

HOUSE OF CLOUDS

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As a lone figure meandered along the path leading into the woods. The sound of receding thunder whispered to her that the storm had dissipated and was moving on. As she approached her destination, the tangle of brush and overhanging vines nearly suffocated what had once been a well-kept garden. And with each step her sadness deepened, clutching at her heart and summoning memories of a childhood blithely spent in the shadow of cataclysmic change to come.

The clearing she sought was recognizable only by a familiar stand of oak trees and the opening of the canopy overhead. She stood still, staring into the knotted overgrowth until she saw the ivy-covered stone. Brushing away dead leaves, she laid a bundle of white lilies on the damp ground at its base. Almost ten years had passed since she had stood over her brother's grave that muggy summer morning in 1861. Laura traced a finger over the letters etched in the stone marker. *Ransom Barrett St. Clair*. She was still stunned, still devastated, that in an instant a life could be snuffed out, a future snatched away. Such hope, such endeavor, was housed in the fragile flesh of fathers, sons, and brothers. So many of Virginia's young men would no longer walk the land, hunt in her woods, or grow old to see their grandchildren thrive.

The Civil War, the War Between the States, the War of Northern Aggression, whatever one's point of view, had stretched its gnarled fingers across the land of her childhood, leaving no household untouched. Four years of fighting had produced nearly one million casualties, three percent of the population. Over six hundred thousand men had died, appallingly many more from disease than in battle. At Gettysburg alone, more than fifty thousand men had been killed or

wounded, or had gone missing during the three-day battle. The statistics were incomprehensible to Laura, even ten years later.

The war had come home to the St. Clair family almost immediately, with the First Battle of Manassas, the bloody fray that abruptly ended illusions of romantic heroism. The battle took place on the hills overlooking Bull Run, in Virginia, and began badly, with the Union forces descending in an attempt to flank the Confederate left. Outnumbered, the men in gray had crumbled at first, but as reinforcements arrived, the South retaliated and forced the Federals to retreat in confusion. Somehow, during this retreat and the capture of Union prisoners, Ransom was killed.

Laura could still recall every detail of that day in late July when her life changed forever. An officer in gray rode up to the St. Clair home on a bay gelding and dismounted in one swift motion. He was fair haired and not a tall man, but wore his yellow sash and braid of the Confederate Cavalry with distinction. He delivered his news in an emotionless tone, perhaps not so much for their sake as for his own. His face gave little away, but Laura could see his hands shaking very slightly. Her mother asked if he was present at the battle himself, and if he had known Ransom. He admitted to being at Manassas but with a regiment on the other side of the field. Regrettably, he had not made her son's acquaintance, but he'd heard from other officers that Ransom had acquitted himself heroically.

Laura had received the news as though standing outside her own body, hearing but not believing. Ransom had seemed an indestructible constant in her life, the brother she could rely on in the worst of times. For days afterward, she moved numbly from room to room in the house, too restless to remain in one place, unable to occupy herself with Bible readings or needlework. That he had been taken in the first major battle of the war made his loss all the more difficult to believe and to bear. The newspapers gave accounts of the battle, but in glorious and triumphant praise. The South had expected a victory, but not at such a high price, and none of the Northern spectators who gathered on the slopes with their picnic baskets had anticipated ten hours of human butchery and a panic-stricken stampede back to Washington.

The details of the dead and dying were left to the women to ascertain as best they could. Many traveled to the field of battle to prowl among the carnage in search of their sons and husbands, while

others kept watch outside post offices, awaiting the casualty lists that were posted on the doors each day.

In the years that followed, Laura read every account she could find and listened to stories from the lips of wounded soldiers and veterans who had somehow survived four years of fighting. She desperately wanted an eyewitness, someone who could tell her exactly how Ransom died, if he had managed to say anything to anyone, if he suffered. Now, long after the collapse of the Confederacy, she had given up hope of ever discovering the circumstances, and she wondered why an explanation mattered so much. The facts would change nothing of the larger truth she lived with, that he was gone, and all she had left were the shifting sands of memory and a future that would never be.

Already, with time, her memories of Ransom had begun to fade and their precious moments together seemed further into the past. Their relationship had withstood all that life had thrown their way, from dark secrets about their parents to a war they both believed in, yet had not understood. Laura often wondered if Ransom had shared her private misgivings about their way of life and the cause that would eventually be vanquished. Would it have made a difference for him? Would he have done as so many other young men did, and simply chosen to fight on the opposite side? Would he still be alive if he had traded honor for victory?

A slight breeze drifted through the clearing, bringing relief from the humidity that weighed upon her almost as heavily as her thoughts. She lingered at the graveside, delaying her return to Charles City. The locals looked upon her with undisguised hatred. To them, she was a traitor to her country and an embarrassment to her family, especially her brother, a hero of the Confederacy. She avoided their angry stares and concealed her hurt over the insults and petty humiliations she had to endure on her daily rides from town to Barrett Hall. For a long while she had not been able to face coming back, but she was no longer afraid or ashamed. She felt sad, appalled by the impoverished homes, and shocked by the wailing bitterness that flowed like a ghost river through the South.

Had the war really changed anything? If not, for what purpose this devastation, for what the sacrifice of so many? Tears stung the corners of Laura's eyes and she dabbed at them lightly. She had walked through cemeteries, along the orderly rows, reading the names aloud. She had

prayed in church for the souls of the dead, and she had begged God to give her answers. But even God had turned His face away from the country. He had no answers to give.

Perhaps it was true what they said, that He was punishing the South for the sin of slavery. Little seemed to have changed. White people still treated their colored neighbors with contempt and resented those who could find paid work. Even living up North where so many former slaves had fled, Laura could see that relations between the races were far from cordial. But at least she felt safe, far removed from the lawlessness and desperation of the South. Sometimes she thought about the modest comforts of her life and felt guilty that she was the one who had survived.

Coming back, standing over her brother's grave, she had made herself remember all she wanted to forget, because that much was owed to those whose blood and bones decayed beneath the earth, whose eyes saw no glory, whose nation was lost to them. *Good-bye, Ransom.*

Laura returned the same way she had come, avoiding the briars and rocks strewn along the path. After a short distance, she stopped and faced what remained of her childhood home, a crumbling red brick chimney. Unlike the slave quarters made of brick and still standing near the fields, the abandoned house had escaped burning by the Yankees, only to be destroyed by locals. Any wood that had not been carried off for fuel had long ago rotted and dissolved into the earth. While these ruins had once been the beautiful house where she was born and raised, Barrett Hall had never really felt like home to her, not like the home she had now.

She had always known that someday she would leave the plantation, as it merely provided shelter and the requisite nourishment for that eventuality. Looking back, she realized all that had really mattered to her were the people in her life. At first, home and family had sustained her. Her father, Edward, whom she adored and idolized; her mother, Rachel, who, although they were never close, had earned Laura's respect for surviving all that had happened to her; Ransom, whom she loved more than life itself; and even her younger sister Meg who, despite everything, Laura knew she would always love. And then there was Martha, the St. Clair cook who had been a slave long before Laura was born and now lived free somewhere. Laura had confided in Martha all her hopes and dreams, not realizing that Martha had her

own dreams to fulfill and, like so many others, bided her time until God and the Yankees set her free. Her daughter, Ruby, would not be so fortunate.

They were all gone now. Like characters in a novel whom she'd grown fond of in the reading, they had been placed on a shelf in her heart to be revisited often. She had begun a new life in a small, unfamiliar town among strangers who knew nothing of her past, nothing of her family, her childhood friends and acquaintances, and nothing about the experiences that had made her the woman she was. She had formed new friendships and created new memories, but though Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, had been her home for ten years, Barrett Hall beckoned from a past that would always remain a part of her. It called to her in her dreams and in the dark of night, when she sought escape from the insistent drumbeat of memory. She had not been ready to answer that call until now.

CHAPTER ONE

*Ten years earlier
November 1860*

Laura St. Clair wrestled with her hoop skirts as she rushed out the front door. Her father's carriage rolled up Barrett Hall's broad entrance road and came to a clattering halt before the house.

"Papa?" she cried, barely waiting for the slaves to still the horses. "Who is President?"

Edward St. Clair stepped down from his place alongside their coachman, John. His face was grim and although he opened his arms in a great bear hug, Laura could see that the news was not auspicious. She sighed deeply as she was enveloped and held close. She was happy to see the parent she loved, but she was upset by the defeated expression he had swiftly concealed and the anxiety that creased his forehead. Her father was a robust, barrel-chested man with ruddy complexion and flowing silver hair matched by an equally flowing mustache of which he was very proud. He walked like a man accustomed to being obeyed, confident in his ability to manage his property and his family. However, this morning his posture sagged a little, hinting at a weariness that was more than physical.

"Who, Papa?" Laura begged once more as he released her.

Before he could answer, Rachel St. Clair stepped onto the porch. "Good morning, Edward. It is good to see you home."

"Rachel." He glanced up at her sadly. "I am afraid it is to be Mr. Lincoln. God help us all."

Laura's mother paled, her hand rising to her throat. Visibly gathering herself, she said, "Come to the dining room, my dear. I've been holding breakfast far too long and can only hope that it has not entirely gone to waste."

She reentered the house with Edward and Laura following behind. Out of the corner of her eye, Laura observed John and another house servant unloading the luggage. From their impassive expressions, it seemed neither man had heard the announcement. Typically when the master arrived home from an extended absence, they were animated, but now it was as though they were mute, unable to hear or understand the news that their world was about to change forever.

In the main hallway, Edward handed his coat, hat, and gloves to Henry, his trusted valet.

Leaning into her father, Laura whispered conspiratorially. “Is it war then, Papa?”

“No one knows what will happen, my dear, but I fear the possibility. Threats are being made every day, but so far nothing has changed.”

“Margaret?” Rachel called up the stairs to Laura’s younger sister. “Margaret, you hurry now, breakfast is on the table and you will get none of it if you are not here in one minute.”

From a distance could be heard the reply, “Coming, Mamma!”

Laura followed her parents into the dining room, where the polished mahogany table was completely laid out with linen, china, silverware, and crystal. As they sat down at their regular places, with Edward St. Clair at the head, she heard the sound of footsteps on the stair and moments later, Meg flounced into the room and sat down hard upon her chair, folding her arms across her chest in the process.

Laura could almost hear her father sigh as they all waited to hear what complaint was in store this morning.

“Margaret St. Clair!” Rachel spoke sternly. “You have not yet welcomed your father home.”

Dutifully, Meg arose and tossed her golden curls from her eyes. Putting on her most sincere smile, she skipped to her father’s side and kissed him affectionately on the cheek. “I’m sorry, Papa. Welcome home. Did you bring me something from Richmond?”

As Rachel watched her younger daughter wheedle and flutter begging eyes, she reflected that Meg had the potential to be every bit as beautiful a young woman as her older sister were it not for the hard, thin-lipped expression carved indelibly upon her face. This suggested a harshness and experience well beyond her years, and a willful nature in sore need of correction. Rachel was confident that with time she could shape Meg into the very woman that she envisioned her to be. She was not so sure about Laura.

“Don’t I always bring you something from my travels?” Edward laughed warmly. “Later, my dear. For now, you must eat and then we shall see what I have brought back from the city.”

Sarah, the serving girl, entered the dining room, placed trays of ham and eggs on the sideboard, then went to fetch the biscuits and gravy. While they awaited her return, Laura begged her father for news of the latest events.

He stroked his mustache thoughtfully. “Well, it’s too soon to tell, but I have been asked to return to Richmond as soon as possible. There are firebrands and compromisers, and all sorts in between in the legislature. Some are for secession, some against. Virginia, like all the other Southern states, must meet to decide what she shall do, if anything.”

“If you must return, then you must.” Rachel paused to command, “Sarah, be careful with that ladle. Don’t rap it against the side of the dish so harshly. It is delicate china and breakable, do you understand me?”

“Yes’m.” Sarah flinched slightly and scurried out of the room.

“Richmond is too close to Washington and quite vulnerable,” Rachel said, returning her attention to the family. “Virginia must surely make preparations to defend herself.”

“Will Ransom be in the fight, Papa?” Meg asked excitedly.

“I would venture to say that all the cadets at West Point will be making up their minds as to which side they will fight on, if there is a fight, little one. Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“So, Papa, we will be staying in town then, won’t we?” Laura was excited. When they resided in Richmond she could visit friends, attend the theatre, and shop in the stores where the newest fashions were available. Best of all, the latest developments would take place there, and her father’s membership in the Virginia legislature meant she would receive her information firsthand.

“Yes, I will definitely be spending all my time there.” Edward sliced a piece of ham with his knife. “You, however, may come and go as you please from Barrett Hall.”

“Someone must remain here to take charge of the fields and the laborers,” Rachel said. “I don’t trust the overseer to attend to our affairs as he ought.”

“Well,” Edward reflected, “as soon as the crops are planted, there won’t be much to do except wait until they are ready to be harvested,

which won't be for some time to come. Richmond is not such a distance that I cannot be here whenever I am needed."

"Oh, Papa," Meg finally piped up, her earlier sulky mood forgotten, "am I to come to Richmond as well? May I, Papa?"

"Yes, my dear. Everyone can come, at least for now. I have missed you all these last weeks and am in no hurry to be away from you again so soon."

"When shall we leave?" Rachel asked.

Edward shrugged. "Within the month."

