



along  
a  
storied  
trail

ANN H. GABHART

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *Angel Sister*

“Fabulous! This beautifully written book brings a little-known part of American history to life with characters so real they leap off the pages into readers’ hearts and linger there long after the last page is turned. *Along a Storied Trail* is a story to savor, to ponder, and to read again and again.”

**Amanda Cabot**, bestselling author of *Dreams Rekindled*

“Ann Gabhart has woven a tale of a feisty, endearing, and thoroughly memorable character, Tansy Calhoun, as she settles into her route as a WPA packhorse librarian in Depression-era Appalachia. Adventure, a romantic triangle (or two!), plus an unexpected natural disaster roil up, spilling into a dramatic, heart-pounding conclusion. *Along a Storied Trail* might be Gabhart’s best book yet.”

**Suzanne Woods Fisher**, author of *The Moonlight School*

“From the very first sentence of *Along a Storied Trail*, Ann H. Gabhart has hand-delivered a tale that will make readers feel right at home. With a voice that is every bit as distinct and special as Gabhart herself, the reader feels as though she’s riding along with her new friend Tansy, seeing the beauty of Appalachia even amidst the hard times of the Great Depression, through loss, and adversity. This is a story of resilience that is not only representative of the 1930s, but a story of resilience that we so deeply need in our times.”

**Susie Finkbeiner**, author of *The Nature of Small Birds*  
and *Stories That Bind Us*

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## Books by Ann H. Gabhart

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*Along a Storied Trail*  
*An Appalachian Summer*  
*River to Redemption*  
*These Healing Hills*  
*Words Spoken True*  
*The Outsider*  
*The Believer*  
*The Seeker*  
*The Blessed*  
*The Gifted*  
*Christmas at Harmony Hill*  
*The Innocent*  
*The Refuge*

### HEART OF HOLLYHILL

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*Orchard of Hope*  
*Summer of Joy*

### ROSEY CORNER

*Angel Sister*  
*Small Town Girl*  
*Love Comes Home*

### HIDDEN SPRINGS MYSTERY AS A. H. GABHART

*Murder at the Courthouse*  
*Murder Comes by Mail*  
*Murder Is No Accident*

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Scripture quotations, whether quoted or paraphrased, are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This book is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author’s imagination.

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*In memory of my grandparents,*

*Rose and Herbert Hawkins,*

*who loved books,*

*and my aunt*

*Lorin Bond Houchin,*

*who kept a list of every book she read.*

*They passed down a love of reading and books to me.*

## *one*

EVERYBODY THOUGHT Tansy Calhoun was heart-broken after Jeremy Simpson threw her over for Jolene Hoskins. Or that she should be. She had to admit her pride was bruised, but the whole thing was simply a shin bump in life. In fact, after pondering it some, she decided she'd gotten the best of things.

Of course, that had been some while back. Three years, when she counted it up. Jolene had a baby now, with another on the way. That could have been Tansy if she'd gone down the path folks thought she was ready to take. Married at seventeen. A mother at eighteen. Worn out by thirty, with more children than she had chairs around her kitchen table. A poor man's riches, some said. That was about the only riches a man was apt to see here in the mountains in 1937.

Family did matter. Tansy wasn't against marrying and having her fair share of children, but she was glad enough to put it off a while. Longer than most around here thought sensible. Marrying young and for forever was the way of life in these Eastern Kentucky hills. A person should marry with the intention of staying married forever, but that could still be a long time even if you waited a while for forever to start.

Her own mother had been eighteen when Tansy was born and

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she wasn't the firstborn. Her sister Hilda was nigh on two when Tansy came along. Hilda married young too, but that wasn't because she was following in Ma's footsteps. She had in mind to escape mountain life by marrying the schoolteacher and happily going off with him to live up in Ohio somewhere. Hilda sent a letter now and again and sometimes a book for Tansy, but no word of any babies on the way. Ma worried some about that.

She worried about Tansy even more. Ma was glad enough to still have her home to help with things. She needed the help. Giving birth to Livvy, the least one who was only four, had stolen her health. Did something to her hip so that moving was ever painful. She said Livvy might need to be her last and sounded sad about that, although Tansy thought five a fine number. Well, six. She couldn't forget her little brother Robbie, who got the fever and died when he was seven. He did count. Dear little Robbie. The sweetest of the bunch. Way sweeter than Tansy. But Livvy was turned sweet too.

Took that after their ma. Not their pa. Might be a blessing Pa took off on them last September. Him being gone would be a sure way to save her mother from the ordeal of carrying another baby.

Looking for work, Pa told Ma. No work was to be had here in the mountains. Coal mines had mostly shut down, with nobody having money to buy anything since what they called Black Tuesday happened off in New York City. Tansy still hadn't quite gotten her mind around how rich people losing their money through something they called a ticker tape had leaked down to close mines and bring such hard times to Robins Ridge. Didn't people still need coal to keep the fires in their grates burning? At least those who didn't have trees to cut for firewood.

But Pa never liked the mines anyway. Said working down under the ground stole his breath. Sometimes at night he did seem to do more coughing than breathing.

Ma hadn't wanted him to go. Tansy heard them talking the night before he left. Her bed in the loft was right over theirs, and she often covered her ears with her pillow to keep from hearing more than she should. But this time she'd done the opposite and leaned off the side of the bed to catch every word when she heard the pleading in her mother's voice.

"Joshua, looks to me it would be best you stayin' here. Little Josh can help you do the farming. We can get by."

Pa's voice rumbled in return. "Unless another dry spell comes along. Corn don't grow without rain, Eugenia. You saw that this year, what with the beans drying up in your sass patch and some of the corn ears no more than nubbins."

"We had enough sass to get by." Ma didn't like admitting her vegetable garden didn't supply food enough for their table. "I made pickles. We got some of the early planting for shucky beans. They're hung up all over the attic."

Her father didn't say anything for so long that Tansy about decided he'd let Ma have the last word and gone to sleep. But then he said, "It ain't your fault, Eugenia. Ain't mine either. The Lord just didn't send us no rain."

"The Lord supplies our needs."

Tansy heard the absolute certainty in Ma's voice. She refused to hear complaints against the Lord. Even when Robbie died. She had sat by Robbie's bed night and day, praying fervently for him to get well. But once the boy's breaths stopped, she folded his little hands together, kissed his forehead, and accepted it as the Lord's will. She didn't war against that, like Tansy wanted to. Or like Pa did. He'd gone off and not come back until after the neighbors dug a grave and helped lay Robbie to rest. Ma said that was the only way Pa could take losing a son.

"At times better than other times." Pa sounded worn out. "Lately he must not be paying much mind to what folks is needin' down here."

That went too far for Ma. "I'm thinking you best offer up

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a prayer for the Lord to open your eyes to the blessings he sends down to us.”

“Maybe so.” Pa’s voice gentled. “Be that as it may, I see how you never put much on your plate at suppertime. If I head out to find work somewheres, that’ll be one less mouth at the table. Tansy and Josh are old enough to take care of things around here.”

“Tansy might find a feller and get married.”

Tansy couldn’t decide if Ma sounded worried or hopeful about that. Maybe resigned to their fates, whatever they were.

Pa made a sound of disgust. “She had a good enough feller and let him get away. That’s been over two years back and I haven’t seen no boys making paths to our door. The girl turned twenty in July. She ain’t liable to find a suitor less’n a widower comes along. Maybe not then if she don’t get her head out of them books. Hilda hasn’t done us no favors sending storybooks that’s got Tansy thinking above herself.”

Thinking above herself. Those words had made her want to get up and climb down the steps to tell her father a few things. Like she had a right to think. To read. She didn’t slack off helping Ma, but in stolen moments, books took her beyond the mountains. Let her fly like an eagle to take in the view of other places and ways.

That didn’t mean she didn’t want to roost right where she was. She loved the mountains. Time and again she did let a little daydream tickle her mind. That maybe a prince on a white stallion might ride into her life the way it happened sometimes in fairy tales. Not really a prince, but a man with aplomb. She’d discovered that word a while back and studied out what it might mean. A man who was handsome. Self-confident. Capable. Like the men in the stories she read.

She had lain stiff in her bed while the words she wanted to throw at her father boiled in her head. She never got the chance to say any of them. The next morning he was gone.

Books had always been a bone of contention between them. Once he'd even jerked a book from her to sling into the fire. She had a scar on her hand from yanking the book out of the flames. The page edges were charred, but the words were saved. After that, Tansy hid out to read. In the hayloft. In a tree during the summer. In the loft, crouched beside her bed near the half window as soon as light dawned.

Her pa might change his mind about books if he could see her now. Her love of reading had opened up a way for her to be a packhorse librarian, since it turned out she wasn't alone in thinking books mattered. The government did too and had established a work program to get books to people in these Eastern Kentucky mountains where roads a truck could travel were few and far between. Women like Tansy on mules and horses took books to the people.

Sometimes Tansy thought every prayer she'd ever thought to pray and some she hadn't thought up had been answered the day she got one of the book routes here in Owsley County. Then on top of the pure pleasure of working with books, to get paid for it. Let people feel sorry for her because they thought she was on an old maid's path. She wasn't ready for a rocking chair on a relative's front porch yet. She had time to find a man to love.

But now, she had a horse, access to more books than she had time to read, and money to keep food on her mother's table. She'd felt practically rich the first time she collected her monthly wages. Twenty-eight dollars.

Not that she didn't earn every penny. Her route was over some rough ground, up and down steep hills, through creeks and woods. And she couldn't let the weather stop her. Rain, sleet, or snow, she had promised Madeline Weston to faithfully ride her routes.

Mrs. Weston, the head librarian, had found a room in the back of an old store building in Booneville for their central

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location. She talked some local men into building shelves along the walls and then sent out a plea for book donations. Tansy had carried the few she had down to the library even before she was hired. Without books, a library was nothing more than a quiet room. Others had brought in books and magazines too, and the headquarters of the women's work programs in London, Kentucky, sent them a few boxes of books. Little by little, the place was beginning to look like a real library.

"We have to make this work," Mrs. Weston told Tansy when she traced out her route. Three other women had routes in other parts of the county. "The people who live in your area will depend on you making your rounds on a regular schedule. Winter coming on doesn't make things easy, but when was anything ever easy for us up here in the hills?"

November had gifted them with some fine fall weather. Riding her route had been a pleasure. Then December was nothing to complain about. But January came in cold and mean.

Rain had poured down all night, and now ice pellets stung Tansy's face as she rode away from the barn to start her route. She was relieved to see snowflakes mixing with the rain, even if that did mean the temperature had dropped. Snow made for better footing for her horse than ice.

Easy or not, Tansy was glad to head down the hill with her saddlebags loaded with books on this first Monday in the new year. She reined in her horse at the edge of Mad Dog Creek. Well named, she thought every time she crossed it. The creek could be a sweet, flowing stream, or it could turn evil when rains brought the tides. Flatlanders thought it odd to call floods *tides*, but that might be because they'd never seen tides of creek water sweeping down the mountains after a downpour.

Tansy stroked her horse's neck. She leased Shadrach, a Morgan gelding, from Preacher Rowlett, who lived at the bottom of Robins Ridge. Their mule was so old he'd give out if

she tried to ride him on the miles of her rounds each week. Preacher Rowlett promised Shadrach would be sure-footed on the rough trails, and a person could depend on what Preacher said. Not that he was really a preacher. At least not one with a church pulpit and all, but he did know his Bible and could be counted on to say words at a funeral whenever no bona fide preachers were around.

He was right about Shadrach. The white stockings on his front legs were the only thing fancy about the horse, but Tansy didn't need fancy. She needed willing. Shadrach was that. If she pointed him up the side of a hill, he did his best to climb it, although sometimes Tansy got off and walked to make it easier for him.

“What do you think, boy?” she asked now as the water churned past them. She weighed her options. Heading down the creek for what might be a better crossing place would put her off schedule. Crossing here would be cold and wet.

When she flicked the reins, she wasn't sure if Shadrach was game to give the creek a try or simply resigned. He shook his head slightly and stepped into the water. Tansy gasped as the water sloshed over her boot tops and soaked the wool pants she'd borrowed from her brother. She twisted around to grab her saddlebags of books and lift them above the water.

She let the reins hang loose to give Shadrach his head. The gelding would get through the creek. All she had to do was not fall off. And keep those books dry. Books were hard to come by, and she wasn't about to ruin her allotment.

Her feet were soaked by the time they climbed out of the creek, but the books were dry. After she settled the saddlebags back down on Shadrach's flanks, she stopped the horse to dump water out of her boots. Then nothing for it but to stick her wet feet back in those boots and head up the hill. Her pant legs stiffened and froze in the frigid wind.

She could warm up at her next stop, Jenny Sue Barton's

house. Poor woman had lost her husband a few months back when a tree fell on him. A dark cloud had settled down over her house after that, what with her son, Reuben Jr., falling sick with an ailment nobody had exactly figured out. They'd fetched in a doctor from the next county who didn't have any more answers than the granny healer, Geraldine Abrams, who'd concocted a tonic for the boy. The doctor said to feed him eggs to build up his strength and time would heal him. A boy of six should shake off whatever was ailing him.

Reuben Jr.'s grandmother claimed that was the first town doctor with sense. While he hadn't come right out and said it, he'd tiptoed all around how losing his pa had bruised the boy's heart. Until that healed some, they simply needed to be patient and do what they could to give him something to think about besides missing his pa.

Tansy was glad to help with that. She always stayed long enough at their house to read some from *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. A while reading aloud to bring cheer to the Bartons' worried cabin seemed little enough to do, and as a book woman, she was supposed to find ways to awaken people to the joy of books.

Today, she could dry out her boots while she read more of Crusoe's adventures and taught young Reuben some new words. Learning to read did seem to lift some of the sorrow off the boy. *Snow* might be a good word for him to learn this day.