

A P R O L O G U E

*In Which I Am Born and Someone
Tries to Murder Me*

The day I came squealing and squalling into the world was the first time someone tried to kill me. I guess it should have been obvious to everyone right then that I wasn't going to have a normal life.

It was the midwife that tried to do me in. Truth be told, it wasn't really her fault. What else is a good Christian woman going to do when a Negro comes flying out from between the legs of the richest white woman in Haller County, Kentucky?

"Is it a girl or boy, Aggie?" When my mother tells the story, this is the point where she pushed herself up on her elbows, giving the midwife's pale, sweaty face some powerful evil eye. And then, depending what kind of mood she's in when she's telling it, my momma either demanded to hold

me, her cooing baby, or she swooned and the villainous midwife gave me over to Auntie Aggie, who cleaned me up and put me into an ivory bassinet until one of the mammies could suckle me.

But if you ask Auntie Aggie, the woman who mostly raised me up, she would say that my mother was thrashing around on the bed, still in quite a bit of pain on account of the whole birthing thing. Aunt Aggie would say that Momma had no idea what the midwife was about, and that the realization of my near demise came much later. She was the one who, when she saw how the midwife was about to put a blanket over my face and declare me stillborn, stepped forward and held out her hands.

“Wasn’t that lady’s fault,” Aunt Aggie said as she told me the story. “Ain’t no white woman going to claim a Negro bastard, and I’m sure it wasn’t the first time the midwife seen it.” Aunt Aggie shook her head sadly, like she was thinking of all the poor little babies that didn’t make it just because they happened to come out the wrong color.

“What happened then?” I asked, because there’s nothing better than the memories of others when you’re little and have no stories of your own.

“Well, I turned right to that midwife and said, ‘I’ll take the girl and get her cleaned up right.’” That’s what Aunt Aggie says she said, and I believe her. If I close my eyes, I can imagine it, my momma’s big bedroom on the east side

of the main house: the windows open to let in the evening breeze and the sounds of crickets and workers singing in the fields, the coppery stink of blood heavy in the humid summer air. The bed linens, no longer crisp and white, a crime punishable by a whipping if the mess had been caused by anyone but Momma. She would never tolerate a stain anywhere, especially not on the bedsheets of her big four-poster. I can see Aunt Aggie there, her voice calm, her dark hands outstretched, her spine straight, her gaze unwavering and stern, an island of calm amid the chaos of house girls running to and fro, bringing the midwife hot water to clean and towels to sop and a cool glass of iced tea because it's hotter than the dickens out.

Yes, I can imagine Aunt Aggie saving me from the clutches of that well-meaning midwife. Aunt Aggie was the one that done raised me up right, despite what Momma says when she gets in one of her fits. Aunt Aggie was more my momma than my real momma, in the end.

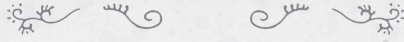
And I suppose I might have grown up better, might have become a proper house girl or even taken Aunt Aggie's place as House Negro. I might have been a good girl if it had been in the cards. But all of that was dashed to hell two days after I was born, when the dead rose up and started to walk on a battlefield in a small town in Pennsylvania called Gettysburg.

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P A R T O N E

The Civilized East



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Dearest Momma,

I hope this letter finds you well. It is coming up on my third anniversary here at Miss Preston's, and although I have not received a letter from you in quite some time, I felt that I would be remiss in letting such an important anniversary pass without acknowledgment. I only hope the fortunes and future of Rose Hill are as bright as my own. Why, I think it is more than fair to say that the teachers treat us as warmly as they would their own children, had they any. I don't think there is a single teacher here at Miss Preston's who isn't completely devoted to our prospects for advancement. . . .

Chapter I

In Which I Am Found Lacking

“All right, ladies. We shall try it again. Scythes up, and on my count. One, two, three—SLASH! One, two, three, SLASH!”

We lift the weapons up into the ready position, adjust our grips, take a breath, and slash them across the space before us in time with Miss Duncan's count. Up, adjust, breathe, cut through an imaginary line of the undead.

Sweat pours down between my bosoms, and my arms ache

from the weight of the scythe. In all of my seventeen years I ain't never been so tired. When Miss Duncan said we'd be doing close-combat training I'd been expecting to work through some drills with the sickles, which everyone in Miss Preston's School of Combat for Negro Girls knows is my best weapon. But instead we work with the twice-damned scythe, which is a two-handed weapon and not at all good for close combat, in my opinion.

"Jane, your grip is faltering," Miss Duncan says, those eagle eyes locking on me. "Raise it up . . . up . . ." Her voice climbs in pitch, as if she could use it to lend strength to my overtaxed arms.

I swallow a groan and raise the scythe a few inches higher. It ain't like my weapon is lower than anyone else's. Miss Duncan must have just heard my dark thoughts. She's punishing me.

My arms tremble as I hold the scythe up in the ready position: vicious curved blade pointing down, body-length handle at an angle across my chest. Miss Duncan waits until I'm about to scream from the holding before she gives me a small nod and turns back to the class.

"Aaaaaaaaand, relax."

The scythes drop and the group of us let out audible gasps of relief. I shake my arms out, one after another, willing the burn to go away. Next to me, Big Sue catches my eye.

"She ain't human," she mutters, talking about Miss

Duncan. I nod. No, Miss Duncan ain't human. Because there ain't no way a normal woman, and a white woman at that, could survive ten years in the Army hunting down shamblers. I can just imagine how that went, the other soldiers falling all over themselves to lay down their jackets every time Miss Duncan needed to cross a puddle. No, I cannot believe a woman could maintain her virtue and serve honorably with the troops out west. So while I do believe Miss Duncan is a fine instructor, I do not believe that she is human. Perhaps she's a revenant, like the creature in Mr. Alexander Westing's latest weekly serial "The Ghost Knocks Thrice." Miss Duncan is pretty enough; I tend to think she would make a fine revenant, possessing the bodies of young women and using them to avenge crimes of passion. Of course, that raises the question as to why Miss Duncan is here at Miss Preston's instead of out seeking her vengeance. Perhaps even revenants need steady employment.

"All right, again. Scythes up."

I lift my weapon, focusing on Miss Duncan and trying to decide if she is indeed a revenant instead of thinking about the deep burning in my poor scrawny arms.

"And, on my count. One, two, three, SLASH!"

As we go through the movements for what has got to be the hundredth time—God's honest truth—I watch Miss Duncan walking carefully around us, just out of range of our one-two-three-slashing. Today her brown hair is pulled into

what my momma would call a messy knot at the back of her head. She wears a prim, high-collared dress of moss-green cotton, perfect for the warm weather we're having. Her skirts are a little higher than a real lady would wear, midcalf just like the rest of us, modesty leggings underneath. The shorter length of the skirts is supposed to let us kick shamblers easy-like and not trip us up if we need to run. I think we'd have to get all scandalous like the working girls down in the city, hems barely brushing our knees with nothing but bare leg beneath, if we wanted to really be able to run comfortably. But that's a whole other conversation.

I slash the scythe across the empty air until my arms feel like overcooked green beans, limp and wobbly. A glance toward the observation pavilion at the edge of the practice ground reveals why we're being worked like rented girls.

A couple of white women in fashionable day dresses stand under the awning of the pavilion, a white wooden structure covered in wisteria erected specifically for the comfort of the fine ladies that sometimes visit Miss Preston's looking to engage an Attendant. An Attendant's job is simple: keep her charge from being killed by the dead, and her virtue from being compromised by potential suitors. It is a task easier said than done.

"Sue," I whisper.

"Yeah?"

"Who're those white ladies?"

She glances over toward the pavilion and grunts. "Don't know. But those dresses are from this season, so they must be somebody important."

"Well, at least now I know why Miss Duncan is determined to make our arms fall off. We ain't seen finery like that around here in a fair while."

Sue grunts again, which this time I take as agreement.

Finally the evening bell rings, and Miss Duncan turns toward the main building.

"That's all for today, ladies. Before you go, I have a treat! Mrs. Spencer has brought lemonade for you, with ice."

On the edge of the green is Mrs. Spencer, a white woman whose farm borders the school. She waves at us, and everyone starts to chatter excitedly about the prospect of lemonade. Miss Duncan ain't finished, though. "I will see most of you later this evening for the lecture at the university. Please make sure you wear your Sunday best for this fine event." Miss Duncan watches as we heft our scythes and head over to the table Mrs. Spencer has set up.

"Hello, girls, hello. There are cookies as well!" Mrs. Spencer grins at us. The Spencers are the nicest white people I've ever met, and at least once a week Mrs. Spencer brings us a treat to enjoy after we're done with our training. Next to her stands a smaller girl with pale skin and a smattering of freckles, her hair in pigtails. I smile at her.

"Hey there, Lily," I say as she hands me a cup of lemonade.

She gives me a tight smile but doesn't say a word. Once upon a time I used to keep an eye on Lily for her brother, but that's our secret.

I drink the lemonade too quickly, sweet and tangy and cold, and watch as Miss Duncan invites a few girls over to talk to the fine ladies. I ain't in the mood to play show pony, so I file into the building with the other girls, heading back to the armory to secure our weapons. Big Sue falls into step next to me.

"You going to that lecture?" Her voice is deep, and she sings a fine baritone in church. She's the tallest of us here, big and dark and imposing, with arms like John Henry. But she's also ace-high at braiding, and my own perfectly straight braids are thanks to her nimble fingers. She's the closest thing to a friend I got here, just all around a nice person, and that's something Aunt Aggie taught me you don't find too often in this world. So even though Big Sue might be a little dense sometimes, she's my friend, and that's that.

"Me, go to that university lecture?" I snort and shake my head. "I ain't about that. What do I care what some trumped-up rich white man thinks about how the dead rose up? He probably ain't never even seen them out there shambling about. You know how it works. He lives his life sheltered away behind the walls of the city while us poor Negroes go out and kill the dead."

"Jane McKeene!"

Katherine (*never* Kate) Deveraux stands before us, blocking the way to the armory, arms crossed over her generous chest. She is one of those girls that makes you question the school's admissions criteria. With her light skin, golden curls, and blue eyes I wonder how it was she ended up in a Negro school in the first place. Katherine is passing light; a body likely wouldn't even know that she was colored unless someone told them. She's the prettiest girl at Miss Preston's, and I figure that's as good a reason as any to hate her.

Not that she ain't good with a weapon. She is a crack shot with a rifle, invaluable in a long-range capacity. But she is also from Virginia, and I ain't had much cause to like Virginians. Partly because most of them are Baptists and Momma ain't too keen on Baptists, being a staunch Presbyterian and all. But mainly it's the way they're so damned self-important, like they'd single-handedly stopped the dead at the Mason-Dixon Line or some nonsense. It is downright ridiculous.

Katherine and I have been butting heads since I showed up at Miss Preston's School of Combat, and not just on account of her being so offensively pretty. She is one of those girls that doesn't know when to mind her own business, and she's a know-it-all that could try the patience of Jesus Christ himself. I ain't a very good Christian, so you know where that leaves me.

"How dare you slander Professor Ghering!" Katherine continues, now that she has my attention. "He is an expert

on all scientific matters pertaining to the deathless. Why, the man even traveled to Europe and Asia researching the undead. What would you know of the realm of academics?”

“First off, they ain’t deathless—they’re dead. That’s it. Just because they happen to run around terrorizing the countryside doesn’t make them anything but the walking corpses they are. Anyone who says otherwise is a fool and wouldn’t know a shambler if it held him down and bit him, including this professor character. Second, I’d be much obliged if you would keep my name out your mouth. The last thing I want is you sullying it with your silliness.” I make to push past her, my scythe still an awkward weight in my hands, but she blocks me once again.

Big Sue frowns down at me and Katherine, her dark brow furrowing. “What’s it matter? If he’s wrong, then he’s wrong. All this arguing is a waste of time, especially since you’re gonna make me late for supper.” She shoulders past Katherine, who puts her hands on her hips and huffs a little.

“Professor Ghering is a brilliant man. Miss Anderson says the papers say he’s going to cure the undead plague! The two of you should attend his lecture. Homespun wisdom can only get you so far.”

I snort. Ever since Baltimore and a handful of the other major cities were certified shambler-free more than a year ago, the government has turned its attention to finding a cure. You ask me, that’s a luxury we ain’t earned yet. I’ve tangled

with enough shamblers to know there ain't no such thing as "shambler-free" while just one of those drooling corpses is still walking about.

But according to the "experts" there haven't been any major attacks within the city limits—or even in the county at large—since before the last Rising Day, and I've heard enough political speeches to know that letting rich white city folk think that we've made even a small part of America safe again is a better stump speech than telling them that we're still in trouble five years after the Army stopped fighting the dead. Especially when the current political party has been in charge that whole time.

But I don't say another word to Katherine, just walk past her into the armory. All the girls at Miss Preston's have their own weapons locker, and I am no exception. I place my scythe into the bracket set into the wall specifically for it. Next to it are my sickles, the blades as curved and sharp as Miss Anderson's tongue. Beside them are my batons, short wooden clubs with a metal spike in the weighted end and a leather thong at the bottom, a last resort in the case of a melee. The crown jewel of my collection is the well-oiled Remington single-action, the close-range gun of choice for Miss Preston's girls. I love that six-shooter. According to the newspapers, the Remington single-action is the gunslinger's pistol of choice, which makes it even more ace.

There is also a rifle near the bottom that's seen better days,

a relic from the War of Northern Aggression and damn near useless. I hate that rifle with a passion, all because it is hands down my worst weapon.

When I come out of the armory, Big Sue and Katherine are gone but Miss Preston's girl, Ruthie, is waiting for me. "Jane! Miss Preston says you need to come and see her right away."

I take a deep breath and let it out, praying to Jesus for patience. Ruthie is just a little thing, with big eyes, dark, velvety skin, and braids that are more fluff than braid. I don't want to take my frustration out on her. Ain't her fault that it's pork chop night and I missed lunch because I was taking remedial etiquette training with Miss Anderson. And the remedial training is probably why Miss Preston wants to see me, anyway, so it ain't like I'm in any hurry to get to the firing line.

"Tell Miss Preston I'll come see her after supper, okay? I'm so hungry I could eat a whole hog."

Ruthie shakes her head and latches her tiny hand on my skirt, pulling me in the direction of Miss Preston's office. "She says you gotta see her now, Jane. So come on. She's already in a fine fit. You ain't gonna want to make her mad."

I reluctantly nod and let Ruthie pull me down the hallway to the main office. The school was once a fancy university, but after the dead rose up, most of the students fled. The building still looks like a school: fine wallpaper, maps of far-off places,

writing slates in most of the rooms. The floor is a pale wood polished to a high gloss, and there are carpets so that you hardly even notice the bloodstains here and there.

During the Great Discord, right after the dead began to walk and before the Army finally got the shambler plague under control, the building was empty. Back then people weren't so much worried about education as they were not having their faces eaten by the undead. But then as the cities were cleared out and recaptured, folks got civilized once again. Shortly thereafter, Congress funded the Negro and Native Reeducation Act and dozens of schools like Miss Preston's were created in cities as large as Baltimore and as small as Trenton.

The minority party in Congress was against the combat schools from the start, saying that Negroes shouldn't be the ones to fight the dead—either because we're too stupid or because it's inhumane. But once the act was passed and the schools were established, there wasn't anything they could do, even if they'd wanted to. The federal government is the law of the land, but it doesn't have much say in how things are truly run within the walls—most cities are small nations unto themselves, with the mayors and their councils in control. And anyway, I don't much mind the schooling. Those congressmen probably ain't seen the dead shambling through the fields for years, going after folks, trying to eat them. But I have. If I can get training on how to keep everyone back

home at Rose Hill Plantation safe, then why shouldn't I?

Ruthie pulls me through the main foyer and down into the left wing of the building, to the big office at the end. I get a whiff of meat frying, the smell most likely coming in through the few open windows. The big summer kitchen is out behind the left wing of the house, and I can already imagine the crisp fried deliciousness of Cook's pork chops, my stomach giving its own noisy approval.

I have half a mind to slip out of Ruthie's little-girl grip and sprint back down toward the dining room, but she's already rapping on Miss Preston's door. A creaky voice calls for us to come in, and Ruthie lets go of my skirt to open the door.

"I brought Jane McKeene, ma'am."

"Thank you, Ruth. You may run along now and get supper."

"Yes'm." Ruthie gives me a pitying look before taking off back down the hall, to a meal that I am beginning to fear I may never get to enjoy.

"Jane McKeene, stop loitering in the doorway like a vagrant and come in."

I straighten and enter the room, closing the door behind me. Miss Preston's office looks like the master's study back at Rose Hill. A massive desk—covered with documents, an inkpot and pen neatly placed in one corner—takes up most of the room. Bookshelves of leather-bound volumes fill the walls with the exception of the one directly next to the door.

That wall is covered with the same set of weaponry as my locker: twin sickles, a Remington single-action revolver, a rifle, a pair of spiked batons. Instead of the scythe there are a pair of Mollies. They're named after Molly Harcraft, the woman who led the defense of Philadelphia after the undead first rose. Only the most elite of Miss Preston's girls get to train with the short swords, no longer than a woman's forearm, and my hands itch to pick them up and test their weight. I've gotten to use the swords twice, and I'm passable with them, though I need a lot more practice.

On a table behind Miss Preston is a beaded buckskin bag that she says was a gift to her family from a Sioux chief. From what I know about folks I think it's more likely one of her ancestors stole it. Rumor is that Miss Preston's people had gone west to the Minnesota Territory before the war but came back when the undead got the better of them. There were whispers that Miss Preston had taken a Sioux lover while out west and that she kept a single eagle feather in his memory, but I don't believe any of that. Seems a little too much like the "True Tales of the West" stories printed every week in the paper. Plus, there ain't a feather to be found on her desk anywhere. I would know; I spend a lot of time in the headmistress's office.

Miss Preston occupies the chair behind the desk while Miss Anderson sits in the chair in front of the desk. My instructor wears her lemon-eating face, so I know this ain't

going to be a pleasant chat.

I inhale deeply and drop down into a curtsy. “Miss Anderson, Miss Preston, good evening.”

“Save the pretty manners, Jane McKeene. You know why you’re here.” Miss Anderson is a widow, and even though her husband died in the War between the States—fighting for the Confederacy, no doubt—she still wears her widow’s weeds. Personally I think all black suits her. With her pale skin, hatchet-sharp nose, and constantly down-turned mouth, I can’t imagine her in any other color.

“Miss Anderson, I’m afraid I am ignorant as to the reason of this visit. Honest Abe,” I add when she opens her mouth to call me a liar. Momma used to tell me, “Deny it until they’ve got you dead to rights, sugar. If they can’t prove it, it never happened.” It’s good advice, and it’s served me well.

Miss Preston clears her throat, distracting Miss Anderson from whatever she is about to say. “You’re here because your progress in your etiquette training is inadequate. In addition, Miss Anderson tells me she found you sneaking in newspapers yet again. As you are already on probation for previous infractions, these latest shenanigans don’t bode well for your continued enrollment here.”

I nod and clench my hands in my skirts. I should have known that Miss Anderson would run to Miss Preston as soon as she found that newspaper under my bed. Most of the girls here can’t read, so sometimes I read out loud to them.

But reading isn't something an Attendant needs to learn, so it's frowned upon. Newspapers and novels are considered unnecessary distractions. From the way Miss Anderson acted about us girls reading, you'd think it was something dangerous.

But the contraband was peanuts compared to my test. I wasn't all that surprised that I'd failed my most recent etiquette examination. Seemed like a bunch of tomfoolery to me. Who could care what spoon was used for what or the proper address for a European noble? Still, I thought I might've had a bit of respite before I was going to be marched into Miss Preston's office. I was already on academic probation on account of not caring enough about the importance of gravy boats. Now it looks like I'm about to get the boot.

And then where would I go? I don't even know if Rose Hill still stands. I haven't gotten a letter from my momma in nearly a year, though I still write faithfully. And Rose Hill and Miss Preston's are the only two homes I have ever known.

I take a deep breath and let it out. "Miss Preston, I've been trying. You have to believe me when I say that I've been working my fingers to the bone trying to get better at drawing place settings. Why, I went through an entire box of chalk just last week." I actually went through the chalk because a few of us girls were drawing unflattering pictures of Miss Anderson on our slates, but that is beside the point. "I daresay my efforts have been derailed not because of my

“Sit,” she commands, and I fall gracelessly into the chair Miss Anderson just vacated. Miss Preston lowers herself back into her own chair, her lips tight with dismay.

“Your sardonic nature has worn through Miss Anderson’s tolerance, Jane. I spoke to a few of the other girls about their most recent examination, and I fear you are correct in your estimation of Miss Anderson’s faithlessness. The questions she submitted for you were far more difficult than those of your peers.”

I school my face to blankness, but, inside, my emotions are raging like a creek after a spring storm. The truth and I ain’t very close—uneasy acquaintances at best—so imagine my shock to discover that Miss Anderson really did go harder on me than the others. When I’d said all that nonsense about perfidy, I’d been telling a yarn, hoping that I could distract everyone from my questionable manners. But to know that Miss Anderson has been intentionally sabotaging me . . .

Well, that ain’t such a good feeling at all.

“Jane, I know that etiquette isn’t your strongest area. Many of you girls have trouble with it, which is why we wait until your last year here to introduce it. But providing the ladies of the better families with well-heeled and well-trained girls is central to our goal here. You’re a bright girl, and so I’m going to be frank with you. There isn’t the same demand for Attendants as there used to be. With the cities being declared free of undead, people are beginning to feel there isn’t much of a

practical requirement any longer. An Attendant is becoming more a luxury, a mark of social standing. An ornament. Something to demonstrate one's wealth, at dances and dinner parties. Not a life-and-death necessity. And in this context, etiquette and fashion are more important than ever." She leans back and takes a deep breath. "I care deeply for you girls. Truly, I do. I want you all to find good homes, to get the right start in this brave new America. And that means training you properly to be a part of it. So while you might feel that finishing classes are a waste of your time, I assure you that your lack of proficiency places you in very real danger of expulsion from this academy."

A lump blocks my throat, and I swallow it down right hard. I ain't going to cry, but it's a near thing. Because failing out of Miss Preston's means going to one of the other Negro combat schools, and none of them are half as good as Miss Preston's. Not only that, but I probably won't be there long before I'm sent to work a patrol. Only fancy schools like Miss Preston's are longer than a year, and I've heard tell of schools that ain't more than six months. Six months! That ain't enough time to learn to kill the dead proper-like. Half the Negroes from those programs end up a shambler their first month on the job.

I have no interest in working as a show pony for some coddled white lady, but an Attendant Certificate from Miss Preston's means I can go wherever I want. It means I can

make my own way in the world. And even though I want nothing more than to go back to Rose Hill and the life I left, I need to have options if Rose Hill no longer exists. As much as I'd like to quit Miss Preston's and make a dash for home, I'm a smart girl, and running across the country half-cocked is definitely not my style.

I need that diploma.

The headmistress continues. "All of that having been said, you have some of the highest competency scores in the combat modalities. So I'm going to reassign your etiquette instruction to Miss Duncan, since she has some free time in her schedule. As for this most recent failure . . . I think it would behoove you to attend the lecture at the university tonight with Miss Duncan's group. Get some real-world experience as to how a Miss Preston's girl conducts herself."

I squirm a bit in the chair, because there ain't no way listening to some old white man drone on for the better part of the evening was in my plans. "Miss Preston, by 'behoove' did you mean—"

"I meant that you had best get some supper and wash up. The carriages leave after dinner. And if you aren't on one of them, you can consider your enrollment to be terminated."

I give Miss Preston a tight smile and stand. "Yes'm. That's what I thought you meant." I drop into a quick curtsy before leaving.

I head down to the dining room, though my appetite is

gone. Even the golden stack of pork chops on my plate can't erase the sick feeling in my middle.

I need to start taking my studies here seriously or I'm going to be out on the street, a vagrant for real.

That just ain't happening.

One of the tenets of our instruction here at Miss Preston's is to attain enrichment beyond the schoolhouse walls, an endeavor that often takes us into nearby Baltimore. I daresay I have learned almost as much in the streets of the city as I have in the classroom and on the practice field.

Chapter 2
In Which I Look the Fool

Half past five finds me running down the main corridor, hastily tying my bonnet. After a hurried dinner and a swift face-washing there was just enough time to change into the only nice dress I have before the carriage came. At least that's what I thought, until Big Sue saw me in the dormitory.

"Aren't you going to that lecture thing?"

"I am," I said. I was trying to get my hair to do this front frizz thing that I saw in a fashion magazine I pinched from

Miss Anderson. But my stubborn curls kept going up instead of down, and I was cursing the good Lord above for giving me hair that would've been better suited to sheep.

"Shouldn't you be out there waiting on the carriage? It's leaving at half past."

I stopped my fiddling and turned to Big Sue. "Miss Preston told me the lecture was after dinner."

"The lecture is at six, but the carriage is leaving at half past five. Haven't you been paying attention? Miss Anderson and Miss Duncan've been talking about it all week."

So that is how I end up running a full sprint through the school, sliding to a stop in the front yard just as Miss Duncan is closing the armored carriage door.

"Jane, how nice of you to join us. Come, you can ride along in the other carriage with Katherine and me. I'm going to head inside and see if we have any other stragglers." Miss Duncan wears a fashionable riding ensemble, her hair curled and her creases knife sharp even in the humidity. I am now more conscious of my disastrous hair and ugly blue-flower dress.

I climb into the cab while Miss Duncan goes back into the school. Katherine sits inside, fiddling with a pair of the whitest gloves I've ever seen. She doesn't say anything as I sit in the seat opposite, and that suits me just fine. I ain't got nothing to say to her, anyway.

The pony is a newer model. It's sort of like a train but

without tracks, and the driver sits in his own protected car up front with the stove that heats the steam engine. The passenger compartment is made of steel, with bars over what would be glass windows in the wintertime. The glass has been removed on account of the heat, and although it is still powerful hot out, the beginnings of a breeze makes its lazy way through the compartment, providing a bit of relief.

I lean back in the wooden seat and try to relax. I don't much care for the ponies; the noise they make, all that clanking and wheezing, tends to attract the dead. But it's a long way through forested hills to get to Baltimore, and we'll be returning after the sun goes down. Trying to travel by foot at night is a death sentence. It's amazing how quickly the dead can creep up on you in the dark.

In the old days, carriages were pulled by horses, and that's why we call them ponies now. Horses were big, stinky beasts that snorted steam and had eyes of fire. At least, that's what Lloyd, the older boy that used to cobble shoes back at Rose Hill, told me they looked like. I ain't never seen a horse. The dead are hungry, and the thing they're hungry for is flesh. Most horses met a sad fate at the hands of the shamblers back in the early days, eaten by the very same people who'd once cared for them. Momma said that's why you had to be wary. "Janie, you mark my words, you be careful who you trust. You never know when the man you married is going to turn around and try to take a nibble out of your neck."

That actually happened to Momma when her husband, Major McKeene, returned from the War between the States, which inevitably turned into a war against the dead. Of course, I ain't ever planning on getting married, much less to a war hero that got changed to one of those restless dead, but you never really knew what was in store for you. I'm sure nobody ever expected the dead to get up in the middle of a pitched battle and start eating people, which is what they did at the Battle of Little Round Top. And no one expected those dead boys to bite their buddies and turn them as well. But that's the way life goes most of the time: the thing you least count on comes along and ruins everything else you got planned. I figure it's much better to just be all-around prepared, since the best defense is a good offense.

That's why I'm smuggling my six-shooter under my skirts. We ain't supposed to carry firearms when traveling into town, but I'm always ready for someone to try and take a bite out of me. Especially at the university. Everyone knows that academics are the most ruthless cutthroats around.

What I ain't prepared for is the look that Katherine gives me from the other side of the carriage. My dress ain't all that nice compared to hers. She is tucked into a pretty blue frock with a big flounce in the back. It's not a bustle, on account of the fact that Miss Preston finds them hideous and banned them from the school, but the cut of the gown makes it look like she's wearing one. It's a lovely dress, especially with the

way the corset cinches her waist to nearly nothing.

I fiddle with the curly mass of my bangs and slouch down, feeling like the plainest girl ever next to the fashion plate that is Katherine Deveraux. If I didn't hate her before, I am absolutely positive I despise her now.

"What happened to your hair?" Katherine asks, breaking the not-so-companionable silence. My face heats as she stares at it, her light eyes taking in every flaw and faux pas. I try to sit up a little straighter, but that just causes the bodice of my dress to strain against my rib cage. Katherine's eyes narrow. "And why aren't you wearing your modesty corset?"

I take a deep breath and muster up all my bravado. I am not going to let spoiled Katherine Deveraux get the better of me. "Why, Kate, don't you know? This is the way the ladies are wearing their hair these days. It's called the Fritzi Fall. Very popular in New York City, and no one would be caught without a bit of frizz in Paris."

Katherine grits her teeth. "Katherine. Not Kate. I'll thank you to use my given name."

I swallow a smile and shift, settling back against the seat. "As for a corset, well, every woman knows that wearing one of those things is pretty much suicide if you want to be able to fight effectively. A punctured lung if a stay goes awry, lost flexibility . . . I mean, how are you going to be able to do a reverse torso kick if you can't even breathe?"

That wasn't so much a lie as a half-truth. I had no idea what

most women did outside the confines of Miss Preston's. We didn't wear true corsets. Instead, we bound our breasts with a fitted undersmock called a modesty corset. It was supposed to mimic the support of a corset without yielding too much in the way of flexibility. But wearing the thing is blazes hot in the summer, so I spend most days forgetting mine. I can perform our daily drills better without it on, improper or not. It's not like the Lord saw fit to endow me with huge bosoms like he did Katherine. Plus, I like being able to breathe when I want.

"Jane McKeene, only you would think that we'd run into any shamblers in the heart of Baltimore—" Katherine stops short and studies me with a narrow-eyed gaze, her eyes settling back on my head. "Is that my bonnet? The one I lost last month?"

"Kate, the day I go around pinching your scrap bonnets is the day I dance a jig naked in the dining room. No, this ain't your bonnet."

That is a bald-faced lie. It is most definitely her bonnet. I nicked it from her during our school picnic last month out of nothing but pure pettiness. But I ain't about to give it back to her right now, not with my hair acting the way it is. This bonnet is the only thing keeping me from looking like a startled chicken.

Katherine purses her lips in a perfect imitation of Miss Anderson's lemon-eating face, but she doesn't say anything

else, and that's when Miss Duncan climbs in with a smile. "Well, it looks like we are ready." She rings the bell in the carriage, and the thing lurches forward like it's drunk on rot-gut. We settle back into our seats and begin the slow trek to the university.

While Miss Preston's is housed in an old university, it ain't the same university as where we're going. I don't know how many universities there were before the dead walked, but there must have been a few. The one we're headed to is the kind where doctors learn to cut people open. I guess back in the day, when the dead first rose up, all of those future surgeons were pretty quick to figure out that cutting off the head of a shambler was the way to keep them from rising yet again. Either way, most of the students in that university survived, while the one where we go to school became a bit of a slaughterhouse. Most of those fancy folks were studying philosophy and such, and from what I can tell they made fine shambler chow.

That was lucky for us, I guess. Not many girls get to go to school in such a nice building. A lot of the Negro girls' combat schools are in old plantation houses, while the boys' combat schools are in abandoned military barracks. I heard that in Indian Territory they tried to send Natives from the Five Civilized Tribes to combat schools, but they quickly figured out what was what and all ran off. The Army was too busy fighting the dead to chase them, so the government gave

up and just focused on us Negroes.

I guess that's another thing Miss Preston's has going for it. No one runs off, because we have nowhere to go, and we have very nice accommodations, bloodstains notwithstanding.

While we travel, Katherine and Miss Duncan chatter on about the professor's theories on why the dead rise and what-not. I ignore them and stare out through the bars, watching the forest roll past. The trees have been cut along the road, felled and burned. That's to give travelers a fighting chance out here on the byways. The dead ain't like bandits. They ain't going to come jumping out of the underbrush. Instead, they'll come lumbering out of the woods like drunken farmhands. That ten or twenty feet of clear-cut land on either side of the road gives travelers enough warning to shake a leg or make a stand. Here in the great state of Maryland that usually means making a stand, since it ain't no picnic running up and down them hills.

The rate of survival when a mob of dead set in on a settlement ain't good, according to the headline I saw in the paper. But Maryland has been declared one of the safest states, on account of our work patrols and the very active militia, with Washington, DC, being nearby. I've heard in places like Pennsylvania it's a lot harder to get around, except for in the winter, when the dead lie down and become dormant. That's why great former cities in states like Georgia are pretty much ghost towns these days. It's always shambler

season in Dixie. General Sherman's March to the Sea, where he and his men marched across the South, burning and putting down the dead, wasn't much more than a temporary setback for the shamblers. The waves of dead are like dandelions. Just when you think you've beaten the weed, it pops up somewhere new. The Lost States of the South are called that for a reason.

We move along the road, the engine chugging and wheezing up the hills, the carriage rocking back and forth. Outside, near the wood line, there's movement.

"Shambler," I say, interrupting Katherine and Miss Duncan's conversation.

"Where?" Katherine leans forward to see out the window.

I point past the bars, to where a little white girl with blond pigtails stands on the side of the road. She wears a flowered dress with a pinafore and her mouth gapes, a toothless black hole. The ponies are too loud for us to hear her raspy moans, but as we pass she jogs after us a bit, her yellow eyes locked on mine.

We're quickly past the shambler, and Katherine sits back in her seat. Miss Duncan frowns. "I'll let the patrolmen know when we get into town. Rare to see shamblers this close to the city. I do hope the Edgars made it home safely."

"The Edgars?" I ask.

"The women who observed your training earlier today. Grace and Patience Edgar and their mother, Wilhelmina

Edgar. They're newly arrived from the Charleston Compound and were interested in engaging a couple of Attendants."

"Yes, Mrs. Edgar said they've seen a few undead around their property of late," Katherine interjects. "I imagine they're likely being spooked by a couple of shadows, but if it finds them looking for a few girls from Miss Preston's, I'm certainly not going to tell them otherwise."

I roll my eyes. She's obviously showing off for Miss Duncan. Of course Little Miss Perfect stayed to talk to the fine ladies. She's practically the image of the Attendants they're always advertising in the paper, the Negro girl holding short swords and smiling prettily: LADIES! DON'T GO IT ALONE! KEEP YOUR SELF SAFE WITH A MISS PRESTON'S GIRL!

"Mrs. Edgar told me the same thing." Miss Duncan looks back down the road, her lips pursed in thought.

"But she can't be right, can she?" Katherine asks. "Mayor Carr has declared Baltimore County safe for months now."

I turn my head around. "The Survivalists would have you believe they saved Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Boston single-handedly if you listen to them long enough. It's all that 'America will be safe again' nonsense—"

"Please, Jane, how many times must I tell you, there will be no talk of politics," Miss Duncan admonishes gently. "That is entirely too coarse a subject for young ladies to discuss, even ladies of color."

I sit back and cross my arms, biting my tongue on the

hundred things I want to say in response. As Miss Duncan and Katherine resume their conversation, I reach into my shirt and touch my penny. It's a luck charm Auntie Aggie gave to me before I left Rose Hill, and it hangs on a string between my bosoms. It's warm at the moment, as it usually is; but there's a small bit of magic in it, and when it goes cold, I know I'm in danger. I flick at the penny and eye the other two women in the carriage before I go back to staring out of the window.

I know you probably worry about the number of undead out here in the East, but Baltimore County is the safest in all the country. They say so in the newspaper, and you know the paper would never lie.

Chapter 3
In Which I Relate My First Encounter
with a Shambler

When I was little, back at Rose Hill, I used to sneak out of the kitchen, away from Auntie Aggie while she and the other aunts worked to feed all of the hungry mouths on the plantation. Once they were distracted I'd tiptoe out past the ovens and slip away to freedom in the fields.

Rose Hill mostly grew tobacco, which Momma and a couple of the bigger field hands would ride into town to trade for cloth and other essentials. Early on, back before I can

remember, Momma had tried growing tomatoes and other vegetables; when it became obvious that her small bundle of tobacco was worth more than all the food combined, she switched. Momma is savvy like that. The dead may have risen and we might have been living in the end times of Revelation, but folks still wanted their tobacco.

The tobacco plants grew tall, and the leaves were broad and green. In the summer I could duck down and run through the rows undetected, which is what I did on this particular day. My goal was always the same: find the other kids, the ones that got to run the fields because their mommas weren't ladies who owned the plantation. The kids I liked best would be near the barrier fence at the far side of the tobacco fields, so I made a beeline for that patch of trouble.

A barrier fence is the line of security between shamblers and the rest of us, and Rose Hill had three such fences: white-painted fence rails that had been our original property line and weren't more than pretty decoration, a dense forest of wooden poles with sharpened ends implanted in the ground at an angle that worked like stakes to impale any shambler enterprising enough to get to it, and, at the outer edge, a wall of five-strand bobbed wire that was our primary defense against the dead.

Once or twice a day the stronger men would go out to the bobbed wire and end any shamblers tangled up in it. Momma would have them bring the corpses in and burn them for

the compost pile. If there were any valuables on the bodies, Momma and a couple of the men would sell them in town, bringing back something fine. One time there was a shambler that musta been a fine lady, since she was decked out in gold and jewels. Momma used the baubles to buy several hogs, and that was how Rose Hill came to have pork chops every Sunday after the Scripture was read.

But I didn't much care for that business. I was more interested in the children who hung out playing games in between the fences. I scrambled over the white split rail fence and carefully picked my way past the sharpened stakes of the interior fence. And there, between the safety of Rose Hill and the danger of the outside world, were the plantation kids.

Everyone on the plantation but Momma was a Negro, all excepting for Mr. Isaac. There had been other white men, once upon a time, but after the dead rose they'd either ran off or turned shambler. Mr. Isaac was different; he came to Rose Hill after the war. He lived on the plantation because he was married to Auntie Evelyn and relations between Negroes and whites were frowned upon. Momma didn't much care for, as she called it, "the spiteful leanings of biddies with too much time on their hands," and welcomed folks into the house staff as long as they didn't make too much trouble and were happy to work hard. So Mr. Isaac and Auntie Evelyn lived on Rose Hill with a passel of boys, the worst of which were the twins.

Auntie Aggie said twins were an ill omen, and anyone

who knew the Isaac twins would agree. The boys were light-skinned, lighter than me, sandy-hued with unnervingly blue eyes. They always had a scam running, like the time they'd stolen a watermelon from the garden and climbed up a tree to share it, or the time they'd let loose all the dogs as a distraction so they could run off to fish in the creek on the north side of Rose Hill.

The Isaac twins were always up to no good.

They were my favorite people in the whole damn world.

"Hey there, Jane!" called Ezekiel, Zeke for short.

"Aww, Jane's here, now we're gonna get the strap for sure," said his brother Joseph, who was saltier than Lot's wife.

"I snuck off!" I said, as the other kids began to give me dirty looks. "Ain't no one know I'm gone. What're you doing?"

Each of the kids held a stick, the end sharpened, and had the look of someone with a secret.

"None of your business. Go back to the kitchens," Joe said, picking up a rock from the dusty ground and throwing it at me.

The rock missed by a mile, but the one I picked up and flipped back at Joe didn't. It hit him right in the middle of his forehead, and as he cried out I picked up another rock.

"Next person throws a rock at me is getting what for right in their eye," I said, shaking with anger.

"No one's going to throw any rocks, Jane. You should come with us. We're going to kill the dead." Zeke smiled wide and

handed me a sharpened stick. While Joseph was prickly and hostile, Zeke was all smiles and warmth, the kind of person people liked to be around. And he had the best ideas. It was no wonder Joe was so tetchy. Who would want to share such a wonderful brother with everyone?

I took the stick. "What do you mean, kill the dead?"

"There's a shambler stuck in the bobbed wire. We're going to kill it."

"That ain't a good idea." As soon as the words were out of my mouth I knew it was the wrong thing to say. But I couldn't help it. I liked trouble as much as the next kid, but this seemed different. Dangerous.

"We're gonna kill it so that we can go on patrols with the rest of the grown-ups," Zeke said with a grin. "No more chores for us!"

"You can stay here, Jane. No one wants you tagging along, anyway," Joe said.

I set my jaw. Whatever Joe said, I was going to do the opposite, just to spite him. "I'm coming. You probably ain't found a shambler, anyhow."

"Oh, it's a shambler all right," Zeke said. "You'll see."

We marched in silence, along the line of the fence rails. A few of the kids began to whisper excitedly, but a single glance back from Joe shut them up real quick. My stomach surged and gurgled, roiling with hot dread. I'd heard Momma and the other farm hands talk about how the dead worked, how

they came out of the brush, overwhelming the unwary and wary alike. That was what made shamblers so scary: even when they were predictable, they could still surprise you.

As we rounded the corner a loud moan split the air. There, twisted up in the bobbed wire, was a shambler.

We stopped, and all the celebration and shouting died down real quick. I'd always imagined the dead as some kind of monster: mouth gaping as they came to eat you. But the shambler caught in the bobbed wire looked almost normal: a white woman with long brown hair pinned up on her head, wearing a day dress of green linen. The skirt was torn, and her petticoats showed through. Her eyes were the yellow of crookneck squash, and the nails of her grasping hands had been broken down, her fingers covered with dirt. Still, I recognized her.

"That's Miss Farmer. Her family owns Apple Hill Plantation," I said. Miss Farmer hadn't cared for me—she thought Negroes shouldn't be allowed in the house, since we were dirty—but she loved Momma's blackberry jam enough that she came to call every so often, when it was safe to travel.

"She ain't nobody no more," Joe said, poking her with a stick.

The shambler growled and reached for him. Joe danced out of the way, much to the delight of everyone.

Even me.

I ain't sure why we thought poking the shambler with our

sharpened sticks was a good idea, but everyone started doing it, creeping in close enough to stab the creature and then dancing out of the way before her hands could reach us. The game might have gone on longer if the dead Miss Farmer hadn't managed to pull herself free.

Bobbed wire ain't a long-term fix for a shambler wanting in to the plantation. Since they don't have any kind of survival instinct it's no big deal for them to eventually pull themselves free of such an entanglement, ripping off great big swatches of themselves to do so. And this is exactly what the undead Miss Farmer did. One moment she was jammed up in the bobbed wire, the next she was stumbling toward us, half her dress and a good bit of arm skin left behind on the fence, which now listed to one side.

Most of the kids, myself included, screamed and ran. I took off for the field of sharpened sticks, knowing that would slow the undead woman down. But when I looked over my shoulder I realized that not everyone was with us.

Joe was standing right where he'd been, not moving, frozen in the path of the dead woman and her gaping maw. The boy had always been a bully, and the thing about bullies is they never learn how to run like the rest of us do. So Joe stood his ground, sharpened stick at the ready, convinced he was going to kill that shambler.

At some point in the woman's lunge toward Joe he realized that a stick wasn't much of a weapon against the dead,

but it was too late. Joe was about to be shambler chow.

If it hadn't been for Zeke.

It was Zeke that slammed into Joe, pushing him out of the way of the woman. It was Zeke the woman bit, sinking her teeth deep into his throat. It was Zeke that cried out like a wounded animal, trying for a few precious moments to push the much heavier woman off him as she tore away a great chunk of flesh. And it was Zeke that let out one soft, anguished cry as his life bled out into the dirt of Rose Hill, the sound almost indistinguishable over the noise of the dead Miss Farmer feeding.

"Joe!" I yelled, and the boy looked at me, expression distant and caught somewhere between grief and horror. I ran back to where he'd landed, pulled him to his feet, and dragged him by the hand through the field of sharpened sticks, to the safety of Rose Hill.

As we ran back we passed the patrol coming to put down the dead. I didn't stay to watch; I'd seen enough carnage for one day. They say when they got there Miss Farmer had started on Zeke's face, and that two of the men vomited before they even got to putting her down and driving a nail into Zeke's head so he wouldn't come back.

Momma gave Zeke a proper burning, and gave Mr. Isaac and Auntie Evelyn his ashes. Joe ran off a few years later, presumably to one of the combat schools, and so their heart-break was complete, Auntie Aggie clucking her tongue and

saying, "Told you them twins was an ill omen."

It took me a long time before I left the safety of the main house, and I never ventured to the borders of Rose Hill again, not until I came to Miss Preston's years later. I learned two valuable lessons that day.

One: the dead will take everything you love. You have to end them before they can end you. That's exactly what I aim to do.

And two: the person poking the dead ain't always the one paying for it. In fact, most times, it's the ones minding their own business who suffer.

That's a problem I still don't have an answer for yet.