married Charles and moved away a year ago, Mama's chores doubled and the dark circles under her eyes and her thin, slumped appearance showed her extreme exhaustion, although she would never admit to it.

"I am truly sorry, Mama. I only meant to tease a bit. Of course, I will help."

With a shake of her head, Mama clucked her tongue. "Where do you come up with such outlandish behavior?" Then the corners of Mama's mouth lifted and she added, "Must be your father's doing, of course."

Dressed in undergarments, Alex tossed her nightgown toward the room that she shared with her two younger sisters. She then donned the heavy, green linen blouse over her head, stepped into the calf-length black skirt, and fastened it with the long strings at the waistband. But, she left the itchy, woolen stockings on the chair.

Mama cocked an eyebrow. "What about your shoes?"

Alex wrinkled her nose and shot a glance toward the neat line of footwear by the backdoor, while hers were in a haphazard, muddy pile. "When I go outside, I will put them on."

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Placing baby Olli against her shoulder, Mama stood and patted his back to bring up a stubborn burp. “I suspect only if I tie you down and shove them on myself.”

Ignoring her comment, Alex sat in the ladder-backed chair, then held out the empty ceramic cup and asked the same question she did at every meal for the last two years, “Coffee?”

“It will stunt your growth. Drink your buttermilk instead.”

She set the cup down with a distinct thud. “I am already a head taller than you and you were fifteen when you drank coffee. In less than a month, I will be seventeen!”

“Must I remind you? I was a married woman and you are not.”

Lips pursed, Alex took a deep breath before daring to venture further. “So, you're saying that I must first get a husband before I'm allowed to drink coffee? That truly doesn't seem like a fair trade at all. Besides, the only boy you'd approve of would be a boorish bumpkin with cow shit on his boots.”

Mama's left eyebrow hitched even higher, while her voice dropped lower. “How many times must I tell you, do not contract your words? If they are worth the time to say aloud, then do it properly like a young, educated woman should. You sound more like your father every day.”

Alex sighed in profound defeat. Mama didn't mind her using the word shit, but abhorred contracted words. Besides, by deftly changing the topic, Mama won the persistent coffee battle once again.

The five-year-old, dark-haired, identical twin girls emerged into the kitchen. Jenny rubbed her droopy eyelids, while Agatha vigorously sucked her thumb, a habit she refused to relinquish. Their warmed pinafores, also draped across chairs by the stove, waited for them as well. And Alex noted, like good girls, they put on their stockings and shoes without argument. Walking to the table, Mama placed four platters of bright yellow scrambled eggs, warm buttered oatmeal bread with blackberry jam, and thick slabs of salty, smoked bacon in front of them. “Let us eat before it gets cold.”

When everyone got settled, Mama bowed her head and began, “Dear, Heavenly Father...”

As she prayed, Alex's mind wandered to the town social next month. There were two churches in their small village, only one of which held parties for the young people. Mama's strict Pentecostal church professed socials were not 'Godly' and refused to have that sort of celebration. Instead, they held 'work parties', which didn't seem to be nearly as much fun. But then, religious, fanatic Mama didn't think

'fun' and 'church' belonged in the same sentence. Yet, when Alex's best friend, Betsy, asked her to attend a Spring festivity at the 'other' church, it stunned Alex when Mama said she could.

Although, Mama included a most harsh condition, "You may only attend if you wear the calico dress and matching bonnet that I made for you last Christmas. And your hair, it must be put into a woman's bun instead of those girlish pigtails."

Alex detested long dresses that restricted her activities but preferred calf-length walking skirts and her carefree pigtails. But, if that's what it took to get Mama's permission, then she begrudgingly conceded.

She suddenly realized the room was deathly quiet and everyone was staring at her. Amid a cheek-flushing blush, she quickly added her, "Amen."

Breakfast finished, Alex gathered the empty dishes and placed them with the others that filled the sink basin. She put her arm around Mama's waist and bent down to give her a kiss on the cheek. "As always, breakfast was delicious, thank you, Mama."

Her mother smiled, then placed baby Olli inside an open-topped wooden crate used to keep him confined, for his newly acquired crawling skills often got him underfoot on workdays. That meant one less small person for them to worry about. The girls gathered their collection of corncob dollies and minuscule handkerchief clothes while they played beside the cook stove. Their morning chores would come later, after sunrise, still an hour away.

Mama dragged the large copper kettle, weighing nearly as much as she did, across the wooden floor on the back porch and placed it close to the door. From several pots on the stove, she filled it halfway with hot, steamy water and a load of clothes. She then retrieved the well-worn scrubboard and lye soap made from ashes and the tallow of last year's old boar.

She lifted her winter coat off the hook by the door. "A couple of the hens are clucking already, and I need to get out there. If I can just figure out which of them is eating the eggs, she will be plucked and in a stew tomorrow. Alexandria, here is your apron, please wear it this time, otherwise you will get soaked through." Then she added amid a giggle, "As always."

At the door, Mama paused and looked at Alex once again. "Perhaps when you are finished, you would like to help your Aunt this morning? I will do the kindling for you."

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Alex's heart soared. Aunt Abby was barely twenty-three years old and full of energy and life. Helping her was never a chore. "Yes, I would love to," Alex squealed in agreement.

After Mama left, Alex strung the clotheslines across the porch rafters, then immersed her hands that stung and reddened in the nearly scalding hot water. She grabbed a shirt and started the arduous task of rubbing it with the bar of soap across the ribbed surface of the wood and metal board. The first of many. An hour later, she straightened and with her rolled-up sleeve, pushed away beads of perspiration and stray hair from her forehead. The last of the clothes were pinned to the lines, the sun finally allowed its first rays to peek over the horizon while Mama stood at the kitchen work table already kneading bread dough for tonight's dinner.

Without even saying goodbye, Alex dashed for the hay and animal-scented barn. She quickly saddled Mama's old horse, Brownie.

Grey-haired Papa walked over to her, his brows furrowed. "Where are you going?"

"Mama said I could ride over and help Aunt Abby."

He shot a worried glance toward the horizon, then returned his steadfast gaze to her.

"You be careful now, Missy. There's a war brewing and many young men are avoiding conscription, knowing what's to come. If you run across any strangers, don't talk to them and come get me or your uncle. Understand?"

"I will, Papa." She placed her foot into the stirrup and mounted.

He pinched a toe on her bare foot. "Stubborn, just like your Mama."

She decided that obnoxious comment didn't deserve a response. Instead, she scowled at her father, then tightened her calves against Brownie's sides to get him moving down the road toward the destiny that would change her life forever.

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A mile down the road, crows burst from the woods and sounded a raucous alarm. Alex shuddered, knowing they were the notorious harbingers of woe. She studied the billowing steel-grey clouds gathered over the distant, rolling hills. The flying black demons, peppered across the sky, shrieked another warning. A storm is coming.

She urged the ancient horse into a bumpy trot, and when she spotted Uncle Patrick in the newly plowed field, she called out a greeting and waved. He removed the dirt-encrusted lines from around his sunburnt

neck and draped them over the plow's darkened, sweat-worn handle. He raised his hand and 'hallooed' in return. Aunt Abby stood close to the cabin with a seed bag slung across her shoulder. Their two little boys, Jack and Sam, ages four and two, played on the covered porch.

"Mama sent me to help you," Alex said, as she tied Brownie to the railing.

"Not much left to do, the laundry's already done. Just have to get the corn planted in the kitchen garden. With all this rain, it's been a late start this year. But, if you'd occupy the boys, that would be a great help. Later we can have tea and warm buttered biscuits. I still have blackberry jam from last year."

"It sounds wonderful!"

Settling herself on the old, squeaky, wicker rocking chair, both excited children climbed into Alex's lap and begged for a story. Once again the crows screamed an alarm and flew from the nearby trees. Concerned, she scanned the dense forest just beyond the corduroyed field. She squinted for a better look, then spotted a few riders hidden in the shadows, raw fear tickled down her spine as she pointed. "Aunt Abby, who are they?"

Just as Abby shielded her eyes with her hand, the men whooped and galloped their horses toward them. Shock tightened Alex's throat and chest. In a frightened heartbeat, Alex realized they were not simple, tattered men looking for food.

Seeing them as well, Uncle Patrick spun toward his small family. Frantic, he barely had time to shout, "Abigail, run!"

A strangled gasp escaped as Alex pulled the children close.

Tossing aside the seed sack, Abby dashed for the porch, her eyes as wild as a frightened deer's. Gasping for breath she grabbed Alex's arm and dragged her and the boys down the steps. "Take the boys to the cellar, now!"

The root cellar was under the house and Abby lifted the double, heavy side doors. "Don't you dare come out until one of us gets you! Please, Alex, I know how you are. For the first time in your life, follow directions. For my sons' sake and for your own as well, don't say one word or come out for any reason. Promise me!"

Torn with terror, anger, and indecision, she nodded, "I promise, Auntie."

Alex gathered the children and helped them down the narrow ladder. Inside the underground vault, with trembling hands, using a flint and striker, after the second try, she lit the emergency candle on the table.

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Abby now satisfied, closed the hatch and whispered, “Keep your promise.”

The boys huddled in Alex’s lap whimpered and she tried to calm them. “Shush, shush. We are playing hide and seek,”

They nodded, then hid behind boxes near the dirt wall.

Her gaze kept darting to the closed hatch. *Uncle Patrick will handle this situation. Like Papa said last week, those men probably just want food.* Yet, dire concern filled her heart and she dared to lift the heavy door just an inch so she could see out.

But the marauders didn't ask for anything, as six raggedy-dressed men circled their thin horses around Uncle Patrick. Without warning, the paunchy rider on a dappled buckskin slammed the butt end of his rifle against her Uncle's forehead and jolted him clear off his feet. Bright red blood gushed from his wound, while he lay on the muddy earth.

The dark cellar spun dizzily along with Alex's roiling stomach. Fiery anger surged from her heart and settled as a numb knot in her chest stealing her very breath. Nostrils flared, she gripped the door's handle tighter. *I must help them!* Then the dreaded promise returned as a roar in her head and heart... ' don't say one word or come out for any reason.'

*I promised.*