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WOODS
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*The
Moonlight School*

“*The Moonlight School* wraps around you like a colorful quilt, planting you soul deep in turn-of-the-century Kentucky. Suzanne Woods Fisher pens an unforgettable story about love and the transforming power of words and community in this remarkable Appalachian-inspired novel. Deeply moving and uplifting!”

Laura Frantz, Christy Award–winning author
of *Tidewater Bride*

“*The Moonlight Schools* by Suzanne Woods Fisher is a captivating story with rich history and engaging characters who pull at your heartstrings. Readers will gladly ride up in the hills with Lucy to get to know the local folks. They’ll cheer on Cora Wilson Stewart as she finds a way to open up the world of reading to people who missed out on proper schooling as children. That the story shares the true historical beginnings of the first Moonlight Schools makes it all that much better. If you like fascinating history mixed with great storytelling the way I do, you’ll love Fisher’s *The Moonlight Schools*.”

Ann H. Gabhart, bestselling author of *These Healing Hills*
and *An Appalachian Summer*

Novels by Suzanne Woods Fisher

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The Waiting
The Search

THE BISHOP'S FAMILY

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The Quieting
The Devoted

SEASONS OF STONEY RIDGE

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The Haven
The Lesson

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Phoebe's Light
Minding the Light
The Light Before Day

THE INN AT EAGLE HILL

The Letters
The Calling
The Revealing

THE DEACON'S FAMILY

Mending Fences
Stitches in Time
Two Steps Forward

AMISH BEGINNINGS

Anna's Crossing
The Newcomer
The Return

THREE SISTERS ISLAND

On a Summer Tide
On a Coastal Breeze



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A N O V E L

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Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

This book is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity and are used fictitiously. All other characters, and all incidents and dialogue, are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

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*The brightest moonlit night
the world has ever seen.*

~CORA WILSON STEWART

Cast of Characters

Cora Wilson Stewart: first female superintendent of schools for Rowan County, Kentucky

Lucy Wilson: second cousin to Cora Wilson Stewart

Brother Wyatt: raised in the mountains, educated in the city, now a singing school master

Finley James: mountain boy, aged fifteen, works at the livery, attends Little Brushy School only when he has no choice

Angie Cooper: mountain girl, grade 8 at Little Brushy School

Arthur Cooper: father to Angie, trustee of Little Brushy School, owner of the livery in Morehead

Andrew Spencer: sales agent for Valley View Lumber Company

Charles Wilson: father to Lucy, husband to Hazel, first cousin to Cora, owner of the Valley View Lumber Company

Hazel Wilson: Lucy's very young stepmother

Mollie McGlothin: elderly mountain woman

Sally Ann Duncan: young mountain wife

Glossary

The accents and pronunciation of mountain talk can seem simple, quaint, or uneducated, but it's far more complex than one might think. It resembles a Scottish-flavored Elizabethan English dialect spoken long ago. Many of the words, expressions, the phrasing and framework date all the way back to the time of the first great English poet Geoffrey Chaucer, who wrote *Canterbury Tales* in the fourteenth century.

afreared: afraid

ahr: hour

a mite: a little

a`tall: at all

bar: bear

book red: educated

cousined to death: nepotism

deef: deaf

far: fire

haint: ghost

heered: heard

holp: help

idn`t: isn't it

if`n: if only

jolt wagon: a farm wagon,
like an oxcart

laht: light

nary: none or never

nigh: near

nothing never stop: unending

parts: neighborhood

pert-near: almost

The Moonlight School

pizen: poison

tolable like: pretty good

poke: bag

wampish: wiggle

retched: reached

scald: used to describe

“exhausted” land

And just to keep things interesting, there are words that seem to have been invented out of thin air:

si-goggling: something that isn't

jasper: stranger

straight

gaum: all cluttered up

Prologue

JANUARY 1901

TRAIN DEPOT, LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

Lucy Wilson shifted on the wooden bench, hardly aware of the afternoon chill as she waited for Father to return to the station. She was halfway through Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, and she sensed a niggling worry about sister Beth's fragile health.

Whenever Lucy finished a chapter, she restrained from turning the page and made herself put down the book to check on her own sister, two-and-a-half-year-old Charlotte, who was curled up like a cat on Father's coat, napping soundly, arms wrapped around a favorite stuffed bear she called Mr. Buttons. Lucy stroked one of her sister's chubby little white hands and tucked a blonde ringlet away from her round cheek. At moments like this, when Charlotte was sleeping, she could see so much of Mother in her sister's little face. She pulled the edge of Father's coat over Charlotte's woolen stockings and picked up her book, only to put it down again when she heard the railroad clock chime.

Two o'clock. Father had been gone for over an hour. He didn't say when he might return from his business meeting, only that Lucy must keep close watch on her sister. Charlotte was a curious little

girl and had an annoying tendency to wander off. Just yesterday, Lucy had caught Charlotte in Mother's writing room, playing with her jewelry box. She scooped up Charlotte in one arm and gathered the jewelry with her free hand, but when she looked through the jewelry box later, one ring was missing. An anniversary gift Father had given to Mother, a ring of small ruby chips. As soon as they returned home to Lexington, Lucy would resume the hunt for the ruby ring before Father realized it was gone.

Father had forbidden Lucy and Charlotte to play in Mother's writing room, though that didn't stop the girls. One time when cousin Cora had come for a visit, Lucy had overheard Father say it was the one place in the house he could still sense his wife's presence.

Lucy felt the same way about the writing room. She could almost smell her mother's scent, a lavender perfume that she liked to dab behind her ears. The writing room had been left virtually untouched since Mother had died, right down to the quill pen left in the same inkpot, as if she were going to return soon from an errand and pick up a story where she had left off.

Lucy and Charlotte often sneaked into the writing room after Father had left for work and the housekeeper was busy with the day's tasks. The room was actually Mother's dressing room, but she had used it for her writing room because she liked how the corner windows let light stream in all day long. The girls would sit on the floor together, and Lucy would show Charlotte each piece of jewelry and tell stories about Mother. She wanted Charlotte to have memories of their mother, even if imagined ones.

Lucy missed her mother with all her heart, missed everything about her; her gentle ways, her sparkling laugh, her joy of life. Her mother used to tell Lucy stories, and together they would come up with plot twists or surprise endings. Someday, she told Lucy, they would write a book together. But someday never came.

Charlotte squirmed in her sleep, and Lucy wiggled her back against the cold bench. When would Father return? He felt the

girls were safer waiting here at the station than at a lumberyard, with big saws and horses and wagons and hardened tree fellers.

She glanced once more at the clock and sighed. Only a few minutes past three, though it felt like hours since Father had left. As long as Charlotte napped, she didn't mind waiting for Father because she was able to read to her heart's content. Father didn't approve of novels, not after Mother died. He said such twaddle softened the brain.

A train came into the station. Lucy watched dozens of people, all kinds—rich and poor and everything in between—stream out its doors. A young woman stood at a distance, looking at them with a peculiar expression on her face. Lucy realized the woman's attention was focused on Charlotte. She glanced down at her napping sister and saw her blue eyes open briefly, blinking, before drifting shut as she fell back to sleep. Lucy turned the page to the next chapter in *Little Women* and was immediately transplanted into the world of Jo and Beth and Meg and Amy, upstairs in their bedrooms, Marmie downstairs in the kitchen with the cook.

She read a chapter, and then another and another, sobbing as she came to Beth's tragic death. She knew it! She *knew* Beth was going to die.

"Lucy!" Her father's fierce shout broke through her shell of absorption. "Lucille!"

She snapped the book shut and stuffed it in her bag before turning to see her father stomp toward her, all buttoned up in his dour black suit, gesturing wildly at her.

"Lucille!" he shouted again. "Where is your sister?"

Lucy jerked around to where Charlotte had been sleeping. Father's coat remained, all bunched up, Mr. Buttons the bear tucked under a sleeve. But her sister was gone. She placed her hand on the spot to see if it was still warm. Stone cold.

A fear rose in Lucy, a greater fear than she'd ever experienced in her nine years, including that terrible day her mother lay dying.

ONE

MARCH 1911
LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

The train jerked and jolted as it rumbled out of the station. Lucy Wilson stared out the window, watching her neat and tidy world fade into the distance. Watching her well-ordered life, if a bit pedantic and predictable, disappear.

She placed a hand over her heart and waited for its clamor to calm. Only six months, she reassured herself. She was expected to work for her father's favorite cousin, Cora Wilson Stewart, for only half a year, then back home she'd go.

But back home to what?

To her father's new wife, Hazel? A young, vivacious woman, scarcely older than Lucy. Hazel wanted to make a home that didn't cling to the past.

Back home to Lucy's charity work among the Lexington matrons, most of whom were twice, if not thrice, her age?

Back home to Father? Her presence only evoked his sorrow.

Lucy squeezed her eyes shut. Cora needed stenography help, Father had said, and wouldn't listen to her objections about a move to Morehead. Cora was superintendent of education for Rowan County, an impoverished area full of—how had Father phrased it?—moonshine and dulcimer pickers. Having grown up

there, he should know. But what exactly did a stenographer for a superintendent of education do? Lucy had no idea. She had many accomplished skills from her education at the Townsend School for Girls: from mastering the art of embroidery to conjugating Latin verbs. And so she had dissected the word *stenography*: from the seventeenth century, Greek roots. *Stenos* meant “narrow,” *graph* meant “writing.” The process of taking dictation. That, Lucy thought she could do.

Outside the window, the landscape had started to change. The train made fewer stops; its tracks wound through rolling green hills, thick with trees. Now and then she would spot a house with a sagging laundry line, but even those were becoming rare.

Think of this as an adventure, Hazel had suggested. A time to spread wings and gain confidence. Six short months, she reminded Lucy.

Hazel’s enthusiasm was contagious. Lucy had gone to bed last night with a vow to herself that she would be brave today. Strong and courageous.

Her bold resolve weakened at the station this morning, and dissolved completely with her father’s last words, said as the train to Morehead arrived: “Don’t disappoint me.” When had she not?

Then she saw his eyes soften, grow shiny with tears. She’d never been entirely sure he loved her until that moment.

Perhaps knowing *that* was worth *this*. Whatever *this*—working for Cora—might be. After all, it was only six short months.

Lucy turned her gaze away from staring out the window and faced forward, ready for what lay ahead.

MOREHEAD, KENTUCKY

AS LUCY LIFTED HER HAND to knock on her cousin’s office door, she paused to take in the nameplate: CORA WILSON STEWART, SUPERINTENDENT OF ROWAN COUNTY SCHOOLS. She hadn’t seen much of her father’s favorite cousin in the last few years since she’d

been elected as the first female superintendent in eastern Kentucky. Voted in by a substantial majority. Lucy would have voted for Cora, if women could vote. Father wouldn't have.

Lucy drew in a deep and satisfying breath, at least as much as the tight strings in her corset would allow. She hadn't felt this sense of freedom, this sense of possibility, for a very long time. She was excited. Nervous! She had *butterflies*.

"She's not there."

Lucy spun around to see a man sitting on a chair on the other side of the hall, one leg crossed over the other, his eyes focused on an open leather-bound book that rested on his knee. A hole was on the sole of his worn-out shoes, and his clothes were shabby. She'd been so focused on finding the right door to Cora's office that she'd only been dimly aware of him as she walked down the hall. "Are you waiting to see Mrs. Stewart?"

"Miss Cora? Indeed I am."

"How long have you been waiting?"

He gazed out the window at the end of the hall. "Bout an hour." He set his book—a Bible—on the empty chair next to him, rose to his feet, removed his hat, and folded it to his chest. "When Miss Cora does return, I promise to be quick about my errand." He extended his hand. "Folks around here call me Brother Wyatt."

Lucy took his hand, which had strength to it. She blinked, regarding this man: he was younger than she first assumed, his nearly black hair flowed in ill-kempt waves in need of a cut. His face was etched, with sharp, angular cheekbones. Gray downturned eyes crinkled at their edge in crow's-feet. Unlike the young men in Lexington, he wore no trimmed mustache. No muttonchop side whiskers. "Are you a circuit preacher?" Father was not a fan of what he derisively called saddlebag preachers. Always looking for handouts and free meals, he said.

"Not intentionally, though there are times the Lord has asked me to preach his Word. But my true vocation is a singing school master."

She'd never heard of such a thing and wondered if he was making it up.

"I didn't catch your name." He gave her a smile, his first. She thought it an oddly poignant one.

"My name? Lucy. Lucy Wilson."

"And what brings you to Miss Cora's door today?"

Lucy never liked to give a quick answer to anything. She mulled it over and came up with a clear response that she hoped would discourage more questions. "I've come for an employment opportunity with Mrs. Stewart. She's desperately in need of assistance."

Brother Wyatt's smile faltered, but then he found it again. "Well," he said, trying to recover from his surprise, but his skepticism was hard to miss. "Well"—he cleared his throat and tried again—"this should be quite . . . an adventure for you."

"What makes you say that?"

His gaze swept her from head to toe. "Miss Cora is not known for coddling her teachers."

Coddling? "I'm not here to teach, but to assist Mrs. Stewart," she said, sounding much braver than she felt. "Short term. Only six months." Six short months.

"Two of my favorite people!" came a shriek down the hall. "Lucy! Dear girl!" Striding toward her came Cora, arms outstretched to give her a maternal embrace.

Cora Wilson Stewart was a good-sized woman, well-endowed in all the right places, and her presence filled the narrow hallway. Whatever size room she was in, she had a way of filling it. Lucy allowed herself to be swallowed up in Cora's arms.

Cora released her, though still gripped her forearms. "How was the trip? I'm sorry I wasn't there to meet your train. I tried, I truly did, but something came up, like it always does. Were you able to locate the boarding house? I hope Miss Maude was accommodating. It's nothing fancy, but it's decent and clean. Goodness, you must be famished. Exhausted! And how is that Victorian father of yours? Has his young new wife redecorated the palace yet?"

Sentences came out in rapid fire, one after the other, with no time or space for Lucy to respond. “Just look at you. You’ve gone and grown up on me. You certainly don’t take after the Wilsons, do you?” She paused at last to let Lucy answer.

“I suppose not,” Lucy said, after taking a moment to interpret what Cora meant. The Wilsons were bold, handsome people in personality and appearance. In her midthirties, Cora’s angular face and piercing brown eyes made her seem older than her years, though her dark hair had no sign of gray. In a way Lucy had never understood, Cora seemed ageless.

Cora released the tight grip on Lucy’s forearms and said, “Come in. Come in to my office and let’s catch up before my next meeting. I’ll send someone for tea. Wyatt, have you met my cousin? Of course you have. Have you been waiting long? I do apologize.”

Hands behind his back, Brother Wyatt lifted his shoulders in a mild shrug. “Not so very long.”

“Over an hour,” Lucy said, thinking he was being overly kind. “I’ll wait outside while the two of you talk.”

“Better still, come in, Wyatt, and join us for tea.”

“Wish I could, but I’ve much to do today. It won’t take long, Cora, but I do need a minute of your time.”

Some kind of silent exchange passed between the two that Lucy picked up on, suddenly aware Brother Wyatt’s errand required privacy. “I’ll go see about finding some tea,” she said. Working as Cora’s stenographer, she assumed she’d be making quite a bit of tea.

Cora seemed relieved. “Thank you, Lucy. Down the hall.”

Lucy came to a modest ladies’ room that seemed to double as a kitchen, including a small electric stove. She rummaged through a cupboard and found cups and a tin of teabags and a small teapot. Tea always seemed to calm her—not the tea, just the fixing of it. As she waited for the water to boil, she started to rearrange the contents of the messy cupboard. It actually cheered her to discover a task she could do to serve Cora. First role: tea making. One

thing Lucy was well trained in. Not much else, but tea she could make.

Father, being a staunch traditionalist, wouldn't consider educating a woman beyond finishing school. Then came marriage. According to Father's thinking, anyway. There were a few boys who tried to court Lucy, but they were just that. Boys . . . with very little on their minds. She gradually fell off invitation lists and sat at home, working halfheartedly at embroidery; her only outings were to visit the elderly or attend church or a charitable event.

And then Father turned everything upside down when he married Hazel, a beautiful, charming debutante who'd been Lucy's peer all through finishing school.

Father and Hazel had scarcely returned from their grand honeymoon, following their even grander wedding, when he informed Lucy that cousin Cora had pleaded for her help as a stenographer. As Father muttered while writing the acceptance letter to Cora, "It's impossible to say no to the Little General." That was Cora's childhood nickname. "But just for six months," he added. "Then back to Lexington."

All these thoughts rumbled through Lucy's head as she returned to Cora's office carrying a tray of three steaming cups of tea. She stopped short in the hallway as she heard Cora mention her name. "Lucy is my cousin's daughter. She's come to help with them."

Them? Who was them? Lucy leaned closer to the door left ajar. She strained to hear Brother Wyatt's response, but his voice was low and deep and gentle. She thought he said something like, "It's happening more and more often."

"I know. The drought doesn't help." Cora's voice, unlike Brother Wyatt's, could be heard clear and loud.

"It's so much more than that."

"I know, I know. They're so vulnerable. But change comes slowly to the people of the mountain." Cora let out a loud sigh. "Have faith, Wyatt. You're always telling me that very thing. 'For with God, nothing is impossible.'"

When there was a long moment of silence, Lucy gave up being the bug on the wall and used her elbow to push the door all the way open. “I brought tea.”

“Thank you, Miss Lucy, but I mustn’t tarry.” Brother Wyatt smiled, though this time it didn’t reach his eyes. In fact, he seemed rather preoccupied. He gave Cora a meaningful nod, and then he left.

Cora sat behind her desk, an enormous oak piece, ornately carved, and riffled through papers as if looking for something.

Lucy gazed around the office. A richly colored oriental rug covered the floor. One wall had three standing bookshelves, with books jammed in every spare inch of space. “Cora, where shall I work?” There wasn’t a surfeit of room, and every horizontal inch was taken up with books or papers. “Perhaps I could locate a small desk and set it out in the hallway. Even a table would work.”

Still hunting for something on top of her desk, Cora didn’t even look up. “You can share my desk. It’s double-sided.”

“But I’ll get in your way.”

“Not at all. You’ll hardly be here.”

“Pardon me?” Still holding the tea tray, Lucy walked toward her cousin’s stately desk. “Where *will* I be?”

“Out in the field.” Cora lifted a pile to reveal a fat brown envelope. “There it is!” She set the envelope on top of a stack of books. “These are letters that need answering. Precious letters.”

“But surely I could do that from here. Take your dictation.”

“Surely not. These letters aren’t to me. Or from me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There are people in the rural areas who need someone to dictate to. They come all the way into town to have me help them with their correspondence.” She let out a happy sigh. “Oh, Lucy. I can’t tell you how glad I am that you’re here. These good people work so hard. You can go to their homes and save them a trip to town.” She inked her quill as if that was all there was to say and she had other matters to attend to.

“Why don’t they write their own letters?”

Cora’s head snapped up. “Because they never learned to read or write.”

“So they’re imbeciles?”

Cora’s swift and stern reaction reminded Lucy of her father’s disapproving looks. “Not in the least.” She set the quill in the inkpot. “Mountain people aren’t stupid, Lucy. They haven’t had an opportunity for an education, but they’re not stupid.”

“Mountain people? Um . . . just where are their homes?”

“Up in the hollers.”

A cold chill trickled down Lucy’s spine. “Oh. I see.” Though Lucy didn’t see at all. She had come to Morehead to help her cousin with secretarial work, not tromp into the hills of eastern Kentucky. “I assume there’s a car and driver to hire?”

Cora looked up in surprise. “A car?” She gave Lucy a patient smile. “Dear girl, I’d daresay that most everyone you’ll meet up there has yet to lay eyes on an automobile. In fact, there’s not much of any road to speak of into the hollers other than a few logging roads, and you should stay clear of those.”

Lucy paused. “Then, uh, perhaps I could hire a hansom cab?”

Cora leaned back in her chair, eyes crinkling with amusement.

“A dray? A hackney?” Then Lucy had a startling revelation. “Oh, you can’t possibly mean . . .”

“Horseback. There’s a livery stable down the road. Horses for hire.”

Oh my stars and garters. Lucy’s newfound courage, so thin and fragile and untried, began to shatter. The teacups clattered, and she set the tray on her cousin’s desk before she dropped it. “Cora, I’m not trained to ride a horse.” She was well trained in making tea.

Cora’s eyes lit up at the sight of the tray, as if it just occurred to her that she’d sent Lucy out to make tea. “Why, Lucy! You remembered I like honey in my tea.” She properly loaded her cup with honey and took a sip, then gave Lucy a satisfied smile. “Perfect. Just perfect.”

Not so fast. “I’ve never been on the back of a horse in my life.” Taking another sip, Cora peered over the cup’s rim at Lucy. “You’re not serious.”

“But I am. Father felt it was unladylike.”

“Your father”—Cora set the teacup back on the tray with a frown—“likes to forget where he came from. When we were children, we rode bareback all over those hills and hollows.” She lifted her eyes to the ceiling, as if lost in a pleasant memory.

“Father would never allow me to go into those hills and hollows unchaperoned.”

Cora shifted to peer out the window. “There’s a boy named Finley James who works over at the livery. Tell him to choose a horse that gives a nice gentle ride and doesn’t shy at snakes.”

“Snakes?” Lucy sucked in a gasp of air. “Even if I could ride a horse, which I can’t, I have absolutely no idea where to go. I don’t know my way around these parts. It’s not sensible.”

Cora seemed astounded by Lucy’s objections. “Just follow the creek. Triplett Creek. When there’s a ford in the creek, cross over to the opposite bank and head up the trail. It’ll take you straight up to Mollie McGlothin’s.”

Ford? Cross a creek? On a *horse*? Lucy barely had time to digest this, to explain that she had no ability to do any of those things, when Cora added, “As for the rest, you’ve got the names on those letters. Everybody knows everybody else. They’ll point you in the right direction.” She tucked her chin and started to write something.

“Cora . . . I can’t.”

She looked up, surprised. “Lucy, there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Nothing? What about snakes? Or falling off a horse? This was crazy! “I can’t ride any kind of four-legged creature into the woods, all alone. What if something happens?” An encounter with a wild beast? A fall off the horse? “Where do I sleep? Or eat?” Lucy had a stomach-sinking feeling that she already knew the answers to those questions. She was on her own.

“You’ll be back to town in a wink.” Cora tugged at the time-piece pinned to her shoulder and glanced at it, frowning. “Maybe two.”

“Why would anyone let me in their home? I’m a stranger.”

“Now that’s easy. Just let them know you’re a Wilson. Tell them you’re my kin and you’ve come to do work for me. Once they know we’re related, they’ll give you the shirt off their backs, and most only have one shirt to speak of.”

Lucy’s father rarely spoke of his childhood, but the stories he told described a very foreign place inhabited by jelly-making hill-billies. “Father only gave me permission”—she paused as she saw Cora cringe at that word—“to come to Morehead because you told him you needed a stenographer.”

“And I do.”

Lucy was having serious doubts. This job wasn’t what she had expected. “But, Cora,” she pleaded, feeling a little teary, “Father would be outraged if he thought I was riding into those hills alone.”

Cora peered at Lucy. “Your father always overprotected you. He’s not here to make decisions for you. You’re a grown woman, Lucy.”

Lucy felt like a mouse cornered by a cat. There was no way out and it wasn’t going to end well. “I’m not . . . very brave.”

“You’re stronger than you think. Every woman is, even if she doesn’t know it.”

Cora sounded so final that Lucy felt a growing sense of desperation. “But I . . .”

Palms on her desktop, Cora leaned forward, like a judge delivering the verdict. “Lucille Wilson, *this* is your chance. To release you from the terrible burden of losing Charlotte.”

Lucy looked down at the tips of her boots. Would she ever be free of that burden?

“Oh dear girl,” Cora said, her voice growing tender. “After Charlotte went missing, I saw you change from a happy child, full

of curiosity and adventure, into a shell of a girl buried under an enormous weight. It was as if the sun was hidden behind a cloud. You lost interest in everything, as though the very idea of curiosity about life belonged only to the past. I hoped that with time, you'd return to your old self, but when I saw you recently at your father's wedding, I thought my heart was going to break. It must be so hard to breathe with a heavy stone on one's chest." Cora let out a weary sigh. "It's time, dear girl. High time to rejoin the living."

Lucy kept her head down, blinking back tears. She hated being the object of pity. "I admit," she said softly, "that a change might be needed."

"That's my girl!"

She chanced a look at Cora and saw a big smile wreath her face.

"This is the time to discover just how brave you really are." Cora clapped her hands, as if the matter was settled. "Off to the livery."

Lucy's head snapped up. "I can't. I just . . . can't go up in those hills. Not alone. And especially not on a horse. I've never had much of a sense of direction."

"That's understandable. Your father never gave you a chance to think for yourself."

Lucy swallowed past the lump in her throat. "I just can't do it *alone*."

Cora stared at Lucy for a long while, then dropped her pen, jumped up, and knocked on the window. She waved to someone down below, beckoning whoever it was to come to her office. She turned back to Lucy with a smile. "I do believe I've found you a suitable chaperone."

Not two minutes later, a skinny barefoot teenaged boy dressed in bib overalls stood at the open door. "You needin' somethin', Miss Cora?"

"Finley James, why aren't you in school this morning?"

"Teacher's ailin' agen."

Cora frowned. "You telling the truth?"

"Cross my heart." He made a big X over his chest. "But, Miss

Cora, I do believe Miss Norah is playin' possum. She only gits sick on days when the postman comes through these parts. I think she's sweet on him."

"Now you're twisting the yarn."

"I ain't lying. I wouldn' nary tell a lie."

"Don't say ain't. Say isn't." Under her breath, Cora muttered, "Norah is absent far too often." She looked straight at Finley James. "In the meantime, how'd you like to earn two bits?"

His eyes brightened. "You need me to fetch and carry agen?"

"Better than that. I need you to take Miss Lucy to a few cabins in Deerlick Hollow. She's got some letters to read and ones to write." She pointed to Lucy, whom the boy had yet to notice. When he turned to see her, he startled, staring wide-eyed and openmouthed.

"Stop gawking, Finley James."

He snapped his mouth shut, then opened it again. "Pardon me for saying, Miss Cora, but she don't look like she'd last long on a mount. Even on Jenny."

"Yes! My sentiments exactly," Lucy said. "Who's Jenny?"

They ignored her. "You need to stay with her, Finley James, and bring her back in one piece. Just head to Mollie's and Sally Ann's and back down to town." Cora felt the thick envelope. "Perhaps a few more, if time allows. Lucy just needs a little help learning the trails. She'll get a nose for it soon enough."

Lucy fanned herself a little more vigorously. She would never get a nose for *this*.

"In fact, Finley James, you can be even more than a trail guide. Lucy is new to our ways. Teach her about the mountain people. Interpret for her."

"Interpret?" Lucy said. "Don't they speak English?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

Finley James stroked his unwhiskered chin. "All that for jest two little tiny bits?"

Eyes twinkling in amusement, Cora released a longsuffering sigh. "Fine. Four bits."

“Hmm, that does shed a new light on the matter.” He tapped his chin, a gesture that made him look much older than his years. “But I’ll need new bullets in m’gun. That’ll cost y’ some.”

Lucy’s eyes went wide. “Gun? Whatever for?”

As if quoting someone, he said, “There ain’t nothing more important to a Rowan County man than his gun.”

“But . . . ,” Lucy looked to her cousin, “what does he need a gun *for*?”

Once again, she was ignored. Cora’s eyes were fastened on the boy’s. “No need for bullets. There will be an extra two bits if you get her back to town in one piece. So, then, do we have a deal?”

Finley James stuck his hand out to shake Cora’s. “I’m your man,” he answered without another moment’s hesitation.

And with that, the bargain was sealed, and Lucy Wilson’s new life in Rowan County began.