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CHAPTER ONE

JUNE 12, 1877
GREEN VALLEY, NEW YORK

The morning my life shattered, I'd been back at my parents' two-story farmhouse for a week after graduation from Mount Holyoke College. I was walking home from our neighbors' property, where I had been feeding their animals. Mr. and Mrs. Couseau were in Massachusetts to visit their son, Johnny, who was my fiancé. He was studying at Harvard Law School while I waited for him to finish. Then we would marry. I'd also wanted to study law before we married, but Johnny had convinced me we shouldn't wait to begin our life together.

I'd taken care of their cow, two horses, and a flock of chickens. Carrying a bucket of milk in one hand and a basket of eggs in the other, I strode past the edge of the Thompson farm and entered a small grove of trees on our land.

With no warning, a large creature attacked me from behind and knocked me down. I hit my head on a sharp object. The world went black. When I came to, I felt the most incredible pain, especially between my legs. Although I could hardly see him, I knew it was our neighbor, Vincent Thompson. He was disabled by idiocy from birth, and now he was on top of me. Milk and eggs covered both of us and blood had splattered everywhere. Vincent exuded the odor of a pigpen that gagged me at such close range. He couldn't talk,

but made meaningless sounds like “Uh, ugh.” He was tall, about five feet, ten inches, and fat and flabby.

Vincent stood and raised his foot, ready to stomp down on my head, wanting to kill me. I grabbed his boot and pulled as hard as I could. He fell over. Rolling onto my side, I grasped a large branch. I managed to stand, but was dizzy and nearly fell again. Raising the branch, I used all my strength to hit Vincent across his face. He hollered. I tried to run toward my house, hobbled by sharp pain as well as my torn blue skirt and voluminous undergarments.

I stumbled into our yard, screaming. It was agony to move, to breathe. I couldn’t run fast enough. I heard Vincent behind me.

Big Josh, our muscular servant freed from slavery, appeared from behind the barn. He wrapped his strong arms around me, scooped me up, and carried me into the house away from Vincent, who retreated. I was terrified but overwhelmed with gratitude to Josh, knowing he had rescued me from certain death.

Mother—short, round, fat, white-haired, and exhausted from bearing twelve children—met us at the door. “Susie, darling, what happened?” Her normally sullen face was contorted by panic, horror, and disgust. She saw Vincent, hanging back watching, and called him. He turned and ran into the woods. “That was Vincent?”

“Yes,” I sobbed as Josh put me down on my feet where I started to crumble.

Mother took me in her arms to comfort me, and then led me into the sitting room. “What were you doing?” she asked kindly.

“Only walking home ... I, ... f-fed ... the Couseaus’ animals.”

Mandy, our housekeeper, who was married to Josh, appeared with clean towels and water as I collapsed on our old settee. I heard Mother call Davy, my thirteen-year-old brother, and ask him to find Doctor Andrew, my elder sister Trudy’s husband. A tall, clean-shaven, thin man, Andrew arrived after Mother and Mandy had washed off the worst of the blood and dirt.

They began to dress my wounds while I sobbed, terror and pain still gripping me. I had a huge lump on my forehead as well as scratches and deep cuts all over my body. My clothes were caked

with blood. My skirt, petticoat and undergarments had to be cut off. Then there was the big problem of the wound between my legs.

“What happened?” Doctor Andrew asked gently.

“He assaulted me, Doctor Andy.” I could not stop sobbing. Andrew was almost a father to me. He cleaned the worst of my wounds and put iodine on each one. I screamed again. He explained kindly that it was important to prevent infection. At last he finished and I could lie back and rest. I couldn’t move any part of my body without severe pain.

“I need to talk to Father Reed,” said Doctor Andrew. “Please, someone, go find him and ask him to see me right away.”

Davy ran upstairs and met Father—fully-bearded, of medium height, wearing his spectacles—as he was preparing to leave for church, where he was the rector. Mother continued to hold and stroke me while Doctor Andrew and Father went into the next room. Father never whispered. He was both hard of hearing and accustomed to preaching at the top of his voice, so I caught almost every word he and Doctor Andrew said.

“I was about to come downstairs to see about the commotion,” Father declared, “but I had to finish dressing. What’s the problem?”

“Susie was knocked down and assaulted,” Doctor Andrew said gently. “The man tried to kill her and, sir, I’m sorry to tell you that she also has been raped.”

Father was usually a calm, serene, and soothing person but not now. “Raped? No! No! Not my dear Susie. Who did it?”

Mother left me and joined them. In the midst of my terror, I was becoming aware of her unusually kind behavior and was mystified by it. I would have expected her to be angry, as harmony had been missing between us for years. “I saw that Vincent chasing her,” she said.

Father came in to see me. “Susie, my dear, was it Vincent Thompson?”

“Y-yes,” I choked out, still crying.

“What did he do to you?” Father demanded.

“He t-tried to k-kill me. I was only ... w-walking home after f-feeding the Couseaus’ animals and he ... j-jumped on me.”

“Did he have his way with you?”

“I don’t know, F-father. He knocked me d-down and everything w-went black.”

Father silently paced around the room for a minute. At last he strode over to Mother and said, “He must marry her.”

I saw Mother gasp and Doctor Andrew frown.

“Susie marry Vincent?” asked Doctor Andrew. “I hope not.”

“N-no! I don’t want to marry him, I want to m-marry Johnny,” I begged.

Doctor Andrew had sent Davy to fetch Trudy. I was thrilled to see her. She was more of a mother to me than my own. Her sympathetic hug made me cry again.

“Please, Father, you can’t marry her to Vincent,” Trudy said. “Vincent is an idiot! He can’t hear or speak and can’t even dress himself.”

“Let’s be calm, Susie.” Father ignored Trudy as his normal demeanor returned. “Johnny will not want you now. You are damaged goods. You have been dirtied and ruined. Vincent must marry you. It’s the only way to make you a decent woman again.”

My terror and pain exploded into anger. “L-let’s ask Johnny first. He will still want me. I was only on an errand for his family.”

“We might if we had time,” replied Father, “but Johnny is far away in Boston. We cannot discuss this matter by telegraph.”

Mother tried to explain more gently. “You are dishonored and could have a child, Susie. No one will respect you or Father or our family. None of your brothers or sisters will be able to make a good marriage.”

Father nodded as Mother continued. “It’s possible that Father could lose his pulpit. Even if he doesn’t, many of his flock will leave because they will believe we are disgraced. The only possible way to keep that from happening is for you and Vincent to be married.”

“Why, why? I’m the one ... attacked and h-hurt. We n-need to call the s-sheriff.”

Father ignored me and summoned the rest of the family. Davy, still out of breath from his messenger duties, and my little sisters, Belle and Dell, ages fifteen and sixteen, known as “the twins,” were home. They were silly young girls waiting for husbands, now sleepy and scared after they heard what had happened.

None of my three older brothers was home. Billy had fallen at Gettysburg and I’d never stopped missing him. I wished that Ed, an Episcopal priest like Father, were home, but he was in his own pulpit in Chicago. Darling Fred, Johnny’s best friend, was at Harvard Law School with Johnny. Another younger brother and sister had both died shortly after birth. Trudy and Doctor Andrew adopted my youngest brother, Charley, after Mother abandoned him.

“We must go to the Thompsons and marry Susannah and Vincent,” Father declared to the assembled family. Every mouth dropped in disbelief and Trudy shook her head vigorously.

“That’s simply n-not right. Please!” I tried to control my outrage. “H-he assaulted me. Don’t punish me for what the fool did. I want him arrested and put in an institution or in j-jail.”

“Father Reed, I mean no disrespect,” Dr. Andrew said calmly with authority, “but I don’t think Susannah is well enough to be married. She may be seriously injured. I can’t tell unless I examine her further, but I think she should be in the infirmary.”

“Vincent tried to kill her,” Mother added. “Despite what I said a few minutes ago, perhaps it would be wise to think more about it. We don’t want to make things worse.”

Father made a pretense of listening to me and the rest of the family. Then he rose to his full height to let everyone know the discussion was over. “I know this marriage is not what any of us wants, but it must happen now. It’s decreed in the Bible. Since the beginning of time, a man who assaults a woman must marry her immediately to avoid shame.”

He held up his hand to silence everyone. “I am the head of the family and I intend no further discussion of this matter. Is there anyone who does not understand me?” He focused a withering

glance on Mother and his eyes swept over each of the others, communicating that he would tolerate no interference.

I continued to beg and shout, but they ignored my pleadings. Mother and Doctor Andrew completed dressing my wounds, put a clean frock on me, and helped me to stand. They served me breakfast, but I couldn't eat.

"Billy's old shotgun is upstairs. Bring it along," Father ordered Davy, who obeyed.

I refused to budge. I was still having trouble breathing and was in incredible pain, so Father told Big Josh to carry me. We straggled out of our house and down the road. Father pounded on the Thompsons' door.

George Thompson, Vincent's father, answered the knock. He was tall, fully bearded and dressed in a fine woolen suit. A successful stone and quarry broker, he'd been widowed at the time of Vincent's birth. As the only person in the world who cared about Vincent, he'd done his best to raise him with a series of nursemaids and housekeepers, but Vincent had now become uncontrollable.

"I guess I know why you've come," Mr. Thompson said as he cautiously looked at my face.

Father replied, "You know what we have to do."

Vincent was in the sitting room. To my satisfaction, I saw a huge welt on his head, his eyes were puffy, and his face was rapidly becoming black and blue. He, too, was covered with scratches and cuts. I was glad that I'd managed to hurt him. I wished I could have done much more.

He scowled. I think he must have seen the shotgun. Davy certainly displayed it prominently as he twirled it around. I was glad it wasn't loaded. Huge clumsy Vincent had changed his clothes and looked like he had bathed—a rarity for him. He'd even combed his unruly blond hair, or someone had done it for him.

I must talk to Johnny. Johnny will tell me what to do. Johnny is almost a lawyer. And with that thought, I remembered that I, too, wanted to study law before we married, but Johnny had convinced me we shouldn't wait. Now I was losing Johnny. Overwhelmed, I

began to sob again.

Reluctantly, Mother stood by Father's side in the center of the room. Father opened the Bible he always carried. George Thompson pulled Vincent up and held him standing. Josh set me on my feet and stood me next to Vincent, then caught me as I started to fall. I gasped for breath. Belle and Dell were crying. Davy was solemn. Mother was trying to be brave but she, too, was weeping.

This is the end of my life.

"Don't do it, Father," Trudy pleaded. "Please, please don't do it."

"Don't interfere, Trudy," Father replied sternly. He scowled and appeared to tower above all of us as he began the ceremony. It was only a moment before he asked those most important questions.

"Do you, Vincent, take this woman, Susannah, as your lawful wedded wife?" Father intoned. Vincent couldn't talk. I guess Father had forgotten. Vincent made no indication of anything. He merely stood there.

Father looked directly at me. "Do you, Susannah, take this man, Vincent, as your lawful wedded husband?"

"No! Never!" *These are the most important words I will say in my life.*

"I now pronounce you man and wife."

"Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Thompson!" Vincent's father boomed. "I could never have imagined so great a fortune as to have you for my daughter-in-law. Darling Susie is now the wife of my dear Vincent. I have somebody to help me take care of him. Praise the Lord! Let's have a celebration."

Mr. Thompson walked to a cupboard and produced a bottle and several glasses. Trudy and I watched Mother, Father, Doctor Andrew, and George Thompson go through the motions of toasting the "marriage." Still in pain and exhausted, I fell onto a sofa. Trudy sat down beside me and began to stroke my head.

My eyes closed and I heard Doctor Andrew say, "She appears to be more seriously injured than I first thought. I think she might have a broken rib, possibly two or even three. I need to bind them

before they puncture an internal organ. I also think she needs to stay in bed for several weeks. She could die from her wounds unless given time to heal.”

Everyone listened. “With your permission, Mr. Thompson, I’d like to take her home with us. I’ll put her in the infirmary I maintain in the house.”

I think Mr. Thompson nodded before I lost consciousness.

* * *

I remembered nothing after that. The next morning a door slammed and awakened me. Sleep had temporarily removed my smothering despair, but now it devastatingly returned. I slowly realized that I was in the infirmary at Trudy and Doctor Andrew’s house. The horrible pain gripped me and I was cold, weak, and shaky. I tried to get up, but fell back on the bed when I heard Father’s loud voice in an argument with Doctor Andrew.

“I must take her to her husband,” bellowed Father. “She is a married woman and she cannot stay here.”

“Please speak quietly, Father Reed,” Doctor Andrew said in an admonitory and authoritative tone I hadn’t previously heard. “No one may disturb my patients—right now Susannah is one of them. And I am in charge. I want to repeat what I said last night. Susannah could die without continued medical attention over the next several days.”

Here in town, at his own house and infirmary, Dr. Andrew could challenge Father. “In any event,” Dr. Andrew continued, “Susannah lived here with us for eight years when school and college were not in session. She was only staying with you temporarily because Johnny wanted her near his parents until they could marry. We made a tragic mistake in this hasty marriage to her assailant.”

I lay still, in pain, but I knew exactly what I had to do: stop whining and crying and feeling sorry for myself. I must grow up. Also, I must never acknowledge this marriage. I forced the pain from my mind, but before I could arise, I heard Mother’s rustling dress and her soft cough. I realized that she was also in the next room.

“No, Doctor Andrew,” Father said, “I had to marry them. My duty to God is more important than to any mortal.” He appeared to be about to begin his old sermon.

“Father Reed, Mother Reed,” Doctor Andrew said, “please go into the parlor and sit down while we wait for Susannah to awaken. I need to see a patient down the road and should be back shortly. Please understand that Susannah may not leave without my permission.” He shut the door without further ceremony.

I lay still, my eyes closed, unwilling to rise and face my father and the world quite yet. Perhaps Mother could change his mind.

“What do those words mean, William?” Mother said, so softly that I could hardly hear her. “Are they fair? Or are they merely platitudes to justify men’s primordial urges? God knows, you’ve had those yourself and because of them we had at least seven more children than I, or even you, ever wanted. All the children after the first five, after Susannah, were not blessings from the Lord, but crushing burdens on me.”

I had never heard her voice such thoughts.

“In any event, William,” Mother added, “she is not better off married to Vincent than she would be on the street. Vincent will kill her. Even though you could marry her to a murderer, I thank the Lord that Trudy and Doctor Andrew stepped in to rescue her.”

Father sounded distracted, irrational. “Here it is 1877, twelve years after . . . most important event in my life, in the . . . of the world, and something I worked, prayed, and paid for, the end of slavery. . . .”

“That’s right, William, so don’t condemn your daughter to life as a slave.”

I couldn’t believe Mother was talking to him in that manner. She had never addressed him so disrespectfully, at least not in my hearing.

Father now appeared to be muttering, listening to his inner thoughts only, “I risked my career and my pulpit to free the slaves. I felt fulfilled . . . vindicated when President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Even the loss of my . . . Billy . . . at

Gettysburg, was almost bearable . . . unshackling of the chains. I have many children. I . . . could sacrifice one for what was right.”

“I’ve never forgiven you, and I never will, for letting Billy, our firstborn, go to certain death at Gettysburg. You even encouraged him to join the Union Army.” Mother’s voice quivered with anger and grief. “You know I’ll never recover from losing him. Now you’ve done something as bad to Susie.”

I could feel Father becoming more agitated as Mother’s stern logic was beginning to overwhelm him.

“I had the right to compel Susie, to insist that she be . . . married. Marriage to a potential murderer is acceptable to the church, the community. Fallen women are just that: fallen.” I heard Father’s voice break and he let out several sobs and then was quiet. Eventually he said, “I’m sorry, Anna, my dear. I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I never meant to hurt my dear Susannah.”

No one spoke again for a few moments. Eventually he said, “You are right, Anna. This is my daughter. I cannot treat her as a fallen woman. Let’s go to her.”

They left the parlor and strode into the infirmary. I was ready.

“Susie, Mother and I came to take you to your husband.” Father held out his hand.

I ignored his gesture and spoke in a quiet but firm voice. “Father, I want you to know that Vincent is not now and will not ever be my husband. He did not agree to marry me and I did not agree to marry him. When you asked me if I took him as my husband, I said, ‘No, never!’ That is still true. I am not married to him.”

I wanted to say more, but I didn’t. *I will not grovel nor plead, but I must be unequivocally clear.*

“But Susannah, I married you in front of our Lord and several witnesses.”

“Father,” I said again, with strength and determination, “I did not agree to the marriage. I will never, never be Vincent’s wife. I will not live with Vincent. I will not bear Vincent’s children. Never! I do not care what else happens to me.” *Nor do I care what happens to the rest of the family.*

In a low voice Father said, “God forgive me. Lord God, Lord Jesus, please tell me what to do now.”

“I am sorry that we all lost our heads and married you to that monster.” For the first time ever, Mother was standing up for me and apparently succeeding. It came to me in a flash. *She feels as if she’s been raped nightly in her marriage. Now that I’m also a victim, she’s sympathetic.*

Father looked toward the heavens. He shook, turned pale, and then began to breathe heavily. He bowed his head. I imagined he thought he had spoken with God. When he addressed me, it was with kindness and resolve. He had made up his mind.

“Darling girl,” Father said, “Mother and I will leave you here. We’ll tell Mr. Thompson you are injured and will take a while to recover. We’re going home to pray and talk about it. When you feel a little bit better, we’ll decide what will come next for you.”

Thank you, Father, but I’ll decide what will come next for me. Some way, some how, I’ll marry Johnny, read law, and become a lawyer.