

A detailed botanical illustration of purple morning glory flowers with yellow centers and green leaves. A yellow circular callout in the upper left corner contains text.

"An absolute triumph!"

JOCELYN GREEN

Christy Award-winning author

Shiloh

LORI BENTON

Praise for Lori Benton

“Lori Benton’s latest is a rich tapestry of lost love and betrayal, of heartache and compassion—and ultimately, of redemption and restoration. The courage and resilience of the human spirit is woven through every page of this highly enjoyable novel.”

TAMERA ALEXANDER, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Colors of Truth*

“An absolute triumph! With nuance and sensitivity, this tale explores the complexities of life after freedom from bondage. It’s a landscape of hope, fear, choices, love, surrender, and ultimately victory over that which ensnares. The writing is as lush as the frontier world it portrays. *Shiloh* is so powerful, and the characters so richly drawn, it could only have come from master storyteller Lori Benton’s pen.”

JOCELYN GREEN, Christy Award–winning author of *Between Two Shores* and *Shadows of the White City*

“A sumptuous tale, so true to life you will hope and yearn and dare to dream along with Ian and Seona as they wrestle with what reconciliation and second chances really mean. Lori Benton delivers another impeccably researched historical that kept me up late turning pages and haunted my thoughts when I reached the end.”

LAURA FRANTZ, Christy Award–winning author of *A Heart Adrift*

“Lori Benton dares to write characters whose lives are nuanced, complex, even cracked in tender wounds . . . and through those cracks, within the pages of *Shiloh*, something beautiful shines: the light of hope. Healing. And the binding of lives in friendship, love, and family. The depth of research and deftly developed characters and voicing are paralleled only by the depth of heart in this transporting tale. . . . A tale not to be missed!”

AMANDA DYKES, Christy Award–winning author of *Yours Is the Night*, *Set the Stars Alight*, and *Whose Waves These Are*

“Readers who enjoyed Lori Benton’s wonderful novel *Mountain Laurel* will be thrilled to read more about Seona and Ian’s frontier adventures and remarkable love story. Lori has a unique gift to bring a historical era and setting to life and then weave those story elements together in a way that captures your heart and soul. Overcoming past hurts and forging strong family ties are two important themes in this captivating story. Well-written and highly recommended!”

CARRIE TURANSKY, award-winning author of *No Ocean Too Wide* and *No Journey Too Far*

“With every book Lori Benton writes, I’m reminded again of why she’s one of my very favorite authors. Her characters are refreshingly layered and wonderfully complex—to the point that I find myself thinking about them long after the end. Through a rich tapestry of detailed history, she weaves a story that’s as thought-provoking as it is emotional and romantic. With vivid writing and an intriguing plot, this story of redemption and second chances will stay with me for a long time.”

MELISSA TAGG, Christy Award-winning author of *Now and Then and Always*

“Lori Benton masterfully weaves fine strands from her haunting debut novel, *Burning Sky*, into *Shiloh*, the gripping conclusion of the Kindred duology that began with *Mountain Laurel*. The result is a powerful saga that reaches from the bitter aftermath of the American Revolution into the very beginnings of slavery’s agonizing unraveling.”

J. M. HOCHSTETLER, author of the American Patriot series and coauthor of the Northkill Amish series

“*Mountain Laurel* is the sort of book where you really hope there will be a sequel because you want to spend more time with the characters. It’s a fascinating story, rich in emotion and a sense of the time and cultures in which it takes place.”

DIANA GABALDON, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Outlander series

“Lori Benton’s epic family saga *Mountain Laurel* thoroughly immersed me in plantation life in the 1790s and in the moral dilemmas created by the evil of slavery. Her lush, descriptive writing made every scene vivid and real. This engrossing tale of love and sorrow and redemption kept me turning pages!”

LYNN AUSTIN, Christy Award–winning author of *If I Were You*
and *Chasing Shadows*

“Love forbidden, sacrificed, redeemed. *Mountain Laurel* casts long shadows of kinship through generations of a society that breeds slaves and secrets. . . . Exquisitely penned, with all the beauty of a highland song, Lori Benton throws wide the door of a culture born in Scotland and wedded to the American South in years before that region dreamt of abolition. Stunning portrait of a past made real.”

CATHY GOHLKE, Christy Award–winning author of *The Medallion*
and *Night Bird Calling*

“Lori Benton is an extraordinary storyteller. . . . Every page delivers a unique, satisfying, and enriching read, where faith and family exposes and nurtures the journey of the human heart. I loved *Mountain Laurel!*”

JANE KIRKPATRICK, *New York Times* bestselling author of
Something Worth Doing

“Poignant. Impeccably researched. Tender and romantic but with a powerful message of clinging to faith over fear, *Mountain Laurel* is Lori Benton at her finest. . . . This is a stellar series debut!”

KRISTY CAMBRON, bestselling author of *The Butterfly and the Violin*
and *The Lost Castle*

“Vivid and complex, Lori Benton’s newest offering is penned within the backdrop of yet another stunning setting that touches the senses. In the truest threads of Lori’s fiction, *Mountain Laurel* is an intricately woven tale of love and heartache, wrapped up in a sweeping family saga.”

JOANNE BISCHOF, Christy Award–winning author of
Sons of Blackbird Mountain

“With a masterful pen, Lori Benton creates a poignant story that will have readers flipping pages late into the night. . . . I finished *Mountain Laurel* with both a sigh of satisfaction and a longing of expectation for what comes next for these characters. I highly recommend this novel!”

HEIDI CHIAVAROLI, Carol Award–winning author of *Freedom’s Ring* and *The Orchard House*

“Lori Benton’s *Mountain Laurel* is a compelling masterpiece, a stunning dance of romance, sacrifice, yearning, betrayal, and redemption. Benton weaves an exquisite tale that delves into the world of slavery while unearthing the treasure of what it truly means to be free. Seona and Ian’s story continues to captivate me long after the pages have closed.”

TARA JOHNSON, author of *All Through the Night* and *Where Dandelions Bloom*

Shiloh



Shiloh

A KINDRED NOVEL

LORI BENTON



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Shiloh

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*For Nancy and Gary Jensen—
you have so often cheered me on*

Cast of Characters

NORTH CAROLINA

Ian Cameron, planter, owner of Mountain Laurel; *Judith*, his wife; *Miranda (Mandy)*, their daughter
Malcolm, Mountain Laurel's oldest slave; *Naomi*, his daughter; *Ally*, his grandson
John Reynold, friend and neighbor to the Camerons; *Cecily*, his wife; *Robin*, their son
Charlie Spencer, friend and neighbor to the Camerons
Lucinda Cameron, Judith's mother, Ian's widowed aunt, now living at Chesterfield Plantation
Rosalyn Pryce, Ian's sister-by-law; *Gideon Pryce*, her husband and master of Chesterfield
Esther, former slave at Mountain Laurel, now living at Chesterfield; *Maisy* and *Jubal*, her parents

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Seona Cameron, freewoman; *Gabriel*, her son with Ian Cameron
Lily Cameron, sempstress, midwife, freewoman, Seona's mother
Robert Cameron, bookbinder, Ian's father; *Margaret*, Ian's mother
Catriona Cameron, Ian's sister
Ned Cameron, Ian's brother; *Penny*, Ned's wife; *Robbie* and *Eddie*, their sons

Morgan Shelby, New York City merchant
Thomas Ross, Ian's boyhood friend

SHILOH, NEW YORK

Neil MacGregor, Shiloh's physician, Ian's neighbor on Black Kettle Creek; *Willa MacGregor*, his wife; *Jamie* and *Liam*, their sons

Matthew MacGregor (called Owl by the *Kanien'kehá:ka*), adopted son of Neil and Willa MacGregor

Maggie MacGregor (called Pine Bird by the *Kanien'kehá:ka*), adopted daughter of Neil and Willa MacGregor

Joseph Tames-His-Horse, *Kanien'kehá:ka* warrior, Wolf Clan brother of Willa MacGregor

Colonel Elias Waring, magistrate, former militia colonel; *Goodenough*, his common-law wife; *Lemuel Waring*, their son
Anni Keppler, Elias Waring's daughter; *Charles Keppler*, her husband, Shiloh's miller

Francis Waring, Elias Waring's son, Anni's younger brother

Jack Keagan, owner of Shiloh's tavern and trade store

Hector Lacey, squatter and recluse

COOPERSTOWN, NEW YORK

William Cooper, judge, congressman, land speculator, founder of Cooperstown; *Mrs. Cooper*, his wife; *James*, his youngest son

Moss Kent, lawyer, William Cooper's assistant

Aram Crane, frontier troublemaker with a history of violence

Mr. Hansen, storekeeper



Is it fitting for a body to miss a place she once walked in fear? A place that broke her heart and bruised her soul? Still I dream at night of Mountain Laurel.

By day I walk this new world with its smelly cobbled streets teeming with people brusque and busy. With its tolling bells and ropewalks and ships lining wharves that poke into salt-tanged waters like the spokes of the wagon wheels that brought us here. Boston swirls around me like the sea wind, too fast to catch before it shifts again. Face after strange face. Ship after taller ship. Season after passing season. I have learned to trade the coins Mama earns for things we once made ourselves. I know the best time to bargain for fish and fruit, tea and coffee, notions and thread, and I know their fair worth. No one obliges me to go or stay, though there's plenty needing done and me and Mama do our share. Some things did not change with freedom—like who I am inside where no one sees. That girl with the bruised soul who learned to say, “Yes, sir,” and “No, ma’am,” to white folk smart-quick. That girl who walks now in a waking dream, calling herself free. But she's not.

The house that shelters us, the room we sleep in—the very bed—all of it was Ian's. I see him in the faces smiling with his smile. None more so than the son we share.

There is no forgetting. No letting go of who I was. Who I am still? There is only this place in between where I wait, harbored but unanchored, like one of those tall ships with its moorings frayed, set adrift.

What it is will anchor me, I cannot say.



PART I

Winter 1795–Summer 1796
North Carolina and Massachusetts



I

CARRAWAY MOUNTAINS, NORTH CAROLINA

December 1795

The crevice in the earth, widened by pick and shovel, permitted a man of average size to hunker comfortably within.

Ian Cameron, taller than average and broad through the shoulders, felt his coat sleeves brush the sides of the tunnel dug into the creek's steep bank. The creek itself, near its spring-fed source, was narrow enough a man could bestride it. That small distance placed the vein of gold the digging contained on his neighbor John Reynold's land. Not on Mountain Laurel, Ian's farm.

John and another neighbor, Charlie Spencer, crouched outside the tunnel, hats dusted with the snow feathering down from laden clouds, as Ian ran a hand over its clammy roof, fingers exploring the stone embedded some three feet back from the entrance. Charlie's pick had exposed all but one edge of the roughly rectangular mass. No telling how deep the fourth edge went into the bank. A foot or more and it might pose no threat. Inches would be another matter.

Thought of being buried alive sent Ian crab-walking out into the frigid gray.

"Was I right?" Charlie's breath clouded before his whiskered face. "That rock set to drop and bring half the ridge down after it?"

“Ye’re right to leave off digging.” Ian dipped muddy hands in the ice-rimmed creek, then stood, chafing reddened fingers.

“Can it be shored? Or should we cease the business altogether?” Worry made John Reynold’s voice more crisply English than usual. Nose red-tipped, he cast a dubious glance at the raw cutting in the earth. “I’ll not put Charlie in harm’s way for *gold*,” he added with such disregard for the substance Ian laughed.

“No doubt that’s why the Almighty saw fit to put it on your land, John. Ye’re the only man in the Carraways who’d cover that vein and put it out of mind if one of us half urged ye to it.”

Wry humor lit John’s brown eyes. “I won’t say it’s more trouble than it’s worth, but it does present its complications.”

The gold had been discovered on the Reynolds’ land by Mountain Laurel’s overseer—a secret taken to his death the previous autumn. Not until Charlie Spencer stumbled upon the abandoned mine had Ian learned of its existence.

After choosing to keep the gold a secret between the three of them—and his wife, Cecily—John had faced a quandary. How was he to make use of the ore without arousing speculation as to its source?

Between the ongoing work of farming, John had made two trips east over the past year, to Wilmington and New Bern—long-established coastal towns—to exchange the gold for coin, which was more discreetly spendable for the modest improvements to his farm he wished to make. And to portion out wages for Charlie, who swiped off his drooping hat to knock away snow, then snugged it back over his balding head.

“Ain’t more’n a thread in spots, that vein, but looks to keep going. No telling how far, apart from digging.”

“I’m not sure the stone would fall even without support,” Ian said. “But I’d feel better about your chipping away up here if ye let me do a bit of framing first.”

Charlie nodded, fondling the ear of one of his hounds come nosing up along the creek, paws muddying the snow that sugared the ground.

“Right then,” John said. “I’ve some pine down to the barn . . .” He

caught Ian's brief frown. "I don't intend taking anything needed in your shop."

"It's not that." Ian fetched his neighbor a half smile, tempered by the reminder of his reduced circumstances since last year's fire claimed his uncle Hugh Cameron's life and home and marked the desertion of all but one of his uncle's field hands. "Pine's too soft. I've some hickory curing. Give it a few weeks, be sure the green's gone out of it, then I'll get to work up here."

John grasped his shoulder in thanks, then turned to the smaller man scratching the dog's ear. "You hear, Charlie? No digging 'til we have that stone supported."

A grin showed Charlie's snagged eyeteeth. "Won't say I'm not gratified by the share ye've staked me, but truth to tell I'm most tickled at keeping the secret from folk got no business poking their noses in it."

Ian knew who Charlie meant: Lucinda Cameron, his uncle's widow—and Ian's mother-by-law. Ian suspected she had been the instigator of his uncle's erstwhile overseer's hunt for gold on the ridge. The man hadn't lived long enough to confirm its existence to Lucinda, and since the night of the house fire she had removed herself to nearby Chesterfield Plantation, her eldest daughter's home. Still, the woman cast a formidable shadow.

Ian replaced the brush-screen used to conceal the digging. What traces their boots had left, the snow would cover. Through it now came a distant baying: another of Charlie's hounds. Ian knew the sound of a dog with a critter treed. So did the hound at their knees. With a joyous yelp, it raced off to join the hunt.

Charlie hoisted pick and shovel. "Let me know when I'm to get back to it. Meantime, me and the dogs are going hunting."

Ian declined John's offer of a chat by his hearth, appealing though the invitation was. Instead they parted and followed their own paths back down the steep ridge, Ian keeping to the creek that dashed through a landscape obscured by slanting snow: shadowed pine and dark-leaved laurel, outcrops of lichen-speckled stone, the skeletal shapes of oak and hickory.

The going was slick in spots. Ian had only half his mind on where he

placed his boots. The other wandered a more treacherous path, ahead to where the creek led: home, eventually, where Judith, his wife, and Naomi, their cook, were likely at work in the warmth of the kitchen, spared by last year's fire. Between him and that snug refuge was the hollow, bowered in white-limbed birches, with the creek plunging in its glassy fall. And the memories, waiting to ensnare.

He hadn't set foot there since Seona, his uncle's former slave, left to live with Ian's parents in Boston, taking with her their son, Gabriel, conceived in that hollow when he and Seona had been handfasted, his headstrong attempt to claim his heart's desire—*her* heart—and give her what she deserved—freedom. Or the promise of it, since the Scots custom of handfasting wasn't recognized in North Carolina.

Even that tenuous plan for a future together had been ruined through Lucinda Cameron's manipulations. She had convinced Ian that Seona had run for freedom without him, leaving him devastated yet unable to abandon the rest of Mountain Laurel's slaves to Lucinda's harsh care. And so he had stayed, become his uncle's heir. And he had married Judith, his uncle's youngest stepdaughter, to assure his determination didn't waver—months before learning Seona hadn't spurned him, hadn't run, but was sold into drudgery farther south, pregnant with his child. Too late to do anything about it except bring her back to Mountain Laurel, shelter her, and try to keep his distance.

He had failed at the latter, to Judith's heartache, before he surrendered his will to the Almighty. Even then it had been a constant battle, day by excruciating day, until the house fire and the revelation that Hugh Cameron had already freed both Seona and her mother, Lily, months before his death.

With Seona, Gabriel, and Lily removed to Boston, Ian had set himself to love his wife as Scripture bade and banish memories of Seona to the far edges of his heart. All these months he had stayed away from that birch hollow with its spilling fall of memories, yet here he was, tempted as if no time at all had passed.

He ought to have accepted John's invitation. Had his friend seen into his soul, back at the digging, and recognized the disquiet burrowing there?

It was the silence undoing him. He had had one letter from his sister, saying Seona, Gabriel, and Lily had reached Boston safely and been given shelter in the Cameron home on Beachum Lane. He had written back, enclosing what he could by way of provision for their keeping.

A year ago.

No further news was promised. He had asked for none. Yet the longer the silence stretched, the harder it grew not to wonder. Did Seona find life with his family agreeable? Or had she and Lily found a place for themselves and Gabriel? Were they flourishing? Surviving?

He *would* go to the birch hollow. Not to linger, he told himself, grasping at a stony outcrop to descend the creek's bank. Merely to pass through and—

His boot came down on a moss-slick stone and shot from under him. Next he knew, he lay sprawled among jumbled rocks, scraped and bruised, snow landing cold on his upturned face.

He sat up, yelping as pain shot through his knee, twisted in the fall. With the help of those bruising stones, he pushed himself to his feet, hands scraped, coat and breeches stained by mud and moss. He hobbled to where his hat had fallen, shook it free of snow, shoved it back on his head.

He would never make it down the steep drop into the hollow now.

While snow sifted down and the creek chattered on, oblivious to his small drama, relief swept him. On its heels came a wash of shame. He closed his eyes against the throb of his wrenched knee, the aching of his heart.

“Right then,” he said. “I’ll go home by the straighter way.”



In the whitewashed kitchen house, Judith was slicing carrots. Knife arrested at the gust of cold Ian ushered in when he entered, she took in the sight of him, expression caught between amusement and dismay. “What on earth does John Reynold have you doing, Ian? Digging a privy?”

He had washed the mud from his face and hands at the well but

knew his foolishness had created more labor for his wife. Even with Naomi doing most of the kitchen work and a share of the laundering, Judith was worn to exhaustion most days with the endless tasks of keeping their household clean, dry, and ordered.

“Took a wee tumble on my way home,” he said, hoping to stave off curiosity. Neither Judith nor Naomi knew of the gold—or the birch hollow.

The half-truth burned on his face.

Naomi stood before the massive brick hearth to shield its flames from gusting air. His daughter, Miranda Grace—whom they called Mandy—rode her broad hip. “Mister Ian, come all in or go back out. You letting in cold.”

Judith peered past him. “It’s snowing? I’ve wash on the line.”

Ian shut the door but knew as soon as he turned, Judith had noted his limp. She put down the knife and rounded the worktable, skirts swishing. “Ian, you’re hurt. Sit by the fire and let me see.”

“Knee’s bruised, is all. Sorry about the coat.”

“I’ll take it. I need to get the wash off the line before it’s soaked again.”

“I’ve work in the stable. Best let the mud dry, brush it off there.”

Judith searched his face, then with a smile that prettied her plain features, wrapped herself in a woolen shawl. “I’ll take Mandy, Naomi, so you can make some headway with supper.”

“Your mama gonna let you ride the toting basket, baby girl. You like that, don’t you?” Naomi skimmed a fingertip under Mandy’s chin, eliciting a giggle as she handed over the child.

It was early days yet, but it seemed Mandy hadn’t taken much from Ian in looks. Not the eyes, brown like Judith’s instead of his blue. Nor the hair. Mandy sported a cap of wisps darker than his wheat-gold shade, though now and then in sunlight he had caught a hint of russet in the brown. Like his sister’s.

Mandy’s head was covered now in a knit cap pulled snug to plump cheeks, to one of which Judith pressed a kiss. “Isn’t your daddy a sight? You’d think he was five, not five-and-twenty.”

She tucked a fold of shawl around their daughter and went out

through the herb shed at the back of the kitchen. Over her shoulder Mandy grinned at Ian until the door closed between.

“Supper ain’t for a spell,” Naomi said. “Want something to tide you afore you go down to Ally at the stable?”

Since the house burned just over a year past—the day of Mandy’s birth—the kitchen had become the heart of Mountain Laurel. They all ate there, he and Judith and Mandy; Naomi, her grown son, Ally, and her aged father, Malcolm. Yet Ian never thought of this space with its ropes of onions and peppers, its perpetual smell of smoke and herbs and grease, its gleaming copper and oiled cast iron, as anything but Naomi’s kingdom, where she presided in her calico crown.

He told her he could wait for supper. “Is Malcolm with Ally?”

“Last I knew.” Naomi took over chopping the carrots. Potatoes lay in a heap next to the cutting board. It looked to be a vegetable stew. They were low on meat save for the hams and sausages put up in the smokehouse, meant to last until next autumn. He needed to take a leaf out of Charlie Spencer’s book, bring in some venison. Or a turkey.

“I’ll head on down. I need to work with Juturna,” he added, speaking of the two-year-old filly born days after he arrived at Mountain Laurel to take up his uncle’s offer of becoming his heir.

“You gonna work that filly in this snow?”

“This little skiff’s no proper *snow*. Ye’ve clearly never seen the likes of Boston in winter.”

Naomi dropped the carrots into a steaming kettle. “Reckon not. Ain’t been more’n five miles off this farm in my lifetime.”

Her words sent a stab through Ian—guilt of another kind. He had never grown easy with his uncle’s owning of slaves. That he now owned this woman, and her kin, was a fact he couldn’t reconcile. “Would ye like to?”

Naomi turned from the hearth, eyebrows vanished beneath her head wrapping. “Not if that mean leaving my menfolk behind. Who’d tend them—Miss Judith and Mandy, too—did I go traipsing off to wherever?”

“There’s that.” He tried to smile but was blindsided with longing.

For his kin in Boston. For Gabriel. *Seona* . . . He jerked his head, dispelling such thoughts for what seemed the hundredth time that day.

Naomi hadn't shifted the kettle over the flames. "You ain't had but the one letter from your sister."

"No" was all he said.

Naomi turned to swing the kettle-crane but got the last word in, loud enough Ian heard it at the door. "It gonna help things, us pretending they never drew breath here?"



Behind its fence pales the kitchen garden lay in repose. The trellised walkway that ran beside it led to a looming emptiness where the house once stood.

Mountain Laurel was a shadow of the plantation it had been the day Ian and his boyhood friend, Thomas Ross, first rode into the stable-yard. Ian and Judith were living now in the old overseer's cabin, out by the tobacco barns. He had expanded the cabin to two rooms, while Naomi and her family had their cabins nearby in what had been the slave quarter, all but the soundest two dismantled.

Besides a full smokehouse, they had garden produce and corn put by to see them and the stock through the winter, but the fire and the flight of his uncle's field hands—with Thomas leading them to freedom—had reduced them to subsistence farming.

Last year's tobacco harvest had amounted to less than half of what the tired land once yielded, and he had only Ally to help in the fields come spring. Malcolm never shirked his work in the garden, but he was beset with rheumatism. Judith needed Naomi in the kitchen and yard. The last thing Ian wanted was to acquire more slaves. He would rather free those he had inherited, but his responsibility toward them wouldn't end with manumission granted by the North Carolina Assembly. Freed slaves were required to leave the state else be subject again to enslavement. With *Seona*, Gabriel, and Lily to help support, he was stretched thin already.

Chasing worries and gathering snow wouldn't accomplish any of the tasks demanding his attention. Shaking off both, Ian rounded the

kitchen and caught sight of Judith taking down the wash as snow blanketed the yard. Nestled in the toting basket, Mandy played in the mound of garments piling up around her.

Judith's shoulders bowed as she worked. She had always been thin, left fragile from a childhood bout with yellow fever, yet in the gray of afternoon, obscured by snowfall, she appeared exhausted.

She looked up as he neared, brushing at a snowflake that landed on her nose. He moved her hand away from a petticoat as she reached for it. "I'll finish this. Take Mandy down to the cabin where it's warm."

She gave way, bending to scoop their daughter from the basket, not quite stifling a groan as she straightened. "There's mending I can see to."

"Never mind the mending. Rest yourself 'til supper."

He glimpsed her relief before she covered it with a smile. "All right, Ian."



He woke in the dark, disturbed by a sound, thinking it only moments since he had drifted to sleep. Or had he overslept and left Ally to tend the stock alone? Hard to tell, these long nights.

The sound came again. He pushed up on an elbow. His wife knelt beside the bed, retching into the chamber pot. Moonlight slanted through the room's window. The clouds had cleared. The cold air smelled of sick.

He waited while Judith washed at the basin, then came silently back to their bed. Across the chilled sheets he reached for her, sick himself with knowing. Softly, so he wouldn't wake Mandy in her cradle, he asked, "How far along are ye?"

"I didn't mean to wake you." Judith's voice was small in the winter dark.

"How far?"

"Three months."

That would make it . . . June. If she carried this one to term. The lingering effects of childhood illness weren't all that had taxed Judith's strength. She had been carrying again two months after Mandy's birth

but lost the babe in late spring. Mourning the tiny girl they named Elizabeth, he had dug another grave on the ridge beside his resting kin.

The bedtick rustled. Judith turned toward him. "Are you pleased?"

A tightness gripped his throat. He found her brow in the dark and kissed it, nose pressed against her ruffled nightcap. "Of course. Try and sleep a bit longer."

Ignoring his own advice, he lay thinking. Perhaps he ought to head out to his cabinetmaking shop, whatever the hour. Work awaited him there as well. Beside him Judith's breathing deepened. He thought her asleep until her whisper rose in the dark.

"It will be all right. I'm not afraid."

Which of them she sought to comfort, he couldn't have said.