

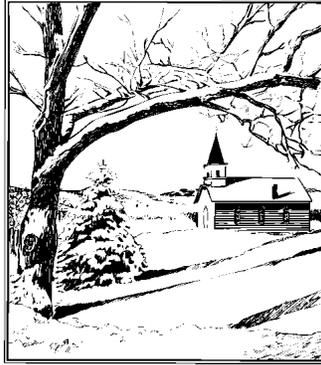
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## My Christmas gift to you



The past two Christmas seasons, I have written short novels, *Mary's Christmas Gift* and *A Cowboy's Christmas Prayer* and offered them free on my web site, [www.inspiration-for-singles.com](http://www.inspiration-for-singles.com). The responses have shocked me. More than 20,000 people have downloaded *Mary's Christmas Gift* and more than 13,000 visitors have downloaded *A Cowboy's Christmas Prayer* since their publications in 2006 and 2007, respectively.

This year's free novel is titled *Appalachian Christmas Dream*. It tells about the Moonlight School movement that swept Kentucky and the Appalachian Mountain area of the United States in the early 1900s.

But more importantly, *Appalachian Christmas Dream* is a story about hope. We all need hope in these troubled times. The world can fail us, but God is trustworthy. That's the true message of Christmas. God cares about you—you, his beloved child.

I hope you'll share this gift with your friends as well. Please send them to [www.inspiration-for-singles.com/appalachian.html](http://www.inspiration-for-singles.com/appalachian.html), where they can download their own copy, or print this out and give a hard copy to them.

My prayer for you is that God will restore your life in this difficult time, and that you will feel his unconditional love in your heart, now and for the rest of your life.

Jack Zavada

[www.inspiration-for-singles.com](http://www.inspiration-for-singles.com)

# Chapter One



“Excuse me, honey, could you go find the schoolteacher for me?”

“First,” she replied, “I’m not your honey, and second, I *am* the schoolteacher.”

“Oh! You don’t look old enough...” He studied the young woman standing before him. Although she appeared only fourteen or fifteen years old, she obviously was older. She was a wisp of a girl, barely five feet tall and certainly less than a hundred pounds. Her hair was the color of wheat straw, shaggy, and down to her shoulders. She was dressed in a faded gingham dress and wore no jewelry. Her blue eyes met his gaze without blinking and there was defiance, no, *determination* in them.

“I am Junie Corban, Mister...” she said, extending her hand.

“Todd. Linton Todd.” He shook with her and smiled at her strong, confident grip. “I’m the engineer for Barnhart Coal Company.”

“And what business do you have with the schoolteacher?”

“I just wanted to inform you that we’ll be building a road past the schoolhouse here, and from my charts, it’ll come within three feet of your front door.”

“It will not, Sir.” She stood with her hands on her hips, staring up at him.

“Beg pardon?”

“Unlike most coal patch towns in Kentucky, this one did *not* get the lots for our church and school from your mining company. Those buildings were already here when your company purchased the land in the hollow.”

“We have rights to...”

“Hogwash!” she cut him off, a smile briefly playing across her lips. “The schoolhouse and the yard surrounding it are owned by the Mission Creek School District, and the signed agreement filed in the Prestonsburg courthouse states that there will be no encroachment upon the school or church grounds by your firm.”

“Barnhart *owns* this valley, Miss Corban, and if we want to make a road...”

“Then you’ll be defying an injunction and subject to arrest by the Floyd County sheriff, Mister Todd,” she interrupted him again, “because as sure as there’s a God in heaven, I’ll notify the county attorney and he’ll speak to Judge Brooker and before you can move one shovelful of dirt...”

“I *believe* you,” Todd said, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’ll have to report this to Mr. Peltier, the mine superintendent.”

“You do that. And while you’re at it, please remind him that I’m waiting for your company’s donation for the Moonlight School.”

“Moonlight School? What’s that?”

“Special night classes to teach the illiterates in the area to read and write. They held the first one up in Rowan County two years ago and had so many adult students they could hardly handle them all. It’s supported entirely by donations, so we’re counting on Barnhart Coal to do its part.”

“I don’t see Peltier contributing to that,” Todd admitted. “He’s tighter than a drumhead with company money. And your fighting our road won’t help.”

“The Moonlight School will go ahead whether Barnhart donates or not. And there’ll *be* no road. Good day, Mr. Todd.”

He said something in reply, but by then Junie was already marching back up the hill toward the schoolhouse's front door. She finished her chores, got her cracked leather book bag, then locked the front door with the big black iron key.

Until a year ago, the only buildings in this eastern Kentucky valley known locally as Mission Creek were the one-room schoolhouse and the white clapboard Baptist church. Now a long dirt road ran down the center of the depression, with a perfectly straight line of two dozen wood frame houses planted along the east side.

Nothing about the settlement was charitable. Barnhart Coal collected rent from the miners who lived there. Having the men live only a couple hundred yards from the mine ensured that they reported for work on time. Her father, the first man hired by the concern, made the one-mile walk on the same footpath she followed to school every morning, but few others lived outside the valley.

The two-story houses, each occupied by three or four families, were heated by coal stoves. She wondered if Barnhart charged a premium price for the fuel that was now so plentiful here.

As she walked past the company store with its outrageous prices, Junie tried to suppress her anger at how the coal companies, through rent and predatory markups at their stores, got nearly all their workers' wages back by the end of the month. The final indignity was charging the miners a 25 cents every few weeks to sharpen their picks and shovels.

Still, these houses were better than in some mining camps, just tarpaper covered shacks that did little more than keep off the rain and snow. She turned off the road at the last dwelling and trudged up the hill into the trees.

Fall was coming to the Appalachians but it would be a few more weeks before the trees turned colors. The path she took was known only to the local mountain folk. The roads, where they existed, were suitable only for a person on horseback. Even the mining company's Model T Fords couldn't get back into the woods.

She passed a grove of towering shagbark hickory trees and got a bawling out by the fox squirrels gathering nuts for winter. The thick-hulled nuts were already scattered about the ground. Junie reminded herself to tell her father about the squirrels; they were one of his favorite dishes. She would start bringing a gunny sack with her to gather nuts on the way home from school. Before the mine came, they had lived primarily off the land, going to the general store at Caney Branch only to buy staples of flour, sugar, coffee, and corn meal.

When she had crossed two more ridges she arrived at their cabin. A three-room affair, it had a bedroom for each of them and a large kitchen. There was an outhouse and a small barn made from the same rough-sawn lumber. In the yard were chickens and a pig. Her father used their mule, Sadie, to work a ten-acre patch of hillside ground which he had laboriously cleared of rocks and stumps over the years.

"Was wonderin' where you was," Big Mike Corban shouted from the front porch.

"You think I got eaten by a bear?"

"Any bear tried eatin' you would get a mighty sour stomach."

She laughed, stepped up on the wooden porch and hugged her father. "How're you, Daddy? That cough any better?"

"Sure! Just about gone. I made a tea out of bayberry and honey—your grandma's cure. She knew her mountain medicine, Junie. That stuff I hacked up was so mean I spit it on the ground and it jumped up and run away."

Big Mike Corban got his nickname naturally. He stood six feet eight inches tall in his white work socks and had arms as thick as fence posts. Yet everyone who was acquainted with him knew him as a man of gentleness and good humor.

They went inside and she set her book bag on the floor then took a flour sack apron from a nail on the wall.

“I’m worried about you, Daddy. That coal dust and mine gas and being all cramped up like that all night—it’s dangerous.”

He shook his head as he sat down at the scarred wooden table. “It beats scratching out a living like we were doing before the mine came along. There’s no work to speak of in these parts, Junie, unless we move to Caney Branch and I get on at the sawmill or with a logging camp.”

“I just...” she paused, thinking about it a moment before she finished. “I just don’t like the way they treat you fellas.”

“It’s work, girl, not a social club. How’d school go today? Is that punkin-headed Mitchell boy still giving you trouble?”

She laughed as she took plates and tableware out of a cupboard and set them on the table. “He was going to throw a spitwad at the blackboard today and Danny Holbrook whacked him over the head with a dictionary. His eyes were rolling around like marbles in a wheelbarrow.”

Big Mike roared, slapping the knee of his bib overalls. “Serves him right. How’re the other young’uns s’posed to learn with him cuttin’ up all the time?”

“They’re a handful, that’s for sure. What do you want for supper tonight?”

“Take the lid offa that pot there and you’ll find a couple cleaned rabbits. I plugged ‘em on the way home this morning.”

“Good! Should I fry them up and make some pan gravy?”

“You know that’s my favorite. I’ll go pump a bucket of water to boil the potatoes.” He took an enameled bucket from the dry sink and headed toward the door.

Junie worried about her father. Since her mother had died three years ago, he rarely talked about her, but she knew he missed her terribly. She was glad that he still went to church at Mission Creek. Her father had sworn off liquor the day his daughter was baptized. Junie knew too well that many men turned to the bottle when tragedy overtook their lives.

Big Mike returned with the water, poured it in a heavy pot and began peeling and quartering potatoes. They worked methodically. Both father and daughter were skilled cooks.

Junie got a large cast-iron skillet, put it on the cook stove and let it get hot. Then she added a large dollop of lard, letting it liquefy while she cut the rabbits into pieces and coated them with flour. While the rabbit was frying, she mixed the ingredients for a stack cake, alternating layers of dough and apple preserves. She slipped the pan in the oven and took note of the small pendulum clock on the wall. The cake would be done just in time for dessert.

“I can’t figure why you never put on any weight, girl,” he teased her, as they were finishing the meal.

“I keep telling you it’s because I do all the work around here,” she shot back. An impish smile brightened her face.

“You do more’n your share, that’s for sure. But you know, if you had a husband, you could split up the chores.”

“And he’d live here with you and me?” She snorted. “There’s not a sane man in Kentucky who’d want to live as son-in-law under the same roof as Big Mike Corban.”

“I didn’t say you’d get you a *sane* man, Junie. After all, you’d have to find one who would marry *you*.”

She giggled and threw the dish towel at his face. “For that, you can dry tonight, and there are plenty of dishes to keep you busy.”

“You should at least be looking,” he said seriously. “Folks in the valley are talking. You, twenty-five years old and without even a beau. Why, most mountain girls have four or five kids by your age.”

“I’m not like most mountain girls, in case you haven’t noticed. They didn’t work themselves through college...”

“And if they had, they wouldn’t have come back to this God-forsaken place. Why don’t you go up to Prestonsburg or down to Pikeville and get you a job that pays you for all you went through? You’re workin’ for chicken feed here.”

“Those children *need* me here, Daddy. I want them to go on and do more and be more. They deserve a good education just as much as city kids. More, maybe.”

“Well, I can’t argue you there.” His weathered face softened. “Everybody says you’re a fine teacher, Junie. You make me proud of you. Maybe if you teach those young’uns the things I never learned, big shots like H.M. Peltier won’t take advantage of them.”

“You can still learn, Daddy. Why won’t you come to the Moonlight School? There’ll be plenty of men your age there. Why, Miss Cora said in Rowan County they had fellas in their eighties at the first session there.”

“I’m too stupid. I’d just make a fool of myself.”

Tears formed in her eyes. “You’re *not* stupid,” she told him. “Just because you can’t read or write, that doesn’t make you stupid. You’re one of the wisest men I know.”

“I don’t want to argue with you, honey. Let’s just leave it there.”

“Okay, but after the session starts and I get Miss Cora’s primers, I’m going to teach you at home here, and I *mean* it.”

He smiled at the fire in her eyes. “You’ve got a lot of your mama in you.”

That night, after her father had changed into his work clothes, he took his lantern and went down the trail back to the mine. Junie lay in bed, staring at the board ceiling of her room, listening to her two-bell brass alarm clock ticking loudly on the nightstand next to her.

Somewhere in the woods, an owl hooted. Random thoughts skittered through Junie’s mind as she waited for sleep to come. She suspected that some day, after her father died, she *would* leave these hills. There was so much work to be done, so many people to teach. She had been excited about the Moonlight School since she had attended the teachers’ seminar in Morehead last fall and actually met Miss Cora.

Cora Wilson Stewart, or Miss Cora, as everyone called her, had *proved* that adults could learn, and could learn quickly. Her goal was to wipe out illiteracy in Kentucky and the first session, held on a moonlight night so folks could see the roads, had turned out nearly a third of the population of Rowan County in 1911.

Now Junie would have a Moonlight School of her own and she would make it a success, too. People were signing up, supplies and donations were coming in.

Her eyelids grew heavy. What was that fella’s name? That engineer? Todd. *Something* Todd.

Junie smiled just before she drifted off to sleep. He *was* kind of handsome.

## Chapter Two



Fayanne Brown scanned the overcast sky, watching a red-tailed hawk circling high above them.

“Looks like rain’s coming, Junie. How many places we have left to visit?”

“Just two,” she answered, walking the trail a few feet ahead. “Maisie Sparks and Velma Turpin.”

“Oh, well, Velma’s on the way back to Mission Creek.” Fayanne stepped over a gnarled oak root that crossed the dirt path. “You really think it’s worth our time to talk to Maisie? She’s never gonna come down to the hollow for your school.”

“Maybe not, but we’re supposed to contact everybody we can. Over in Rowan, they taught a bunch of folks in their houses, and that’s what I intend to do to, if I have to.” Junie stopped, turned around and looked at her friend. “You’re not *scared* of Miss Maisie, are you Fayanne?”

The other young woman looked down at her well-worn shoes. Fayanne, Junie’s former classmate and still her best friend, was dressed in a similar gingham dress and light wool jacket. She had flaming red hair, a sprinkling of freckles across her cheeks, and a funny way of scrunching up her nose when she was worried. Like she was doing now.

“Well, maybe a little. She’s *strange*, Junie. Folks say she’s a witch.”

Junie let out a little girl’s giggle. “There’s no such thing,” she said dismissively. “She just knows a lot about herbs and such.”

“I heard she put a curse on Hector Bayless and his little toe fell off.”

Junie laughed again. “Well, if it did, it was more than likely from not washing it.”

“Still, she’s not going to leave her cabin to come down to school. And you better do all the talking, Junie Corban.”

“I will. You’re just along for moral support.”

Maisie Sparks’ shack was a conglomeration of discarded materials—a piece of rusty corrugated tin here, some tarpaper there, shake shingles on one part of the roof, thatch on another. None of it had seen whitewash since the War Between the States, forty-eight years ago.

“Hello, Maisie! It’s Junie Corban and Fyenne Brown!” Junie shouted loudly at the ramshackle building.

A hound lying on the porch let out one bark but was so ancient the effort was too much to rise and investigate. It laid its head back down and watched them through bloodshot eyes. The screen door creaked open and the old woman appeared.

She was hunched over, her gray hair in stringy strands. She wore three or four layers of clothes—a dress, moth-eaten sweater, and an apron on top of it all.

“Well, hello there, girls. What brings you up to my neck of the woods? One of ya be needin’ a love potion?” Then she let loose a cackling laugh through her toothless mouth.

“No, Maisie, we just want to talk a bit,” Junie said.

“Come on in, then, and find ye something to set on. Would ye like a cup of elderberry tea?”

“Sure,” Junie said, glancing back at Fyenne. Her friend’s eyes widened, as if someone had threatened her with deadly poison.

The inside of the place was crammed with jars and tins, wooden cupboards with tiny drawers, and dried herbs hanging from the rafters. The two young women took small wooden boxes off kitchen chairs and

said down. She poured the tea for them into cracked china mugs. Junie sipped it cautiously and found that it was surprisingly good.

“Miss Maisie, you know that I’m the teacher at the school down in the hollow.”

“Yeah, and folks tell me you’re doin’ a good job there, keepin’ those youngsters in line and teachin’ ‘em their ABC’s.”

“Well, we came up here today to see if *you’d* like to learn your ABC’s.”

“Me? An old lady like me? Why, I’m past learnin’, girl. I could never get it.”

“But would you *like* to?”

Maisie thought long and hard, studying the drink in her cup.

“Well, ya know, there is somethin’ I been thinkin’ about.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, I ain’t got no kin, and I ain’t got no...what’s the word?”

“Apprentice?” Fayanne offered.

“That’s it!” Maisie nodded enthusiastically. “Nobody to learn all the potions and cures I know. My granny taught me, but she couldn’t read nor write either. What happens when I die?”

“This would all be lost,” Junie said. “But if I teach you how to write, you can write all your recipes down, and then pass them on to whomever you want.”

Maisie’s eyes lit up. “Now *that* would be somethin’! I’ll let you girls in on a little secret,” she half-whispered, glancing around as if someone might be listening. “Some folks make fun of mountain remedies, but they work! Some were handed down from the Indians, some of ‘em folks brought over from the old country. But mountain doctors don’t keep givin’ a remedy if’n it don’t work. Makes us look bad!”

“Maisie, would you be willing to come down to the hollow to go to the Moonlight School, at the schoolhouse there?”

The old woman’s expression soured. “No. No, I don’t like bein’ around lots of folks, honey. Makes me kinda nervous. Besides, the young’uns make fun of me.” For a moment genuine hurt shone in her eyes.

“How about if I come up here every so often and teach you here, right at your cabin?”

She grabbed Junie by the hand, almost spilling her tea. “Why, that’d be just fine. You really think I can learn it?”

“They had a school like this over in Rowan County, ma’am, and men and women your age learned to read and write in a couple of weeks.”

Once the arrangements were made, Junie and her friend found their way out of the high hills back toward the mining settlement. Velma Turpin’s house was on the way.

“I guess Miz Maisie’s not so bad when you get to know her,” Fayanne said. “She’s just kind of a sad old lady living up there alone.”

“Years and years ago, there were hardly any doctors in the mountains,” Junie replied. “And by the time they sent somebody on horseback to get one and bring him back, it might have been too late. So folks had to rely on folk remedies. I suppose there’s some science in them, although a medical doctor would never admit it. If we can teach her to read and write, we can preserve what she knows for future generations.”

“We? Did you say *we*?”

“You mean you’re not going to help me with the Moonlight School?”

Fayanne blanched. “Well, I thought you meant what we’re doing today. Going out and signing people up. I’m no teacher, Junie. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“We’ll get some adult primers and learning materials from Miss Cora. I’ll show you what to do. It’ll be fun. C’mon.”

“Like the time we stole all that sweet corn from old man Linkins’ patch, cooked it on a fire, then thought our bellies were gonna bust open because we ate too much? Fun like that?”

“Yeah,” Junie said with a laugh. “But without the cramps.”

“You been getting me into trouble all my life, you know that?”

“I didn’t get you in with Luther Brown. You did that all yourself, girl.”

“Luther’s a good man.” Fayanne reached down and plucked a daisy from the side of the path and stuck it in her red hair. “He’s a good husband, and he’s kind with the kids. I’m happy being married, Junie. You oughta try it.”

“I will some day. When the right one comes along. But meantime I have things I want to do.”

“Like this Moonlight School? I ain’t seen you so fired up about anything in years.”

“It’s a chance for folks, Fayanne, a chance they thought they missed and could never get again. You and I take reading and writing for granted. We can learn things from books and magazines that they can only get by word of mouth. Your world is kind of tight and shrunken-up when you can’t read.”

“So they had a big success with this over in Rowan County?”

“Nearly 1,200 people turned out for it. Men who had to make their mark all their lives were writing their names. They could read from the

Bible. They could even write a simple letter. Just think what it would mean for folks to be able to write letters back and forth to their kin.”

Fayanne grinned and patted her friend on the back. “You always thought big, Junie Corban. From the first time I met you, I knew you were going somewhere. And then you went off to college and came back here. Why’d you do that? You’d have lots more opportunities in the city.”

“Nope.” Junie shook her head. “The biggest opportunities are right here. These folks *appreciate* everything you do for them. They’re not spoiled like city folk. That’s the thing about not having much, Fayanne. When you get a little something, it feels like a lot.”

“There’s Velma’s house,” the redhead pointed.

Velma Turpin was a young widow, just a few years older than Junie. She and her four sons worked the farm. Junie knew for a fact that Velma had turned down three marriage proposals. The talk was that Velma would not marry out of necessity. She demanded love. Junie admired her for that.

“Hello, George,” Junie hailed one of the younger boys who was picking squash in the vegetable garden. He was in fourth grade at her school.

“Miss Corban! What are *you* doing out here?”

“Don’t worry, George. It’s not about you or Harry or Arthur. We’d like to talk to your mother. Is she home?”

“She’s in the shop, yonder,” he said, gesturing toward the side of the barn.

The two young women walked across the farm yard, stopping momentarily at the pump to get a drink. Then they went through a side door into the barn.

“Velma? Are you in here? It’s Junie Corban and Fayanne Brown.”

Velma came from around the corner, a wide smile on her face. She was holding a partially completed violin. She was plain of face, with short brown hair and piercing dark eyes. “Why, it’s good to see you, Junie. What brings you out our way?”

They followed her around the corner into her shop. Velma Turpin made fiddles, the sweetest sounding violins in eastern Kentucky. Like most of the other crafts in Appalachia, the skill had been handed down by her grandfather and his father before him. The shop was a fascinating collection of clamps and chisels, drawknives and saws, files and carving tools. Several violins, in various stages of completion, hung from racks.

“I’m starting something called a Moonlight School,” Junie began. “I’d like you to come to it.” She explained the concept, adding glowing comments about the success of the first session held in Rowan.

Velma frowned. “I don’t know, Junie. I’d be...embarrassed. I don’t know a lick about reading or writing.”

“Nobody will! You’ll all be starting on an equal footing. Oh, some may have a little schooling, but this is mainly for adults, Velma. It’ll be fun. We’ll sing, and have contests and prizes. How often do you get to see your neighbors, other than at church?”

“Well, that part of it does sound nice. It gets kinda lonely out here on the farm.”

“And you know what? I’ll bet if you could come, you could convince Henry to come with you.” Henry was Velma’s oldest son, who had quit school to work the farm.

“I *would* like him to learn to read and write. This sounds like a wonderful opportunity.”

“Sure! And it’s all free. Books and tablets and pencils and everything we need is going to be provided.”

“When does it start?”

“Monday, September 15. First full moon. It’ll run Monday through Thursday, from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Mission Creek schoolhouse. The first session goes six weeks.”

“By God, I’ll do it! And I’ll bring Henry with me, too, even if I have to drag him by the ear.”

“You *sell* all these, Velma?” Fayanne asked, gazing at the fiddles.

“I’ve got solid orders for the next two years,” she said proudly. She took down a maple beauty from a peg, picked up a bow from the workbench, ran it across a block of rosin, and handed it to Junie. “Try her out, Junie.”

Junie smiled self-consciously, adjusted the tuning pegs, then tucked the instrument under her chin. She dove into a spirited version of ‘Sally Good’in’ that had Velma and Fayanne tapping their feet. She finished with a flourish and broke into a laugh.

“I swear, Junie, you must have a honeycomb for a heart, the sweet notes you can pull out of a fiddle,” Velma said.

“It’s a beautiful instrument, Velma. Thanks for letting me play it.”

As they started on the last leg of their journey back to Mission Creek, the dark clouds opened and rain came down in sheets.

“Ughh!” Fayanne shouted. “I hate walking in the rain. This wool coat’s gonna smell like an old hound.”

Junie turned at a noise behind them and saw a pair of headlights approaching. It was a Model T, bumping along the dirt road, which would soon be mud.

The car pulled alongside them and stopped. She looked up to see a grinning Linton Todd behind the wheel.

“Miss Corban, my guess is that you’re too stubborn to accept my offer of a ride for you and your friend back to Mission Creek.”

Junie pushed Fayanne toward the rear seat of the vehicle.

“You underestimate me, Mr. Todd. Stubbornness is a virtue only when directed toward a worthy cause. Walking in a downpour is *not* a worthy cause.”

He exploded with laughter and helped her into the canvas-topped car.

## Chapter Three



The success of Mission Creek's Moonlight School depended on donations, and so far they were behind schedule. Junie Corban was worried.

Her salary as the teacher at the school was \$35 a month, but the school year was five months long, and she got paid only for those months she worked. She could scarcely afford fifty cents for a stack of pulp writing tablets and a box of pencils.

After the overwhelming success of the first Moonlight School in Rowan County in 1911, women's clubs throughout Kentucky started holding fundraisers and collecting money from businesses to duplicate the program in a dozen more counties this year. Miss Cora had assured her, by letter, that a check would be coming to her soon. Junie had spoken with Loretta Hodges, the president of the Daughters of the American Revolution chapter in Prestonsburg, who pledged to provide boxes of chalk, paper and pencils. So far, those supplies had not arrived either.

By nature, Junie was an optimist. She trusted in God but worked as hard as she could to make things happen. She and Fayanne and four other volunteers had signed up nearly fifty people so far. She was confident more would attend the second session, when word got out about the first.

She had followed the instructions at the seminar to the letter, but of course the illiterates had to be told personally about the School. Putting up fliers depended on conscientious, literate people reading them then telling their relatives and neighbors.

Her work done for the day, Junie collected her things and locked the schoolhouse for the night. As she went down the hill toward the road, she saw Linton Todd walking toward her.

“Ah, Mr. Todd. More tomfoolery about your road?” she asked.

“Not at all,” he said, grinning sheepishly. “I do hope you’ll forgive me for that earlier episode.”

She permitted herself a brief smile. He *was* a handsome fellow. “I shall forgive you. I take it your newfound humility means you paid a visit to the courthouse?”

“Right again.” He blushed, shaking his head and chuckling. “Do you have spies in Prestonsburg, Miss Corban, or are you one of those mountain psychics I’ve heard about.”

“I’ll let you wonder about that. I have an appointment to see your Mr. Peltier. Would you walk with me, Mr. Todd?”

“My pleasure.” Now he was positively beaming. “Have you talked with old High and Mighty before?”

“High and Mighty?”

“His initials are H.M. That’s what some of the boys call him.”

“But not to his face.”

“No,” Todd said. “You’ll understand when you meet him.”

“I take it you don’t think he’ll donate to the Midnight School?”

“I’ll make a little bet with you, Miss Corban. If that old tightwad gives you even a nickel, I’ll treat you to dinner at that café over in Caney Branch.”

“And if he gives me nothing?”

“You can play me a tune on your fiddle. One of the miners was telling me you play at dances and such.”

“Would that miner have been a tall fellow, sort of wrinkly face?”

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

“He’s my father, Mr. Todd. And I’ll caution you that he’s every bit as strong and tough as he looks.”

Linton Todd was unfazed. “How about it, Miss Corban? Will you take my bet?”

Junie smiled. “It seems to me that you win either way.”

“Yes, doesn’t it now?”

She laughed at the prospect of spending time with him no matter the outcome. “All right. You’re on.” They shook on it. As she stepped onto the boardwalk of the Barnhart Coal Company office building, she asked, “Any advice for me on how to approach old High and Mighty?”

“You might let him think that he’s won,” Todd suggested. “That would appeal to his ego.”

“Just like I let you think you won with your one-sided bet, Mr. Todd?”

“Something like that. I have some work to check out. I’ll stop by the school tomorrow to see how you did.”

“I like chicken-fried steak,” she said over her shoulder, as she opened the office door. She was surprised that her palm left a film of perspiration on the steel doorknob. She didn’t think she was that nervous.

The offices were what she expected: rough, masculine, with no pictures except for a large photo of the Barnhart Coal headquarters building in Pittsburgh. Men hunched over oak desks, studying maps and writing in ledgers.

She walked up to a bald man who wore wire-rimmed spectacles. A sign on his desk said, “Emory Stopes, Treasurer.”

“Mr. Stopes? My name is Junie Corban. I have an appointment to see Mr. Peltier at four o’clock.”

Stopes looked up from his books and made a sweeping motion with his left hand, as if he were shooing a fly. “He’s in his office. Top of the stairs.”

“Thank you.” She picked up her book bag and climbed the wooden steps, her right hand on the railing.

The desk in the outer chamber was unoccupied. The door to Peltier’s office was closed, and she could hear him talking with someone inside. She sat in a battered oak armchair and put her leather bag on the floor. A wall clock told her she was precisely on time.

“You’re three days behind schedule on that south shaft,” Junie heard a gravelly voice say in the inner office.

“It can’t be helped, Mr. Peltier. We ran into solid rock. It’s taking us a while to blast through it. We don’t want the roof coming down on us.”

“To hell with the roof! Pittsburgh’s on my back to double the capacity here. We went to a lot of expense throwing up these houses. This mine has to earn its way, just like our others.”

“The veins are thick here, Mr. Peltier. She’ll pan out. Todd’s checking out the possibility that there may be veins on the other side of the valley.”

“Huh? I was told we’d only be working the west side.”

“That was our first geologist, Randall. The one you fired. Todd is a lot sharper than him.”

“Randall. Randall. Man didn’t know coal from a pile of manure. Todd got any borings?”

“I don’t know. It was just some offhand conversation at lunch today. I think he’s got some men working on it.”

“Tell him I want to see him first thing tomorrow morning. Now get out of here—and have that south shaft open by the end of the week!”

The door opened and a red-faced man hurried out. He reminded Junie of a rabbit, nervous, skittish. He glanced at her quickly but she could not read the unspoken message in his eyes.

H.M. Peltier surprised her. She had expected a big, powerful man. Instead, he was a short, squatty, balding character with a pencil-thin mustache. He scowled at her then demanded, "Well, what are you doing here?"

"I have an appointment with you, Mr. Peltier. My name is Junie Corban. I'm the Mission Creek schoolteacher." She stuck out her hand and gave him a particularly good squeeze.

"Appointment? I don't remember any appointment," he said, retreating into his office. She followed him, picking her book bag off the floor.

"You were out at the time. Your clerk, Mr. Landis, who was seated here," she motioned to the empty desk in the anteroom, "made the appointment and wrote it on your calendar. There, you see."

"Urr, yeah. Landis," he mumbled. "What do you want? I'm a busy man."

"Then I'll get right to the point." She sat in one of the chairs facing his desk. "I'm asking Barnhart Coal for a cash donation for our upcoming Midnight School, in which we'll be teaching the illiterate adults of the area to read and write."

"Ha! Give me one good reason why we'd want to donate to something like that." He glared at her, openly hostile.

"Because you're a cheapskate, Mr. Peltier."

His mouth dropped open, then his face turned purple. He stood and leaned on his desk. "If you weren't a woman, I'd throw you down those stairs."

“You asked for a good reason, Sir. You’re a cheapskate. It’s an absolute requirement of your job. Barnhart hired you because you know how to manage men and money. You get things done, and you don’t spend a penny more than you have to doing it. That means more profit for them.”

Now he was puzzled. He eased back down into his chair. “Yes. Yes, that’s true. The company doesn’t like waste. I won’t tolerate waste. So why should I waste money on this school of yours?”

“Because accidents are waste, Mr. Peltier.”

“Huh?”

“You have rules for the mine? Safety rules?”

“Sure. We have a responsibility to protect the miners’ lives, along with our property.”

“As a teacher, sir, and a native of this area, I know for a fact that at least half your miners are illiterate. I could go through your personnel records and see their marks on applications instead of signatures.”

“So?”

“So you may have your safety rules posted in a hundred places, but if half the employees can’t read them, they’re worthless,” she said.

“They’re *told*. Every man is told the rules when he’s hired. They’re reminded of them by the foremen. Anybody breaking the rules gets suspended, and the second time they get fired.”

She noticed the wedding ring on his hand and took a chance. “When’s your wedding anniversary, Mr. Peltier?”

“What?”

“I asked you what day of the year your wedding anniversary is.”

He looked at her blankly for a moment, dropped his eyes to the blotter on his desk and mumbled, “October 21<sup>st</sup>.”

Junie didn't want to call him a liar, but she knew his answer was a face-saver. It wasn't true. But she had made her point.

"Your employees need to be able to *read* your safety rules, Mr. Peltier. People remember things that are written down. They need to be able to *write* to fill out reports and keep accurate records. They can write notes for themselves if their memory isn't good. A literate work force is an *investment*, not a waste of money."

He had settled down. "I'm still not convinced, Miss Corban."

"Fifty years from now this mine will be gone," Junie said, looking him straight in the eye. "*You'll* be gone. Some of these miners will still be around. They'll be old men, but they'll still be here in Mission Creek. How will they remember H.M. Peltier? Will they talk about you to their grandchildren as the man who denied them the chance to learn to read, or as somebody who opened up a whole new world to them? Will their eyes get misty when they think about you, Sir? How do you want people to remember you in this little corner of nowhere, Mr. Peltier?"

His mouth moved a little, but he said nothing. Instead, he got up, walked over and looked out the window.

"Do you know what they call me, Miss Corban? High and Mighty. High and Mighty Peltier. They say it behind my back and they think I don't know, but I do. I was named after my two grandfathers, Horace and Martin. They were fine men. They both taught me a lot."

"Teaching is a noble cause, Mr. Peltier. That's why I chose it. You've seen how hard these men work in your mine. They don't have much. This is your chance to help me teach them something that will change their lives forever. They'll be able to write letters back and forth to their loved ones. They'll be able to read the Bible for the first time."

He cleared his throat and turned to her. "You're right, Miss Corban. I *am* a cheapskate. So I appreciate a bargain when I see one."

He went back to his desk and scrawled a note on a piece of stationery then handed it to her.

“Give this to Mr. Stopes, our treasurer, downstairs. He’ll write you a check for your Moonlight School. And when you’re done with them, these boys better damn straight be able to read my safety rules.”

He smiled then, and extended his hand. Junie shook with him and had to hold back tears. “You won’t regret this, Mr. Peltier. Now, or in fifty years. Thank you very much, Sir.”

“Good day, Miss Corban. And you do my men proud, you hear?”

When she got downstairs, she handed the note to Stopes, who frowned, said, “Huh! Whatta you know?”, then dipped a pen and wrote her a check, tore it from the book, blew on the ink and handed it to her. “You want an envelope for that, Miss?”

“No. I’ll just put it in my bag here. Thank you, Mr. Stopes.”

When Junie got out on the front porch of the building, she finally worked up the nerve to look at the amount on the check.

*\$50!*

She had expected \$2 or \$5 at most. Then she couldn’t hold it in any longer. She danced a little mountain jig, right there on the porch.

## Chapter Four



Even by Friday, three days after the storm, the gravel road to Caney Branch was still pocked with mudholes, and Linton Todd had to steer his Model T carefully to avoid them.

“I still can’t believe Peltier gave you fifty dollars,” he said to Junie, seated beside him. She was holding on for dear life.

“He’s not as uncaring as people think, Mr. Todd.”

The engineer frowned. “How about we knock off the formality? You call me Linton, or Lin, and I’ll call you Junie. All right?”

“Fine. The first thing we need to do is go to the bank and cash this check. Then to Carson’s store to see what they have in school supplies.”

“I doubt he’ll have all you need.”

“Then he’ll have to order them for me. We’ve still got time before the Moonlight School starts. How did you manage to get a Friday off, Mr., I mean, Linton?”

“Peltier had a few errands he wanted me to run, and he needs some supplies, too. Friday is a school day, Junie. How did *you* get off?”

She grinned. “I declared it a holiday. The board lets me do that from time to time, as long as I don’t abuse the privilege. The children surely don’t mind it. Our school policies are not as...rigid here as they are in the city.”

The afternoon sun had come out, dappling light across the farm fields and trees. Even on the bumpy, rutted road, the five mile journey to Caney Branch seemed to go quickly. As they pulled into the small village, people pointed in amazement at Todd’s car. Mr. Ford had begun manufacture of the Model T only five years before, and automobiles were still a rarity in this part of the country. The mine even had to have

barrels of gasoline brought in on the railroad spur. The nearest filling station was Prestonsburg.

Caney Branch was only a few hundred people, but it was the nearest post office, bank and place to do business for Mission Creek. The road through the center of town was crushed limestone gravel, flanked on both sides by humble, one-story houses and a half dozen shops.

Todd pulled the noisy car into a vacant spot in front of a carpenter's shop and shut off the engine. It backfired, and two horses at a nearby hitch rail danced and kicked, tugging at their reins.

"You certainly know how to make an entrance," Junie commented.

"Someday these things will be all over and horses will be the rarity," he replied.

He got out, then went around, opened the door, took her hand and helped her out. "I need to go to the bank, cash this check and open an account for the Moonlight School," she said.

"Why don't you meet me over at the store when you're done? I've got a list here of things Peltier wants."

"Good. I'll be over as soon as I'm finished."

The bank teller's eyes widened at the size of the check. Everyone in the county knew about the Barnhart mine at Mission Creek, so there was no question about cashing the draft. He opened a passbook account for Junie, with her name and the names of two school board members on it. She kept \$20 out for shopping for supplies today.

Junie lifted her skirt a bit as she crossed the street to Carson's General Store. She wore her best dress, dark blue cotton, with a delicate lace collar she had embroidered herself. When she stepped up on the boardwalk and went through the door, a small string of sleighbells tinkled as she entered.

“Well, hello, Miss Corban,” Dub Carson said, greeting her from behind the wooden counter. “Haven’t seen you for a while. How are things at the school?”

“Oh, just fine, Mr. Carson. The boys are ornery and the girls are sweet. That part never changes.”

“Anything in particular I can help you with today?”

“I need some school supplies for the Moonlight School, Mr. Carson. *Lots* of school supplies.”

The general store was an overpowering place, with merchandise stacked and hung and poking out everywhere. Junie could smell new leather boots, onions in a bin, oiled tools and wet sawdust on the wooden floor. There were shovels and picks, bolts of fabric, bags of flour and sugar, and a rack of shotguns and rifles along the wall. Glass cases held delicate items like hand mirrors and teapots, while wooden barrels of nails and fence staples squatted at the ends of aisles.

Hearing her voice, Linton Todd walked out of the recesses, a stack of items in his arms. He unloaded them near the huge brass cash register.

“Can’t Mr. Peltier get these things at your company store?” Junie wondered.

“Not all of them. They don’t have nearly the selection this fellow has.”

“Miss Corban, the school supplies are over here,” Carson directed. She followed him to a corner where there were stacks of pulp tablets, pencils, penholders and nibs, bottles of ink, chalk, rubber erasers and tin scissors.

She took a list out of her small handbag. “These are exactly the things I need, but in large quantities. We expect about seventy students at our school, so I’ll need seventy-five tablets, a gross of those large

pencils, seventy-five erasers, seventy-five penholders and two gross of medium steel pens, forty bottles of black ink, and twenty boxes of chalk.”

“Oh, my,” Carson said, rubbing his chin. “As you can see, that’s much more than I have on hand.”

“Well, I was expecting that you’d have to order it for me, Mr. Carson. How long do you think it will take to come in?”

Carson thought for a moment. “How about this? I mail your order in today directly to my jobber’s warehouse in Lexington and have them put it on the next eastbound train. They should be able to deliver it right to the siding at the Mission Creek mine. Say, a week and a half?”

“That’ll be cutting it a bit close, but if you can hold to that schedule, they’ll arrive in time for classes on the 15th. Let’s get it written down and tally it up.”

“Follow me up to the counter, please.”

“I’m going to look around a little more,” Todd told her. He nodded and disappeared down one of the narrow aisles.

A few minutes later, he reappeared beside her at the counter. Todd paid for his and Peltier’s purchases, then Carson wrapped them in brown paper with string and penciled the contents on the outside. Junie bought a few small items for herself and her father: embroidery thread and bar soap, salt and pepper, coffee, and a can of pipe tobacco. Miners loved their pipes.

As they left, she called out to the storekeeper, “A week and a half, Mr. Carson. I’m counting on you.”

“I won’t let you down, Miss Corban.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t try to dicker him down on the price,” Todd teased her, as they loaded their packages into the back seat of the car.

“I did. You just weren’t there. He gave it all to me at his cost, plus freight.”

Todd shook his head. “How’d you manage that?”

“I simply told him all my students will be needing more tablets and pencils, ink and envelopes once they learn to write and start sending letters to their kinfolk. He also sells the Prestonsburg newspaper and a few books. I told him I’ll be creating a steady stream of customers for him for the next twenty years.”

“I swear, you’re more full of blarney than...”

“Blarney? Is that what they call it up...where *are* you from, anyway, Linton?”

“Lexington. Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of THE Todds of Lexington? Mary TODD Lincoln?”

“I *do* know that Mr. Lincoln said one ‘d’ was good enough for God, but not for the Todds.”

He laughed. “C’mon,” he said, taking her arm. “I promised you dinner at that café if I lost the bet, and I’m good on my word.”

It was a small place, with only eight round tables decked with red-and-white checkered tablecloths, and another six stools at the counter. But Todd noticed instantly that the place was spotlessly clean. An elderly couple sat at a table in the corner, eating slowly, silently.

He chose a table by the window and even pulled out her chair.

“Such manners,” Junie remarked. “Did they teach you that in the big city?”

“Todds are *born* with charm,” he answered.

“And apparently blarney, too,” she said under her breath.

“I didn’t catch that.”

“Nothing. Here come the menus.” She turned as someone approached.

“Hello, folks,” a rotund, dark-haired woman greeted them. She wore an apron over her dress, which made Junie think she doubled as waitress and cook. Or was the owner. “Here are the menus. Take your time and look ‘em over. I’ll be back in a few minutes with some water.” She handed them each a sheet of thin cardboard with the fare hand-printed on them.

“Chicken fried steak?” he asked.

“Yep. It says it comes with mashed potatoes, corn, and dessert is included.”

“That’s what I’ll have too.”

She put her menu down on the table. “I can’t figure out whether you won the bet or lost the bet.”

“A little of both. But I feel like a solid winner right now.”

Junie blushed. There was a playfulness about him that she liked. For the past few years she had devoted herself solely to the school, and when she first heard about the Moonlight Schools, it lit a fire in her that gave her renewed purpose.

Still, she knew great loneliness. Few men in this area had a high school diploma, let alone a college education. It had taken her five years to complete high school in Caney Branch, what with missed time because of the weather. She received her education certificate from Morehead Normal School, a church-sponsored college founded specifically to train teachers.

Linton Todd, she learned during their dinner conversation, had earned his degree in engineering at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, with a minor in geology. His father, Edgar, was an accountant at a brick manufacturing company, and his mother, Clara, kept house. He had one brother, Stanton, who was six years younger

and worked in a machine shop in Lexington. Stanton and his wife had a two-year old daughter named Lucille.

Dusk was falling as they left Caney Branch and found the bumpy gravel road back toward Mission Creek. Junie pulled her wool jacket up around her and snuggled into the seat.

Linton was steering the Model T around a strip of potholes, oblivious to her for the moment. She looked over at him. He possessed a fine, chiseled face with a strong jaw and dark brown eyes that twinkled when he teased her.

It had been a perfect day. She wondered if he would try to kiss her tonight. Smiling to herself, she decided she would let him.

When they were only a mile or so from Mission Creek, Linton put on the hand brake and stopped the car.

“Did you hear that, Junie?”

“Hear what? I can’t hear anything over the sound of the motor,” she yelled back.

He shut the engine off and waited. Far in the distance a whistle blew in several short bursts.

“There’s been an accident at the mine!” Linton told her.

## Chapter Five



“Hang on!” Linton Todd screamed.

Junie felt herself bouncing out of her seat as the Model T rattled across hardened ruts in the dirt road. Linton stomped the accelerator pedal to the floor. A fleeing chicken was smashed against the car’s radiator, but the engineer swerved in time to miss a retreating dog.

They pulled up by the mine shaft opening and he braked so suddenly that the flivver skidded ten feet before it came to a halt. Linton engaged the hand brake, killed the engine and jumped out.

A group of twelve or fifteen coal-dust encrusted miners stood around the entrance, the carbide lights on their caps riveting into the gloom. A couple held lanterns.

“There he is! There’s that engineer fellow Todd!” one of them yelled. They ran over and surrounded Linton and Junie.

“What happened?” Todd demanded. “Is anyone in there?”

“The roof caved in!” one of the miners said with a snarl. His eyes were wild. “We warned Hendricks about blowing that rock, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“Is anybody in there?” Todd repeated.

“Joe Fanning and Big Mike. If it hadn’t been for them, we’d all been killed.”

Junie let out a small scream at the mention of her father’s name, thrusting her hands to her mouth. One of the miners went over and spoke quietly to her.

“Is there a rescue crew working?” Todd asked the others.

“Yeah, yeah. They found them and should be bringing them out any minute. You shoulda knowed better,” he accused, pointing a gloved finger at Todd. “You’re paid to know about stuff like that. Our lives are in your hands. If anything happens to Joe or Big Mike, it’s *your* fault.”

“I didn’t approve any expansion of this shaft,” Todd told them. “Who authorized this?”

H.M. Peltier came trotting up, his face red. He had to pause for several seconds before he found enough breath to speak. He winced as he asked the miner, “Anybody hurt?”

“We don’t know yet, Mr. Peltier. They should be bringing Joe Fanning and Big Mike Corban out any second now.”

Another man came running out of the darkness, carrying a brass lantern. He was the same rabbit-eyed fellow Junie had seen fleeing from Peltier’s office, just before she went in.

“You okayed this, Hendricks!” the wild-eyed miner shouted. “You’re responsible for what happens to these boys. We *told* you that roof wasn’t gonna hold.”

He lunged at Hendricks and had his big hands on the man’s coat. Hendricks dropped his lantern as he flailed his arms to defend himself.

Todd sprang forward, grabbed the big miner by his left shoulder and spun him around as if he were a child. The other men watching gaped at the engineer’s strength.

“Back off!” Todd ordered him. “Keep your head and you’ll keep your job. We’ll sort this out later, but right now you’re not helping those men inside by fighting.”

The miner looked down angrily at his big work shoes then nodded his head. He retreated back toward the entrance of the shaft.

“I hear something,” somebody said. “They’re coming out.”

Junie stepped forward. Linton Todd put his arm around her shoulder.

The beams from the rescuers' headlamps bobbed in the darkness. Men on the outside held their lanterns up and finally the shadowy forms emerged, staggering with the weight of stretchers.

They brought their burdens out onto the road and gently set them down.

"Joe's gone," one of the rescuers choked back a sob.

Junie knelt down by her father and someone held a lantern near. "Daddy, can you hear me?"

He was breathing raggedly but made no reply. He looked to be unconscious.

Todd grabbed a miner by the arm and asked, "Where's the nearest doctor?"

"They's one in Caney Branch, but Big Mike needs a hospital. That's clear over t' Prestonsburg."

"We'll take him on the train!" somebody said.

"Now wait a minute," Peltier interrupted. "One of the Fords, fine, but the train is out of the question."

The men crowded around, tightly gripping picks and shovels. Rage burned in their eyes, reflecting the yellow glow of the lanterns. "Big Mike saved our lives," a man with a sooty beard informed the superintendent. "We're *takin'* that train."

"Please, Mr. Peltier," Junie asked, tears dribbling down her cheeks. "He's my father."

Peltier was swayed more by the group of threatening workers than sympathy for the girl. He put his hand over his breast pocket, glanced around, then nodded toward the locomotive. "Awwright. Go on. Get him to that hospital."

Within minutes, men were scrambling over the big black locomotive like ants on a dropped piece of candy. A row of empty coal cars sat on a siding, hitched to a caboose. Linton Todd ordered the caboose uncoupled. Using mules, miners pulled it off that side track and brought it behind the waiting engine and tender, where it was hooked on securely.

Someone roused the train's engineer and fireman from their sleep and hauled them to the locomotive. As Todd supervised the loading of Big Mike into the caboose, the railroad engineer fired up the engine while the fireman and two miners shoveled coal into the firebox to build up a head of steam.

The machine was a 2-8-2 Mikado, with two wheels on a lead axle, eight large drive wheels, and two wheels on a trailing axle. Because the firebox was behind the drive wheels, this model fired hotter and longer and was built for both speed and power.

Black smoke billowing out of its stack, the long, cylindrical engine finally puffed out of the coal camp and onto the recently laid track that would take it to Prestonsburg. Todd, Junie, and a contingent of miners stayed with Big Mike in the caboose, the end car.

"How long will it take to get there?" Junie asked no one in particular. Her voice was shaky.

"Half hour. Maybe less," one of the miners said. "We ain't got but the caboose to pull, but they have to mind their speed on the curves. He'll make 'er all right, Miss Junie. Big Mike's a tough one."

She nodded weakly. Someone had given her a basin with a sponge, soap and water, and she was gently cleaning the coal dust off her father's face and hands. His face was as wrinkled and craggy as a mountain road but was relaxed, almost as if he were sleeping.

Linton had made this run a few times with Peltier, but this was different. They weren't dragging twenty fully-loaded coal cars, and the miners up in the cab would help stoke the fire and would urge the engineer to go as fast as possible without jumping the track.

He looked out a side window of the caboose but couldn't see much at night. Both sides of the track were lined by trees, hills, and cuts through the mountains for much of the route. Junie, dabbing her father's forehead with the damp sponge, looked like she was barely holding together. From hooks on the wood ceiling, three kerosene lanterns cast a swaying yellow glow over the inside of the caboose. Four miners sat silently on stools and wooden crates, their faces still dark with dust, their eyes glistening like specters. After ten minutes, the *clackety-clackety-clackety* noise of the wheels on the rail joints began to grind on Todd's nerves. He glanced at his silver pocket watch, mentally recording the time.

Pacing around was impossible. The car swayed too much from side to side. He finally found a seat next to one of the miners and watched Junie taking care of Big Mike, who still lay on the stretcher on the floor.

"What happened just before the accident?" Todd asked the man quietly. "Did you have any warning?"

"Some rumbling noise. The floor shook. Hendricks wanted us to open that south tunnel by Saturday morning, but we've been fighting a ridge of granite all week. We'd just drilled some holes and were getting ready to set another charge when we heard the shoring cracking.

"Big Mike and Joe Fanning rushed me and the other boys out, said they'd finish up planting the charges. We just got clear when the ceiling came down."

“I *told* Hendricks to hold off on that expansion,” Todd said through gritted teeth. “I’m sure there are other veins on the other side of the hollow, maybe bigger than the original.”

The miner gave a scornful grin. “That’d take *time*, Mr. Todd. When Pittsburgh’s on Mr. Peltier’s back, he wants results as quick as possible.”

“They violated procedure,” Linton Todd said to himself as much as to the man sitting next to him. “Hendricks knows mining but engineering and geology are my responsibility. Something’s wrong here.”

“I reckon they’ll call us all in tomorrow morning,” the miner said.

“What’s your name?”

“Mede. Albert Mede, but folks call me Plug ‘cause I’m always chewin’ tobacco.”

Todd shook with him. “Plug, be careful what you say. Protect your job, but protect yourself, too. They’ll be looking for somebody to pin the blame on here, and you boys were only doing what you were told. I’m wagering I’ll be the fall guy in this.”

Junie motioned with her hand for Todd to come over by her. He went and sat on the floor. “How’s he doing?” Linton asked.

“He’s breathing steady, that’s all I can tell.” She lowered her voice. “When I was outside Peltier’s office, waiting to get in to see him, I heard him talking to Hendricks, even with the door closed. Hendricks said they’d had trouble with the rock, and Peltier brushed off the possibility of that roof caving in. He told Hendricks to get that shaft open by the end of the week.”

Todd was silent for a moment. “Keep that to yourself. Don’t let anybody know you know it, even your father.”

“What about Joe Fanning’s inquest? Should I offer to testify?”

“Your father needs his job. The mine has a lot of influence in this valley, and likely with the coroner, too. It’ll probably be ruled accidental. Best not to stir things up.”

“But what about you, Linton? You said they’d try to pin the blame on you for this. You might lose your job.”

He was about to answer her when the locomotive’s whistle blew, long, low, then a short burst and another long one.

“That’s the signal,” one of the miners shouted. “The engineer told me he’d let us know. We’re pulling in to Prestonsburg.”

Everyone in the caboose could feel their speed decreasing. They looked out the windows and saw the lights of houses, street lights, board fences, and the lights of the freight yard ahead.

They crossed a bridge then gradually ground to a stop. Todd ran out to get his bearings. The miners scrambled out of the caboose, one by one.

“Which way’s the hospital?” Todd asked.

“North,” pointed the engineer, wiping a red kerchief across his forehead. “About six blocks.”

“We’ll need a wagon and team.”

“Yonder’s the barn,” one of the miners said. “I’ll get a couple mules and hitch ‘em up.”

“We’ll find a wagon,” three other miners split up to look.

Ten minutes later, they gingerly loaded Big Mike into the back of a heavy wooden freight wagon. One of the miners took the reins, while Junie, Todd, and the others sat in the back with the injured man.

They navigated the gravel streets as rapidly as they could, without jarring their passenger. Finally someone pointed to a sign and they pulled the rig in. One of the miners knocked on the door, a nurse opened it, and the miner waved for them to bring Big Mike in.

Junie was relieved that a doctor was there, although they had to wake him from bed and wait for him to get dressed.

When he came into the examining room, the doctor ordered all the lamps to be lit. He was an old man, nearly seventy, Todd guessed, with a gaunt face and a shock of snow-white hair.

“Doctor Jackson,” he announced, in a low, booming voice. “What happened to this man?”

“Mine cave-in over at Mission Creek,” Todd said. “We’re not sure of the extent of his injuries. Happened little less than an hour ago.”

Doctor Jackson began cutting Big Mike’s clothes off with a pair of scissors. A nurse assisted him. “Who are all these people?”

“I’m his daughter, Doctor. Junie Corban. His name is Mike. Mike Corban.”

“Miss Corban, I’ll ask you and your friends to wait outside. The nurse will give you a report in a minute after I make a cursory examination.”

Todd guided her out into the hallway where they sat on a wooden bench. The miners sat opposite them. Two leaned against the wall. Some had removed their hats. From the worry on their faces, they looked as if they were a hundred years old.

Five minutes later the doctor himself came out, with an operating gown and white apron on now.

“His left leg is broken, he has a dislocated shoulder, and several broken ribs,” he told Junie quietly. “I believe one of those ribs is pressing in on his right lung. I don’t see any bleeding in his throat or nasal cavities, but he seems to have ingested a considerable amount of dust. I’m going to make an incision in his chest, locate that rib, and realign it to relieve the pressure on his lung.”

“Will he...be all right?” Junie asked.

Doctor Jackson patted her on the arm. “If I say so myself, Miss, I’m a fine doctor, but I’m also a man of God. If you folks know any prayers,” he said to all of them, “I’d appreciate it if you’d start saying them.”

## Chapter Six



Junie Corban knew how to pray. She had prayed her way through a poverty-stricken childhood, through high school and college, through her mother's illness and death, and through the loneliness that had haunted her over much of her life.

She was experienced enough at praying to know that God did not always give her what she asked for, like the healing of her mother from cancer. Yet she continued to pray because she knew nothing else. She had seen enough hardship and misery in these mountains to give up on the childish expectation that life should be fair. Her desperate desire was that God was indeed good and loving, so she continued to pray.

Junie had seen the miners waiting with them in Sunday morning services at the First Baptist Church at Mission Creek. On that bench opposite her and Linton Todd were Plug Mede and James Bedell. Sitting in the corner was Burke Hackett. His eight year-old daughter Hannah was in Junie's third grade class. Leverett Hayes was snoring softly on the floor, curled up on his side. Just outside the door, Herman Danielson and Claude O'Hara sat on the brick steps, silently smoking their pipes.

Linton Todd was lost in his own world, but kept his arm around Junie. She sat with her head on his chest, dozing occasionally, unable to fight off the fatigue of the night. When she stirred, her lips silently formed the word "Jesus."

Hours agonizingly dragged by, as they do only in a hospital waiting room.

Finally the door opened and Doctor Jackson emerged. He had shed the apron but still wore the white operating gown. They all jerked

to attention. Burke Hackett, sitting near the outside door, jumped up and called in the two men who were waiting on the steps.

Doctor Jackson took Junie's hand in his. She looked up at him, her chin trembling.

"It's all right," he assured her, smiling. "His rib *was* broken, but it had *not* pierced his lung. That's what I was most concerned about. I don't believe there is any internal bleeding. I realigned his shoulder and set his left leg. He has a compound fracture of his tibia, the large bone, about six inches above his ankle. He won't be able to walk on it for a few months, but I have some crutches he can borrow."

"Will he..." she started to ask.

The old doctor patted her on the shoulder. "He'll make a full recovery, my dear. He appears to be extremely strong and healthy."

The miners whooped and hollered, slapping each other on the back. Plug Mede spun the doctor around and pumped his hand. "We was mighty worried, Doc, but looks like them prayers came through."

"God is good," the old man said. "You can go in and see him now, but he may still be a bit groggy from the anesthetic. His chest will be sore for quite some time. I'm going to keep him here for observation until Sunday."

Linton helped Junie to her feet and they entered the operating room, followed by the miners. Big Mike lay on a gurney, a blanket up to his chin and a small pillow under his head. He broke into a smile when he saw his daughter. She ran over and kissed him on the forehead, then took his big hand in hers.

"You gave us quite a scare, Daddy."

"Aww, it'll take more'n a few tons of dirt to finish off Big Mike," he answered in a raspy voice.

"How ya doin', Buddy?" Plug Mede asked.

“Plug, I’m so lightheaded now, it’s almost as bad as smellin’ a pair of your dirty socks.” Everyone laughed.

“That’s the anesthetic,” Junie said. “It’ll wear off in a while. Doctor Jackson says you’re going to make a full recovery, but you’ll be off work for a couple months ‘til your leg heals completely.”

“You needed a vacation anyway, Mike,” Leverett Hayes chimed in. “Peltier can just hire a dozen more men to take up your slack.”

“The doctor says you can come home Sunday, Daddy.”

“I’ll pick you both up in my flivver,” Linton Todd said. “Although she won’t go on those trails back through the woods.”

Mede jumped in. “I’ll have Sadie down at Mission Creek waiting for you, Mike. You think you can ride that old mule?”

“Sadie’s more gentle than you are, Plug. She’ll get me back up the mountain.”

After they went out, the nurse gave Junie the address of a nearby boarding house. She and Linton went outside by themselves. He opened his wallet and gave her ten dollars. She argued but he insisted she take it for any expenses.

“You’ve been so wonderful through all this,” Junie said, and then, impulsively, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him—a long, hard, sweet kiss.

When their lips finally parted, she looked into his eyes for a moment then burst out crying.

“Am I that poor of a kisser?” he asked. But he held her close to him as she sobbed gently. “It’s okay,” Linton said quietly. “He’s going to be all right, Junie. The worst is over. He’s going to be all right.”

Later, Linton Todd joined the miners and took the train back to Mission Creek.

\* \* \*

“Friends, Joe Fanning was a loyal member of this church long before I came here twenty years ago. I believe, with every ounce of my being, that at this very moment he is in the presence of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Junie clutched her best beaded handbag as she stared at Joe’s body in the plain pine coffin, resting at the front of the Mission Creek First Baptist Church. Linton Todd sat beside her in the pew. Reverend Fletcher continued his sermon.

“The question we’re all asking ourselves right now is ‘Why?’. Why did Joe Fanning die? Why did this tragedy happen? Why was a good man taken in the prime of his life?

“Friends, I wish to God I could give you an answer, but I’m fresh out of answers. I don’t believe for one instant that our God is a cruel God. I don’t believe he took Joe for some mysterious reason that only he understands. Accidents like this happen all over the world, and sometimes good, honest people like Joe are lost in them, and his widow Ethel and sons Eldon and Roy have to suffer because of it.

“Why do good people like Joe die without a reason? Friends, I’ve asked myself that question when I’ve preached the funerals of innocent babies, lovely little children, and anybody who passed on before their time. In forty-two years of preaching the Word of God, I’ve never received an answer to that question of ‘Why?’

“Now it would be easy for me to tell you just to trust the Almighty. To put your pain in his hands and trust that all the unfairness of this world will someday be made up for in heaven. But that won’t bring you much comfort in the here and now.

“So what should we do? What should we do? Should we spend the rest of our lives mourning Joe’s death? Should his widow and sons be bitter about the unfairness of it? Should we curse God for being so mean and cruel?”

He paused, looking down at the pulpit. “When we think about unfairness, we cannot overlook the most unfair act that ever happened in human history: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He was not just a good man and a wise teacher, but holy God himself! Friends, we murdered our own God! We killed the one who brought us into being and showed us nothing but unconditional love. Our sins killed him.

“But as we all know, that isn’t the end of the story. God took that unfair death and made something beautiful out of it—our salvation. Only a loving, kind God, a God who doesn’t care about revenge, would do something like that.

“So that’s why today I know, deep in my heart, that this same loving God will raise Joe Fanning in the Second Coming, just as he raised his Son. We don’t know the ‘why’. We can’t figure out the ‘why’. But we *can* be certain, based on what God tells us in his very Word, that all of us who trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior, as Joe did, will be reunited someday. Then there will be no more funerals, no more tears, and no more questions. This life is but a wisp of smoke, then it’s gone.

“But the next life, and there *is* a next life, goes on forever! No end! And because we’re with God, we’ll have perfect peace, perfect happiness, and perfect love. Forever! With no end! As you and I wait here for that reward, Joe Fanning is already enjoying it. Let’s keep remembering that truth every time we think about Joe.”

After the pastor concluded with prayers, Junie reached down to the floor and picked up her fiddle, Leverett Hayes came forward with a

guitar, and Junie's friend Fayanne Brown and her sister Alice gathered by them in front of the casket and sang "Whispering Hope."

Following Joe's burial in the small graveyard behind the church, the congregation reconvened at a hall the coal company had offered for the funeral meal. Women bustled over covered dishes, while each man tucked a napkin in his collar to protect his only white shirt.

Linton Todd sampled fried chicken and quail, snap beans, cornbread, bread and butter pickles, mashed potatoes and tomato gravy. Dessert was black raspberry cobbler with fresh cream.

"I see you Lexington boys aren't too high-headed for our mountain food," Junie remarked.

He laughed. "Why, Miss Corban, haven't you noticed that bachelors will eat anything that's put in front of them?"

Plug Mede walked up and leaned in. He said in Linton's ear, "Excuse me for interrupting, Mr. Todd. Me and some of the boys would like to see you outside for a minute."

He nodded and said to Junie, "I'll be back in a few minutes. Don't let anybody take my chair."

They walked outside behind the building. About a dozen miners stood around in their best clothes, hands thrust into their pockets.

"We appreciate the way you took care of Big Mike," James Bedell said.

"We been talkin' amongst ourselves," added Claude O'Hara. "We all know you wasn't responsible for that cave-in. That was Hendricks' and Peltier's doin', but we figure they're gonna hang it on you."

"We wanta help," Plug offered. "We'll speak up on your behalf. You wanta send a letter to Pittsburgh with your side of the story, we all agreed to sign it."

Linton Todd was speechless. He had been here only a few months, but these men were willing to stand up for him. He shook his head.

“I appreciate your help, boys. It means a lot to me. But you’ve all got families. Your homes are here. You need your jobs, and if you backed me, Peltier would make sure every one of you got let go.”

They seemed confused. “You’re not gonna fight it?” Plug asked. “You’re just gonna let ‘em fire you?”

“Better me than all of you too. Believe me, boys, I’m no martyr. I see what’s coming and I don’t like it. But there are plenty of other coal companies. They understand how things like this work. I’ll be able to get another job.”

Plug’s homely face took on a pained expression. “You and Miss Junie?”

Linton Todd’s appearance was even more stricken. One of the miners gently patted him on the shoulder.

A week and a half after the funeral, Junie came down to the school in the morning and was surprised to see Linton Todd sitting on the front step. When she saw his car nearby, the back seat packed with boxes and bundles, her heart started thumping loudly in her chest. He rose to meet her.

“He fired you, didn’t he?” The words sounded strange to her, as if someone else had said them. Her head was spinning.

“A man was killed. Peltier’s got seniority in the company. He’s got friends in Pittsburgh. I have to go up there and answer their questions in person, then I’m done.”

She started to cry.

He took her hands. "I was afraid you might do that."

"Did you think I wouldn't care? Did you think you could just drive away and that would be it? Sorry, Junie. Been nice knowing you."

"No!" he said, giving her a little shake. "That's not it at all."

"I can testify for you, Lin. I *heard* what was said. I'll go up to Pittsburgh with you and *tell* them. They'll change their minds when they hear the truth."

He shook his head. "You can't just up and leave your classes and your father now. Besides, your Moonlight School is starting soon. That's your dream. These people *need* you, Junie."

"And you *don't*?"

He put his hands on her neck and gently tilted her head up so she was looking directly into his eyes. "I...I fell in love with you the first time I saw you," he stammered, his voice catching in his throat. "*That's* what happened. *That's* the truth. I don't *want* to leave, but I have no choice. I promise you this. I swear on everything that's sacred. I *will* come back here, Junie. Somehow, some way I *will* come back here."

He tried to kiss her but she was sobbing too hard. She buried her face in his jacket and wept for five minutes.

"I better go," he said softly. She nodded.

He went over, tinkered with some knobs, then cranked the Model T until it turned over. When he ran back, she grabbed the lapels of his coat, yanked his face down to hers and kissed him with all the love in her soul.

"Write me," she shouted, when he finally broke free. "You write me, you hear?"

He nodded, got in the car, turned it around, and roared off down the dirt road past the row of coal patch houses.

As Junie watched the Ford disappear, she felt as if her world, like the mine down in the valley, had suddenly and completely caved in.

## Chapter Seven



“Welcome to the Moonlight School here at Mission Creek. I want to thank you all for coming. I believe this is going to be one of the most enjoyable and worthwhile experiences of your life.

“My name is Junie Corban and I’m the regular teacher at the school. During these classes, I’ll be assisted by..” she pointed to the other teachers in turn, “Fayanne Brown, Mildred Swenson, and Reverend Fletcher.

“Our goals for these classes are simple. We want you to be able to read, write, and do arithmetic. We will teach each of you based on what skills you already have. I know some of you have had some schooling while others haven’t had any. That’s all right. I want you all to know that reading, writing and arithmetic are all skills, just like weaving a basket or harvesting a crop. Nobody here should be embarrassed or ashamed because they don’t know that skill yet. We’re all here to learn from each other.

“And let me tell you also that there’s no such thing as a dumb question. If you don’t understand something, don’t be afraid to ask. Over the years I’ve discovered that many others in the class are wondering the same thing as you but don’t have the courage to ask.”

She paused and smiled. “This is different from regular school. You don’t have to ask permission to go to the outhouse.” The students laughed. “If you need to go, just slip out as quietly as you can and come back in quietly so you don’t disturb the other students. You ladies who brought your babies tonight, if you have to change their diapers, there’s a small room right through that door that has a cot in it you can use.

And because we have babies in the room, I'll ask you fellows who want to have a pipe or a cigarette, to wait until break time or after classes and go outside. Thank you for your cooperation.

“Oh, I want to make sure to mention that everything in these classes is *free* and without charge. The supplies were donated by Mr. Peltier at the Barnhart Coal Company, while the books and primers came from Miss Cora Wilson Stewart over in Rowan County and her supporters.”

Fayanne had taken attendance as the students came in and wrote thirty-seven names on her sheet. The others who had enrolled would be taught in their homes.

They sat at the wrought-iron and wood student desks, on benches, and stools Junie had gathered. In the front row, probably because of poor eyesight or hearing, were haggard old men, Civil War veterans, with long gray beards. Junie saw grandmothers, their hair pulled back tightly in a bun, several middle-aged coal miners, farmers, a wheelwright, the blacksmith, and a handful of housewives.

All were dressed in their best clothes, because this was an event. It was a social gathering as much as school classes, and in the seminar at Morehead, Miss Cora had stressed that the students should feel a sense of brotherhood and progress. She wanted teachers to emphasize the values of hard work, diligence, and cleanliness. She believed mountain folk were good, moral people who needed only the proper opportunities to succeed.

“Tonight,” Junie continued, “we’re going to start classes, as we will every evening, with a fifteen-minute devotional period of praying and singing. For that I’ll turn our program over to Reverend Fletcher.”

Everyone gladly took the hymnals he passed out and enthusiastically joined him in song. Music was an elemental part of life in the hills, and God was at the heart of every hardscrabble family.

The minister prayed for success of the Moonlight School, the health of the participants, and safety in their journeys to and from Mission Creek. Following a short sermon about God's gift of the human mind and the desire to learn, he led several hymns and popular songs, then turned the meeting back over to Junie.

The classes were divided into five segments. First there would be a twenty-five minute reading lesson, followed by a fifteen-minute drill on history, geography, civics, health and sanitation, home economics, agriculture and horticulture. Students who did not have any book learning could readily contribute their knowledge about plants, canning vegetables, and tending livestock. That was followed by twenty-five minutes of writing exercises, typically copying the letters of the alphabet then later in the session, combining them into words. Another fifteen-minute drill kept students engaged, and the evening concluded with twenty-five minutes of arithmetic.

Junie began the reading lesson by writing simple pronouns, nouns and verbs on the blackboard, having students repeat them in unison, then she combined the words into simple sentences. She had some of the students who possessed basic reading skills stand and read aloud, while the unschooled followed along in their primers. By the end of the session, the students were able to recognize some basic words and rules of pronunciation.

The four teachers alternated during the drill session to keep it lively and fast-moving. Students who answered questions correctly were given prizes, such as a pencil, eraser, or a small blue ribbon tied into a bow. Junie was touched at the pride on the old men's faces as they

shared their knowledge, then received a token reward. Some of the students applauded after a long-bearded fellow painstakingly explained the right way to sharpen an ax, and he smiled with satisfaction and gave them a wave of thanks.

Throughout the evening, Junie was surprised at how quickly the adults understood the material, even the old men. At the teachers' seminar in Morehead, Miss Cora had assured them the first Moonlight Schools proved that older people could learn as rapidly as children, but now she saw for herself. After years of teaching quick-witted children up to age fourteen, Junie had expected more problems. She was very pleasantly surprised.

She tried hard to create a congenial atmosphere and noticed that the other teachers offered abundant encouragement as well. The middle-aged men, especially, seemed self-conscious at first, but she watched their confidence build as they realized they were competing only against themselves, and not the other students.

The writing exercises went even better than reading. These people were accustomed to working with their hands, and they soon mastered a pencil or piece of chalk. As she walked about the room, Junie reached in with her red pencil and drew stars on students' papers or wrote "Excellent!" "Much improvement!" "Well done!" It didn't seem to matter to the students that she had to tell them what she had written.

In the next drill session, the four teachers increased the pace even faster. As the evening wore on, Junie watched eyelids grow heavy and attention spans drop. A teenage boy, who worked in a sawmill near Caney Branch, put his head on his desk and was soon sleeping soundly. She could hardly blame him.

Reverend Fletcher slipped over and opened a window. In his years of preaching, he had seen many a head nodding during his sermons.

The cool autumn air seemed to invigorate everyone in the room. The teachers kept peppering questions, and if no one responded, they answered themselves and hurriedly moved on.

Arithmetic, the most dreaded session of the night, went even better than Junie had expected. Instead of having the students count toothpicks or buttons, as she did with her own primary grades, she used raisins. It did not bother her that she had to keep replenishing the counting devices: anything to keep the students involved.

They wound up the evening with a prayer by Reverend Fletcher and two verses of the hymn "Bringing in the Sheaves." The session ended promptly at 9 p.m. The students helped rearrange the chairs and benches again, then left with broad smiles on their faces, clutching the pages of the very first letters they had written with their own hand.

As Junie was organizing her notes, a hunched-over mountaineer walked up and extended his wrinkled hand. She shook with him and said, "Thank you for coming, Mr. Entwell."

He twisted his head sideways to look at her. "Best fun I've had in years, Miss Junie. My grandson's up in Louisville, y'know."

"I've heard that."

"I'm gonna learn to write him a letter," he said with conviction. "You think an old feller like me could learn that?"

"Mr. Entwell, I will make it my personal goal that by the time we're done, you'll be writing letters to your grandson every couple weeks, and reading the ones he sends you."

"It's a wonderful thing," he kept repeating to himself, as he hobbled to the door. "At my age. Imagine that!"

She chuckled as she put a stack of notes into her desk drawer. She would deal with them in the morning. Junie arched her back and

heard bones pop. It had been a long day, and she and the other teachers—volunteers, no less—had six more weeks of this.

Within a few minutes, the preacher and Mildred Swenson left. Junie and Fayanne put on their jackets, locked up the school, and headed down the path toward the company houses.

“Were you pleased with the way it went tonight?” the redhead asked.

“I thought it went quite well. I picked up a few things we’ll change in the next class, but everybody seemed to be learning, and having a good time doing it.”

“It’s a good thing you’re doing, Junie.”

“Well, you’re helping too, Fayanne. And the reverend and Mrs. Swenson.”

The school was held on the full moon to help people see better on their way home. Junie held a kerosene lantern she would light at the edge of the woods. The canopy of leaves did not let much moonlight through.

They paused for a moment before walking down the hill. The hollow was bathed in a serene, silver glow. Just a few years ago it had been pristine, save for the school and church. Now the long row of company houses, the store and offices, the mine and its equipment and the railroad stretched from almost one end to the other. It was the price of progress, Junie guessed, and steady work for these miners, but the beauty of the place was gone.

“Have you gotten a letter yet?” Fayanne interrupted her thoughts.

“You know I’ll tell you when I do.”

“Sorry. I just wondered.”

“I didn’t mean to snap at you. I’m sure he’s busy.”

Fayanne brushed a strand of hair off her forehead. "I know he'll write you, Junie. Any day now you'll get a letter. You'll see."

They walked on in silence, down the dirt road and along the row of wood frame houses. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked.

"Well, here we are," Fayanne announced. They stopped in front of the house where she and her family lived.

"You tell Luther I appreciate him staying with the kids so you can do this."

Fayanne laughed. "Where else is he gonna go when he's not working, Junie? It's not like there's a saloon within staggering distance from Mission Creek."

"Yeah," Junie agreed. "But there's a few stills back in these hills."

"He knows I'd comb his hair with a frying pan if he ever comes home drunk on 'shine." Fayanne said. Homemade liquor, called "moonshine" because it was distilled during the light of the full moon, packed a potent kick.

"I better get going. Thanks again."

Fayanne hugged her. "You get some sleep, girl. I'll see you tomorrow."

Junie walked down the road, then toward the path that led into the woods. Before lighting her lantern, she gazed up into the sky.

The night was clear and cool. When she had been a little girl, her mother had told her the stars were angels, winking at her because they knew she was going to have a beautiful life.

Tonight, as she missed Linton Todd with all her heart, she wondered if that was still possible.

## Chapter Eight



Autumn sneaked into Appalachia early in October in 1913. The trees had flaunted their brightest colors and were already losing their leaves.

Now, in the final week of the Moonlight School, Junie Corban was elated with the progress their students had made. Cora Wilson Stewart had been right: Adults *could* learn, and they could learn quickly.

Junie had fallen into a routine. Instead of walking home after the regular day classes then returning in the evening, she made a simple supper at the schoolhouse and ate it at her desk, then prepared her lesson for that night's Moonlight School. Her father had come up with the idea, always trying to make life easier for her.

He was recovering from his injuries ahead of schedule and soon would be able to set aside the cane he had been using. He was a strong man and was eager to get back to work at the mine. Junie believed she got her determination from him.

Before she fixed her supper—it would be a fried egg sandwich and a small jar of applesauce tonight—she went out the front door of the school, a few dozen paces down the dirt path, and checked the rusty mailbox.

Inside were a copy of the Lexington newspaper she had sent to the school for the current events class, a letter from the Kentucky Department of Education, a seed catalog, and another long envelope. Her heart jumped into her throat. She checked the return address: 'Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.' She ripped open the flap and yanked the pages out.

*October 13, 1913*

*Dearest Junie,*

*First, I want to apologize for not writing to you sooner. I have been questioned almost from the minute I arrived here in Pittsburgh. The good news is that contrary to my expectations, Barnhart Coal Company has not fired me! At least not yet.*

*Everything seems very mysterious. I wish I could give you some details, but I don't know a great deal myself. It's true that H.M. Peltier has many allies at Barnhart Coal. I have learned that the Mission Creek mine was far behind in company production expectations. That's probably why Peltier was eager to open that new shaft—which I made clear to the muckety-mucks that I did not recommend or authorize.*

*They seem very interested in my belief that Mission Creek holds much more coal than initially expected. Apparently the engineer/geologist who preceded me was quite incompetent.*

*I am still on the payroll, staying in a dreary hotel room a few blocks from Barnhart headquarters. Company investigators have been to Mission Creek conducting an inquiry*

*into Joe Fanning's death and your father's injuries. The results of that investigation have not been revealed to me yet.*

*I follow my orders to report to a cubbyhole of an office every morning, where I study topographic maps and reports from other Barnhart mines and make recommendations. The man I report to has been very complimentary so far.*

*I have asked countless times if and when I can return to Mission Creek, but I receive no answer other than, "That has not been decided."*

*No matter what happens here, I promise that I will be back. I cannot say when. Junie, I miss you so much I cannot express it in words. I am perplexed that I was able to fall so deeply in love with you in so short a time, yet I know my feelings are true.*

*Please do not hold my tardiness in writing against me. I ask you to write me back as soon as you are able. I am driven only by the thought of being with you again.*

*With love,*

*Linton*

When she read the last paragraph, Junie gasped and broke into a sob. The tension of waiting a month to hear from him broke like a great

dam inside her. The other pieces of mail fell from her hand and she stood by the mailbox crying, perhaps a minute, until she was able to compose herself.

*He has **not** forgotten me!* She thought. *He **loves** me!*

She tucked the letter into the pocket of her skirt, picked up the newspaper and other items, then raced back to the school. She opened the door and looked in. The old Regulator clock told her she had time—if she hurried—to go home and come back before the evening class started. On impulse, she grabbed her coat and felt hat from a peg on the wall, pulled them on quickly, snatched up a lantern from the floor, locked the door, then ran down the path that led to the trail into the woods.

When Junie opened their cabin door, she was so out of breath she couldn't speak.

"Whoa! Honey, what's wrong?" her father asked. He was sitting at the table eating. "Why aren't you still at school?"

"Had to...had to tell you," she said, pulling off her coat and hat and tossing them on her chair. She reached in her pocket and took out the letter. "I got a letter from Linton Todd today!"

Big Mike smiled broadly. "Well, that *is* news. Don't you think you better read it to me?"

She did, except for the last two paragraphs, where she waved her hand and mumbled, "and then there's some other stuff."

"I can imagine there is," he said with a laugh. "I'm real happy for you, Junie. He seems like a fine fellow."

She ran over and hugged her father. "He says he's coming back, Daddy. He doesn't know when but he says he's coming back."

Big Mike glanced at the wall calendar from Carson's General Store. "Don't you have Moonlight School tonight, honey?"

"Yes, but I wanted to tell you about this."

“Why don’t you sit down and have you a quick supper, and I’ll wash up the dishes? You gotta be back there by...when?”

She looked at the wall clock. “Around six-thirty if I want to have any kind of lesson at all tonight.”

“Well, then, you’re gonna have to shuck on down this mountain in a hurry. Get you a plate now, girl. I made enough ham and grits for both of us.”

She got her tableware and started to eat quickly. She realized it had been foolish to come home, but she wanted to share the news.

“Doctor Jackson says I can go back to work next week,” Big Mike said.

“Doctor Jackson? From over in Prestonsburg? When did you see him?”

“At the mine today. I took a ride down to Mission Creek on the mule, and he was there. You know he’s got one of those flivvers, just like your Todd fella?”

“I expect they’re the coming thing, although they’re not much good on the roads around here. What’d he say, exactly?”

“He checked out my chest and my leg and my shoulders and said they’d healed up fine. He said if I can walk on my own, without a cane, I can get back to work.”

“You sure you’re ready to go?” she asked, taking a gulp of chickory-laced coffee.

“I’ve been itching for weeks. All this sittin’ around ain’t good for a man.”

“I wonder what Doctor Jackson was doing at the mine, Daddy? He sure didn’t drive halfway across the county just to see you.”

Big Mike said, “Plug told me he saw him coming out of Peltier’s office. Plug was downstairs with Stopes arguing about his overtime. The

doc said something loud over his shoulder as he was coming out about Peltier not listening to him. Then he stomped down those wooden steps.”

“Did I tell you Miss Cora is coming for the Moonlight School graduation?” Junie interrupted.

“That lady over in Rowan who started this business? That’d be a feather in your cap, Missy.”

“Oh, Daddy, she travels all around, trying to visit as many of the schools as she can. But it *would* mean a lot, not just to me but to all the students, too.”

“When’s that?”

“This Thursday night.”

“Boy, those six weeks went fast.”

“Not for me,” Junie said. “I’m exhausted.”

“You want to ride Sadie back?”

“At night? One broken leg around here was enough. No, I better get going. You sure you’re okay with these dishes?”

“Yeah! Now scat! Go on back before you’re late.”

“Thanks, Daddy. I love you!” she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

“Same to ya,” he said, winking.

She got her jacket, hat and lantern and was off.

Cora Wilson Stewart arrived in Mission Creek the afternoon of October 23<sup>rd</sup>, riding a horse, her belongings tied behind the saddle. Fayette Brown met her on the main road of the settlement and took her up to the schoolhouse.

When they came in the school door, Junie walked over and hugged her, then promptly dismissed school for the day, resulting in a great shout and celebration by the children.

At 38, the founder of the Moonlight Schools was a tall, elegant woman, with a regal bearing about her. She had a small ball on the end of her nose, and large, hooded eyes. She wore her dark hair upswept on her head. Today she was dressed in a white blouse, suede jacket, and corduroy riding skirt.

Junie boiled water on the school's potbelly stove and directed Miss Cora to the small back room so she could freshen up. When she emerged a half-hour later, she looked as if she could be presented to the governor.

While waiting for the Moonlight students to arrive, Junie and her mentor talked about illiteracy, funding of the schools, the support of the newspapers throughout the state, spreading the movement into other states, and Miss Cora's progressive politics.

That night the one-room schoolhouse was filled to overflowing with students, volunteer teachers, families and relatives, because it was graduation, and everyone who attended was justifiably proud of their achievement.

Student volunteers had set up planks on sawhorses in the front of the room, then covered them with patriotic bunting. Women had made plates of cookies, pies, and there were a dozen pitchers of lemonade and cold tea.

Junie got the group's attention then spoke in a clear, steady voice. "As you all know, tonight is our graduation ceremony, and to present your diplomas, we have a special guest.

"Miss Cora Wilson Stewart, of Rowan County, is the founder of the Moonlight School movement. Miss Cora has been a teacher, school

administrator, county school superintendent, and a supporter of reading programs all her life. She started a grass roots effort to raise money for the first Moonlight Schools in Rowan County two years ago, and since then, these night classes have spread like wildfire.

“Miss Cora will be giving our graduation address tonight, and I know you’ll want to show your appreciation to her for making this free program possible.”

The students erupted in hearty applause, provoking a beaming smile from the educator. When the room quieted down, she clasped her hands in front of her and began to speak.

“Thank you, Junie. Before I say anything else, I want to tell each and every one of you how proud I am of you tonight. You have shown extraordinary courage and enterprise in signing up for this class. But even more important, you put in the hard work needed to learn to read and write and do sums.

“I honor the many hours of study you put in, the time and effort to attend classes, and your ability to stick with it when the going got tough. You have not only proved that adults can learn, you have gone above and beyond what cynics expected.

“Literacy—the ability to read and write—is a great gift from our Almighty God. It opens a whole new world to a person. It will allow you to learn new skills, keep up on what is going on in Kentucky and the United States, and improve your life beyond belief.

“Your graduation from this Moonlight School is a giant step, but it is only a first step. Now your real education begins. You will improve your reading and writing and mathematics skills. You will discover new areas of interest, and you will be able to learn from the experience of others, put down in books and magazines and newspapers. You will become bigger, more successful people.

“Maybe some day you will even start a public library here at Mission Creek, so everyone can find the books and information they need.

“Reading will help you better yourself. It can train you for a better job. There are things called correspondence courses, where your lessons are sent right to your mailbox. You study, complete them, and mail them back to the school, enabling you to learn a new trade.

“Our motto in the Moonlight Schools is ‘Each one teach one.’ Now that you have learned to read and write, I expect you to hone your skills, and teach them to others. You can help us spread literacy, just as we helped you. That is the debt I ask you to pay back.

“Now, I’d like to recognize your volunteer teachers, Junie Corban, Fayanne Brown, Mildred Swenson, and Reverend George Fletcher. Would you please give them all a round of applause?”

The windowpanes in the schoolhouse reverberated with the ovation. The men shouted out three cheers, much to Junie’s embarrassment and delight.

“Thank you,” Junie said. “Thank you so much. I know I speak on behalf of the other teachers when I say it has been our pleasure and privilege to have you as students in this first Moonlight School. And we’ll be having a second session in a few months for those who wish to continue their education.”

Another outburst of support interrupted her.

“Thanks to Miss Cora, too, for riding all the way out to Mission Creek on our rocky roads, just to be present at our graduation. We do so appreciate all you’ve done, and your encouraging words here tonight. I know that each of our graduates here tonight will do their best to teach reading and writing to their friends and relatives as well.”

Another outbreak of applause, and cheers for Miss Cora.

“Now,” Junie announced, “we’ll have the awarding of diplomas, and a special graduation gift for each of you, followed by refreshments. Please come up to the front when I call your name, and Miss Cora will present you with your diploma.”

To these mountain people, this was a singular achievement, an incredible increase to their self-worth and pride. Every one of them glowed with happiness as they accepted their diploma from Miss Cora and shook her and Junie’s hands.

Because Miss Cora was a deeply religious woman, and because she considered the defeat of illiteracy her personal calling from God, each graduate was also presented an imitation leather-bound King James Version of the Bible, white covers for women and girls and black covers for the men and older boys. They had been donated by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union of Louisville, shipped in on the train a month earlier.

The refreshments and celebration lasted another hour, with singing, students reading from their Bibles, and expressing their appreciation to the teachers.

Finally, after the place had been cleaned up and everyone had gone home, Junie led through the settlement, Miss Cora following on her horse. The young woman had insisted that Miss Cora would sleep in her bedroom while Junie would take a comforter and blankets in the kitchen. Having traveled extensively through the mountains, Miss Cora was accustomed to meager living conditions.

As they passed the row of company houses, talking quietly about the success of the classes, Junie suddenly got a startled sensation, as if a cold hand had touched her shoulder.

She spun quickly and looked behind them. Standing in the yellow glow of a kerosene street lamp was H.M. Peltier, staring silently at her.

The threatening expression in his eyes sent a frigid shiver through Junie's entire body.

## Chapter Nine



Even though Junie Corban was elated about the outcome of the first Moonlight School at Mission Creek, an inescapable sense of melancholy had haunted her since the graduation ceremony a month ago.

She had experienced the same kind of letdown after she graduated college and got her teaching certificate. The realization of a dream, she had concluded then, could be less satisfying than the pursuit of it.

The Floyd County newspaper had carried a half-page story on the classes, including a group photo of the students and volunteers. She had received a personal letter of congratulations from the county superintendent of education, and one of the Mission Creek school board members had even hinted to her of a salary increase.

Still, another dream had overtaken that of the Moonlight School, as important as that was. For the first time in her life, she believed she was entitled to be selfish. She wanted Linton Todd and was not ashamed of it.

She had written him back promptly after receiving his first letter, pouring her heart out to him. A week later another letter arrived from him, as cryptic as the first. He had no definite news to report, just a vague intuition that wheels were turning behind the scenes. Yet a lifetime of struggle and disappointment troubled her, nibbling away at her self-confidence. What if Barnhart transferred Linton somewhere else? What if they fired him? What if he didn't truly love her and it had been just words?

Every hour these disturbing thoughts ran through her mind, to the point that she had difficulty concentrating. She hoped that when classes recessed for the Thanksgiving holiday, she would be able to collect herself.

Junie slipped on a patch of ice and nearly fell. Two inches of snow had fallen during the night and the trail was slippery. Her father's big footprints led down the path toward the mine. He was on the day shift today, happy to be back to work. He had to leave an hour before her. Junie thanked God the accident had not left him disabled or worse, like poor Joe Fanning.

She heard a sliding chirp, looked over and saw a cardinal pecking at seeds, bright red against the pristine snow. Its color reminded her to go up into the attic of the school and bring down the box of Christmas decorations, to put up after Thanksgiving. She and her father needed Christmas food from Caney Branch. She would have to arrange a trip somehow.

Junie smiled when he remembered her visit there with Linton, their first and only date. He was so kind and thoughtful. It had felt so natural, as if they had known each other for years.

"G'morning, Miss Corban."

The unexpected voice jolted her out of her daydream. She looked to her left to see Jimmy Sussman, one of her fourth grade students, coming down another path from the woods, toward where their two paths converged.

"Hello, Jimmy. How are you this morning?"

"Okay. Hey, whose footprints are those?"

"They're my father's," Junie told him. "He's working days at the mine today so he left very early."

The boy wore a homemade stocking cap pulled down over his brown hair and was shucked into a too-big mackinaw that had been handed down from his older brother Jerry. He carried his books and a round metal lunch pail. When the weather turned colder, he and the other children started wearing shoes. Most of Junie's students went barefoot until mid-autumn.

"Are we gonna study those division problems again today, Miss Corban?"

"I'm afraid so, Jimmy."

He scrunched up his nose. "I don't like 'em much. I like science better, when we're learning about frogs and fish and such."

When they got to the school, Junie opened the door and started a fire in the potbelly stove in the middle of the room. As the boys arrived, they each brought in a couple pieces of kindling from the pile outside and dropped them in the wood box. Because the school and church had been there long before the mine, they were both outfitted with wood stoves instead of coal burners.

Junie did not punish the children for tardiness. She started classes at eight, and as the students arrived, they took their places. In the mountains, some of the children had to walk miles, and when snow was on the ground, going was slower. She did take attendance, since that was one of the standards they were graded on.

She found that having some of the older students assist with teaching the younger ones not only re-enforced what they had learned, but fostered an attitude of helpfulness as well. And the older boys, especially, needed the extra credit to make up for the days they played hooky.

Junie was distracted. Her thoughts alternated between Linton Todd and what she was going to buy her father for Christmas. He had

simple tastes and would be happy with whatever she chose, but she wanted to get at least one gift that would surprise him.

After lunch, the students became droopy, some hardly able to hold their heads up. Some teachers she knew cracked their students with a pointer, but Junie would not hit them. Over the years she had devised far more humane—and effective—means of discipline.

She opened some windows to let in cold air, then announced a spelling bee. Because all the classes were in the same large room, younger students would get easier words and the seventh and eighth graders the most complex. The last student standing would receive a small bag of sour balls Junie had bought at the Barnhart company store.

The contest took nearly an hour and was finally won by a chubby third grade boy who giggled and jumped in the air at the thought of his own bag of candy.

Junie looked at the wall clock. She didn't have another hour's worth in her, and besides, her father would be getting off work soon. She dismissed school early, which was met with such glee that the children grabbed their coats, hats and mittens and fled as if they had been released from hades.

A first grade girl, a sweet little rose named Elizabeth Day, stayed behind.

“What’s the matter, Lizzie?”

“Are you going by the houses, Miss Corban?”

“Yes, I am. Do you want to walk with me?”

“Yes, ma’am. I can’t tell ‘em apart. Sometimes I go in the wrong one and people yell at me.”

Junie laughed. “Well, they all have numbers on them. Can’t you remember your house number?”

“Sometimes mama sees me through the window and comes out, but I forget whether it’s five or six.”

“Well, if I remember from your records, it’s number five. We’ll make sure we get you in the right house.”

“Thank you, Miss Corban.”

They left, walking down the snowy path hand in hand. Junie wondered whether she would ever have a little girl of her own.

“I asked Santy Claus to bring me a dolly with a bonnet this year, Miss Corban. Do you think he’ll do that?”

Junie knew Lizzie’s mother, Claire, an Irish immigrant, was an accomplished seamstress. She suspected making a doll and its clothes would be an easy matter for her.

“Oh, I think Santa can handle that, Lizzie. You know, his elves can make all kinds of things.”

“What did you ask Santy Claus for, Miss Corban?”

“Oh, I just asked him to send somebody special, but it doesn’t look like that’s going to happen.”

When they got to the row of houses, Junie directed the girl into number five, and got a wave from her mother from the front window. She continued walking down the road. A small group of miners approached, their slow progress belying their weariness. At six feet eight inches tall, her father towered over the rest of the shift. Junie met them in front of the Barnhart offices.

“What are you doing here, Junie?” Big Mike asked. “Doesn’t school have an hour or so to go?”

“When you’re the teacher, you say what time school lets out,” she replied. The men with her father grinned, their white teeth standing out in their dusty faces. “C’mon, Daddy, I’ll walk you home.”

“I’d take that offer if I was you, Mike. It’s not often a lug like you hears something like that from a pretty girl.”

“Often?” he agreed. “How about never?” The men got a hearty laugh out of that.

The front door of the office building opened and Tom Hendricks, the mine foreman, stepped out onto the porch.

“Any of you boys have business with Peltier today?” he asked the miners.

“We go through you,” one of them said. “Why?”

“Just warning you,” the foreman told them. “He’s on a real run. Just about tore my head off. Cambridge, that new geologist, bucked him on something and Peltier is madder than a hornet. Ever since that accident, he sees a devil in everybody and everything.”

Hendricks had no sooner gotten the words out than the door whipped open and Peltier stormed through, his face flushed and contorted.

“I wasn’t done with you,” the stocky superintendent shouted. “Production is down five percent. What do you aim to do about it?”

Junie blanched. Even she knew that the front porch of the office, with a crew of miners watching, was no place for a boss to dress down his subordinate. She watched Hendricks squirm.

“Can we go back to your office, Mr. Peltier?”

“Hell, no! I want an answer right now.”

“We have two choices, as I see it. We can add more men or open another mine. Number One is already crowded enough. If we add more men they’ll only get in each others’ way. Besides, they’re paid by the loaded car, so they’re working as hard and as fast as they can right now. If we open another mine, we can double or triple our production, but I’ve

got to tell you, this Cambridge is no Linton Todd. Todd could sniff out a coal vein like a dog hunting down a rabbit.”

“Todd!” Peltier roared. “You’ll never see him again. He’s up in Pittsburgh making trouble for me.”

Junie stepped forward. That didn’t sound like Linton. She was about to say something then remembered her father’s job.

“You!” Peltier pointed at her. “You’re his girlfriend. Have you been spying on me here and sneaking information to him?”

“I’ve done no such thing,” she snapped. “Linton Todd stands on his own. He’s not the kind of man to run anyone down.”

“Pittsburgh’s been giving me trouble—even more trouble—since your boyfriend got called back to headquarters. I think he’s trying to sabotage me.” Tiny drops of spittle spewed from his mouth when he talked.

“C’mon, Junie. Let’s go home,” her father said, gently taking her by the arm. She turned and started to walk with him.

“Oh, *I* get it now. You’re her father! I remember from the accident. Then *you’re* the spy, you’re tattling to her, and she’s passing it up north.”

“I just finished my shift. I’m tired, Mr. Peltier. I’m taking my daughter home,” Big Mike said calmly.

“And you can stay there, Corban! Don’t bother coming back to this mine. You’re fired! And you, Missy. This mine pays a lot of taxes, buys a lot of supplies, carries a lot of weight in Prestonsburg. I’ve got enough power to cost you your job at that schoolhouse, and I think I just might do it.”

## Chapter Ten



Junie's mouth dropped open in horror. She was on excellent terms with the school board, but she knew that money talked and Peltier might make good on his threat. And the unfairness of firing her father...

Tom Hendricks stepped up, "Mr. Peltier, don't you think you should..."

"You shut up or I'll fire you too!" the short man screamed.

Then something terrifying happened. They all watched as Peltier's face contorted in pain. He snatched both hands to his chest.

Crashing to one knee, he let out a gurgling growl, then collapsed onto his face.

Hendricks knelt down and gently turned him onto his back. "Mr. Peltier! Mr. Peltier!"

The life was already fading out of the mine superintendent's eyes. Big Mike grabbed Junie by the shoulders and turned her away.

"Loosen his collar," one of the miners said.

It was already too late. In a handful of seconds he was gone.

Tom Hendricks checked Peltier's pulse then put his ear to the man's nose and listened for breath. There was none.

"He's dead," he announced flatly.

Junie couldn't believe a person could pass that quickly. "What happened?"

"He had a bad heart," Hendricks told them. "I was looking for a report in his desk a couple weeks ago and ran across his medicine. The bottle was empty. He'd run out and didn't refill the prescription. Doctor Jackson from Prestonsburg was listed on the label as his physician, so I

got word to him. He came out here himself, brought more medicine. Peltier wouldn't follow his orders to slow down, delegate more. They had a big argument. Peltier near turned himself inside out trying to find out who called Jackson."

"It's a shame," Big Mike said sincerely. "All so unnecessary. If he'd a just slowed down..."

Hendricks looked up, his eyes watering. "Forget what he said about your job, Corban. I'm temporarily in charge now. You're the hardest worker here. Keep reporting to work as usual." Then he looked at Junie. "And as for you, Miss Corban, I apologize for what he said. He wasn't thinking straight. You can rest assured that Barnhart Coal has no interest in threatening your job either. I'm sorry."

"That's all right," she stammered a bit. "Did he have a family?"

"That was his problem," Hendricks said. "He was divorced, never had any children. This job was his life. All he knew how to do was push, push, push. It finally caught up with him."

Hendricks took his coat off and laid it over the dead man's head and shoulders.

Junie and her father walked home in silence, both shaken by the tragedy. When they got to their cabin, it was nearly dark. Big Mike washed up then brought in some firewood while Junie prepared supper.

"Do you know what you and I are going to do on Saturday?" he asked her, after she said grace.

"No, what?"

"Plug loaned me his buggy. We're gonna hitch up Sadie, take a ride to Caney Branch, and finish our Christmas shopping."

"I got your presents," she said. "I got a little something for Fayanne. Aren't you done yet?"

He gave her a conspiratorial smile. “Dub Carson had to special-order something for me. It oughta be in by now.”

“For me?” She frowned. “I told you not to spend a lot on me. You need to be saving for retirement, you know.”

“I am. But that don’t mean I have to save everything. Besides, you have to buy something for your Todd feller.”

She stared at her food. “I don’t know, Daddy. I get this sick feeling I’m never going to see him again.”

“Stop that kinda talk, June-bug. He sent you those two letters, didn’t he? You know, menfolk *hate* to write letters, even those who do know how to write.”

She had to smile. “How would you know?”

“Cause I’m a man. And I know menfolk. Been one all my life. Besides, you’re gonna be mighty embarrassed when he shows up with a big ol’ present for you and you don’t have anything for him.”

“You seem awfully confident about this, Daddy.”

“I’ve been praying about it,” he confessed.

Junie’s eyes widened. “Daddy!”

“I want to see you happy, honey, and I got a strong feeling this man can do that for you.”

“Okay,” she relented. “We’ll go to Caney Branch on Saturday.”

The little girl inside Junie Corban loved Christmas. Every year she relished seeing the decorations at Caney Branch. Throughout the year, most of the people scattered around Mission Creek did most of their shopping here, although an occasional trip to Prestonsburg was warranted when a larger or more unusual item was needed.

Mike made a great mystery of going to Carson's general store alone to pick up Junie's gift. While he was there, she went into the butcher shop and purchased the large pot roast they would have for Christmas dinner. The holiday was still five days off, but the meat would keep well outside in the cold. Mike had built a large wooden walk-in locker behind the house, where hams, cuts of venison, and sausages hung during the winter. The contraption locked securely to keep the wild animals out.

As Junie loaded the paper-wrapped packages of meat into the back of the buggy, her father emerged from the general store bearing a large cardboard box, tied with string. He secured it next to the meat and other parcels.

"I had Dub set a big rat trap inside that box, in case you should get any ideas about peekin'," Mike said with a wink.

After much persuading, he got Junie to go back into Carson's to pick out a gift for Linton Todd. She spent nearly an hour peering into the glass cases, finally settling on a brass pocket compass, a perfect gift, she said, for an engineer lost on an unmarked mountain road.

When they came out, they watched a bearded old man dressed as Santa Claus, walking down the brick sidewalk, passing out peppermint canes to small children.

Big Mike even treated her to supper at the same small café where she and Linton had eaten, but Junie could not make herself eat chicken-fried steak. That day had been too magical, too perfect. She wondered if she would ever have any more like it.

On the way home, a light, dry snow began falling. When they got back to Mission Creek, Mike returned the buggy to its owner, unhitched their mule and tied as many packages on it as he could, then they led the tired animal up the white-dusted trail to home.

\* \* \*

A week before school dismissed for the Christmas vacation, Junie had announced every day that the school board (her bosses, she told her classes) had a rule that she was not allowed to accept any Christmas presents that had been purchased in a store. Of course there was no such rule, but Junie had started it the first year she began teaching for a simple reason: most of the families of her students could not afford to buy Christmas presents, and she did not want any students embarrassed.

The result had been pure delight. Every year she received a wide assortment of handicrafts from her students, from simple wood carvings to small baskets, knitted mittens and crocheted caps and scarves. Her father was especially fond of the food gifts: home-canned chow chow (a sweet cabbage/onion relish), pickles, beets, corn, beans, peas, tomatoes, applesauce, peaches, pears, cherries, jellies and jams.

Christmas day they rose early and unwrapped their presents to each other. As usual, they were practical, humble gifts. Mike gave Junie a pair of leather boots, needles and thread, and a one pound can of black tea. She gave him a pair of bib overalls, a pair of leather work gloves, a pound of horehound candy, and a box of shotgun shells.

“I have one more thing for you,” she said, reaching into the folds of her robe. She handed him a cylindrical package wrapped in red paper.

“I thought we agreed.”

“We did. But I cheated. Go ahead, now. Open it.”

His eyes glowed at the sight of the stag-handled pocket knife. It was sturdily made yet seemed like a luxury to him. He nodded and said, “Thank you, honey. I’ll be mighty proud of this.”

Then he sprang up and got the big box out of the corner, the box he had ceremoniously carried out of Carson's store. He set it on the floor in front of Junie.

"Go on, Junie. See what's inside."

She snapped the string, undid the flaps and opened it up. Reaching in, she drew out a set of nested pots and pans, with lids.

"Why, Daddy, these are so nice. But we've *got* all kinds of skillets and pots."

"Sure, *here*," he replied. "But when you hitch up with that Linton Todd, you're gonna need your own."

Her face puckered, then she sprang across and threw her arms around her father's neck, crying. He hugged her tight, patting her on the back. "He'll be back for you, honey. I told you I prayed for it. The Lord won't let me down."

At Christmas church services that morning, they greeted their friends, then stopped by Fayanne and Luther Brown's company house for fruitcake and coffee, then Plug Mede's place, where Big Mike drank his annual shot of corn liquor and Junie patched a hole in the old bachelor's work jacket while the two men talked.

Later that afternoon, as Junie and Mike walked back home, she suddenly stopped and clasped her hands to her face.

"Oh no!" she said. "I completely forgot about Ethel Fanning and her boys."

"They're taken care of," Big Mike assured her. "We took up a collection at the mine and a couple of the families are dropping in on them today with some presents. It's no substitute for having Joe there, but we have to do what we can."

They had been invited to Christmas dinner by three other families at church, but both of them preferred to spend their holiday at home, with each other. Junie knew this was the worst time of the year for her father, even though he would never talk about missing her mother. She saw the sadness in his face during unguarded moments.

So they ate roast beef and mashed potatoes and gravy, homemade rolls, home-canned vegetables, and hot apple cobbler for dessert until both of them thought they would explode.

After the meal, Junie got up, took a tea kettle off the cookstove and poured boiling water into a dishpan, adding ladles full of cool water from an enameled bucket to wash the dishes.

“If you don’t mind, Junie, I’m gonna go out and tend to Sadie and the pig and make sure the chickens are bedded down okay. I’ll bring you in another bucket of water when I come back in.”

“You go ahead, Daddy. I’m fine here.”

Junie was used to hard work, as were most mountain folk. She was a small woman but lithe and strong.

Even so, she was not always as strong inside as she wished. She did not know where her father got his optimism about Linton Todd. She guessed that it was childish of her to expect him to show up at the holiday—or maybe foolish to believe he’d come back at all. She was not so naïve that she believed people meant everything they said, and after all, she had known him only for a couple weeks.

She attacked the dishes with a vengeance. After the holidays she would start planning the next Moonlight School and she would throw herself into that and get herself so tired she would eventually forget about that handsome, dark-haired engineer from Lexington, Kentucky. She heard the front door and wiped her hands on a dish towel.

“Daddy, are you done feeding Sadie already...”

Her mouth gaped when she saw him standing there, his boots and pants covered with snow, a floppy felt hat on his head, and an unmistakable look of pure love in his eyes. Linton Todd ran across the room and picked her off the floor!

He kissed her and she just *knew* it was a dream. She *knew* she had sat down at the table, put her head down and had fallen asleep.

But he was holding her so tight. And her feet were going but they couldn't touch the floor. And she was gasping for breath.

He was *real*. He was *here*.

"I'm so sorry I got caught up, Junie. I tried to get here sooner." He was talking a mile a minute. "My Ford broke down up by Salversville, and I flagged down a southbound freight train. I showed 'em my pass and they took me to Prestonsburg. I hitched a westbound freight from there but had to walk a couple miles from their tracks to Mission Creek."

She stood there just staring at him, still trying to catch her breath, tears of joy dribbling down her flushed cheeks.

"Got any food left?" he asked. "I could eat a skunk."

"Sure," she said, still stunned. "I'll fix you some. Sit down at the table."

"I thought I'd never get here. You don't know how good it is to see you."

The front door opened again and Big Mike came in, stomping the snow off his heavy work shoes. He took off his hat and coat and hung them on a peg on the wall.

"Lo, Todd. 'Bout time you showed up," he said nonchalantly.

Linton jumped out of his chair, walked over and pumped Big Mike's hand. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Corban."

“Same to you, son. Glad you could make it. Junie’s been expecting you. Go on, sit yourself down and have something to eat. We’ve got plenty of grub here.”

Between bites, he explained everything that had happened at Barnhart Coal headquarters in the past three months. “Hey, this meal is great,” he said, finally noticing. He grinned. “Junie, did you cook this?”

“Why *sure* she cooked it,” Mike answered, beaming. “That little gal is just busting with talents. You’ve heard her play the fiddle, haven’t you?”

“I have, but maybe she’ll treat us both later. A man has to space out his fun.”

“That’s a good philosophy.” Mike had a puzzled expression on his face. “Shame about Peltier. Hendricks seems to be doing a decent job running the mine, though.”

“Come Monday, he’ll go back to his job as foreman.”

“Oh?”

“Barnhart made me the new superintendent of the Mission Creek mine,” Linton announced proudly.

“Well, good for you!” Mike said, slapping him on the back. “Congratulations.”

Junie grabbed his hands and said, “Lin, that’s wonderful!”

“We’ll see how wonderful,” he said. “I’ll be walking a tough tightrope between trying to satisfy Barnhart’s production quotas and treating the miners decently.”

Noticing that Linton had finished his supper, Big Mike retreated to his favorite rocking chair. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a cigar.

“Junie,” he said, “Plug gave me a Christmas cigar today, and I aim to smoke it now. You know what a tightwad he is and how stinky

his cheap cigars are, so you and Linton may want to get your coats and get you a breath of fresh air.” Then he winked at her.

When they were outside walking down the path, Linton said, “You’re father wasn’t too subtle about chasing us out, but I appreciate his trust.”

“Trust? You *do* know you’re sleeping on the kitchen floor tonight, don’t you?”

“I fully expected to.” Then he kissed her. “I’m sorry I didn’t write more. They kept me pretty busy up there. Now, when I look back on it, I think it was some kind of test to see how much pressure I could handle.”

“Well, you must have handled it just fine. You got the job.”

“Do you want to open your Christmas present now?” he asked.

“It’s kind of dark out here.”

He pulled something out of his pocket. “Don’t worry. They tend to reflect the light.” He popped the lid on a small box and revealed a diamond engagement ring.

“Yes, oh yes!” Junie threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“My question was going to be, ‘Would you consider working in the mine once we’re married?’”

“You silly. Would you put it on me?”

He took the ring out, pulled the mitten off her left hand, and slid it down her finger. It fit perfectly.

Junie hugged him tightly for a long time, neither of them speaking, just savoring the moment.

“I do love you,” he said.

It was a clear Christmas night. Junie gazed up into the sky. He looked up as well.

“Do you know, Lin, that when I was a little girl, my mother used to tell me that the stars were angels, and that they were winking at me because they knew I was going to have a beautiful life?”

He kissed her on the forehead. “Junie, I think your mother was right.”

The End



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