

Historical fiction of
southern town during
the Civil War.

BUTTERNUT TEARS

by Arlene Angwin

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Arlene Angwin

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Second Edition

Chapter 1 – War!

May 20, 1861

“It’s here, it’s here!” Clara heard Jimmy’s shout, followed by a solid thud as he slammed the front door. Rapid footsteps tattooed up the stairs. She rushed to intercept him, dropping *Ivanhoe* in her haste, and pressed a warning finger to her lips.

Jimmy slapped a hand over his mouth, his eyes round with excitement. “Sorry, I forgot,” he murmured. Then with an exaggerated whisper he said, “Ellis turned the president down. North Carolina seceded. It’s war!”

Clara pushed past her brother, flying down the stairs he’d so recently ascended. *CAN’T be, CAN’T be*, thumped her heart as she dashed through the door.

She paused on the veranda, her eyes sweeping up and down the street, watching the news spreading from house to house like a raging prairie fire before a hot wind. Shaking hands gripped the railing before her as her mind struggled to sort out the swirling confusion about her. *CAN’T be, CAN’T be*, the litany continued.

“They say it’ll be over ’fore Christmas.” The forgotten Jimmy groaned beside her. “I hope not. I wanna get me some Yanks!”

Clara whirled to face her 12-year-old brother, busy slicing the air with an imaginary sword. Her flashing eyes halted his exuberance in mid-slice.

“War,” she hissed. “You have *no* idea what you’re wishing, Jimmy. No idea.”

His blue eyes widened at his usually mild-mannered sister's vehemence. He lowered his hand. Clara continued, "Get a hold of yourself, young man. We mustn't upset Mother."

"I'm sorry. I forgot 'bout Mother." Jimmy dipped his head in genuine repentance, but mere seconds passed as elation popped it up again. He cleared the veranda steps in one leap. "I'm going to Peter's. Maybe he's heard from his pa."

Clara's shoulders sagged as she turned back to the house. With the silent tread of the doomed, she passed through the door and mounted the stairs, step by eternal step, while her skirts swept over carpets as worn as her own heart.

The papers were right, she thought. They've been warning us for years that war would come. Men have been drilling in the streets since Ft. Sumter fell. She shuddered. How do I tell Mother? Mother took no news well — especially bad.

With one final, burdened step, Clara reached the upper landing. There lay the discarded *Ivanhoe*. Sir Walter Scott's tale was capturing every southern reader she knew. She picked up the book and moved to the first door on the left. It loomed before her like a sealed tomb. Mother's door.

Clara lifted a hand to deliver her usual gentle rap ... and paused. Thunderous silence reached out, enveloping her in its suffocating stillness. Her hand lowered on its own. She turned to continue her reluctant trek.

Another door, closed and silent, demanded her attention. The attic. The first and last time she'd ever passed through this door was when she was 9, after her papa left. Clara hesitated.

An unseen force seemed to lift her hand to the heavy knob and turn it. Unwilling steps took Clara up the narrow risers until she emerged into the musty room. Apathetic sunlight quarreled with the darkness. She allowed her eyes to adjust to the dimness. There, before her, lay her family's history, scattered here and there in careless abandon.

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She noticed a crudely fashioned rocking horse standing, abandoned, by a wall. “Oh my,” she gasped. *Not near as fine as Peter’s store-bought one, but so much more precious.* Clara bunched up her skirts to avoid disturbing the dust’s long slumber as she moved toward it.

Passing a reverent hand over its neck, Clara remembered how much the workmanship cost the carver. She slid the mane and tail through her fingers. *Even used Ol’ Buck’s real hair.*

Papa’s face floated up from the pool of distant memories. She remembered pain-filled eyes and set jaw. *He was so determined to leave something for Jimmy.*

A tear sprang to Clara’s eye as she turned away. Two floor-to-ceiling armoires stood, like austere sentries, against the opposite wall. Wrenched between dread and curiosity, she rested a hesitant hand on one knob before pulling.

“Oh my,” she gasped again as a brilliant array of fine silks and satins overflowed its interior. She fingered their velvety softness. *Mother’s gowns.*

A horseman clattered by, shouting, “To arms, to arms!” Clara shivered. She recalled Jimmy’s breathless announcement. *And nobody, not even Aunt Sally, remembered today is my 16th birthday. War’s already begun its thievery.*

She closed the door, shutting the beauty of bygone days from view. *All forsaken and forgotten,* she choked. *Just like me.*

She opened the second armoire ... and stared at her own reflection. She leaned in to peer into the mirror, scrutinizing her face. Worry pinched her pale cheeks and drew down the corners of her full lips.

Next, Clara studied her eyes. *Papa’s eyes,* she thought, *staring deep into the sable brown orbs. He always made a fuss about my having his eyes – and Mother’s hair. My Carolina Clarabelle he called me.* A rueful smile touched her lips.

'Twould be rather romantic, except it's because my hair's the color of our Carolina dirt.

She pulled her eyes away from her image, noting the contents of the closet for the first time. Papa's weapons and uniforms, standing at stiff attention, in readiness for the departed soldier. Tension gripped her as past and present collided.

WAR. How, oh, how do I tell Mother?

She dropped her weighted body into a nearby rocker, overwhelmed by Jimmy's big news, and ran her hands along its arms. *Grandmother's rocker*, Clara mused. *She rocked all her babies and grandbabies in it. Even Papa.*

Clara leaned back and closed her eyes. *Papa! How different life would be had he lived.* She groaned. *I need him so much.*

She fisted a hand against trembling lips, to halt the sobs gathering in her parched throat, and blinked back hot tears. Her watery glance fell on a small, black book lying on a table next to the rocker. Ever the reader, Clara reached for it, dusting it off with her handkerchief.

"Holy Bible," she read, tracing the two words, embossed in gold lettering, with a forefinger. She cracked open the front cover and read the flyleaf. *To our beloved son, George Maxwell 1845,* written in Grandma's fine hand. Now the tears spilled down her cheeks.

Papa's Bible. What a find! Clara jumped out of Grandma's rocker and started for the steps. *I can't wait to share this with Mother.*

Reason slammed into her, dousing her excitement. *No.* She shook her head and returned to the chair. *Not now. It'll only remind Mother of her loss.*

Clara opened her new-found treasure at random. Verses in Isaiah 43, underlined with a blunt pencil, caught her attention. "Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I

will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the LORD thy God.”

Clara noticed writing in the margin. She tipped the book toward the dingy window. *Aug. 19, 1847, At Churubusco.* She knitted her brows. *Churubusco. Why does that sound so familiar?*

“Oh, my,” she gasped a third time. “Papa marked these verses the day before he got wounded in Mexico.”

In that moment Clara knew her father had faced and conquered fear through this book. He’d carried it in the face of war, seeking comfort and strength through its pages.

“Papa,” she implored, clasping his Bible with both hands. “Help me and Jimmy ... and ... Mother get through this frightful time. Help me be as brave in war as you were. I want to make you proud.”

She tucked the book in her apron pocket with newfound resolve, gave it a firm pat and rose from her grandmother’s chair. Her lightened heart matched her quick, quiet steps as she left the garret. She emerged briefly into the spacious hallway before going into her own room.

She withdrew the Bible and set it on her nightstand with gentle hands. “I don’t know what our future holds, Papa, but somehow we’ll be alright.” A tender smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “I just know it.”

Chapter 2 – Mother

Sunday, July 28, 1861

Clara hummed as she bustled about the kitchen; her hands busy preparing Mother's afternoon tea. She straightened up and glanced out the window. The street percolated with a mass of hoop skirts and parasols held high over the well-coiffed heads of Salisbury's finest ladies, whose dainty, gloved hands rested on the arms of impeccably dressed escorts.

Church bells pealed. Dogs barked. Boys shouted to friends, weaving in and out of the satiny, pastel hued skirts.

The South's brave young soldiers had met the Yankee aggressors at a small place called Manassas Junction. Northern congressmen, confident of a rout, had brought their families, along with picnic lunches, to watch the conflict. The confederates sent them scampering back to Washington D.C. amid the chaos of upturned carriages, bombs and bayonet charges.

Clara swallowed her happy tune, picked up the tea tray, and went upstairs.

"Come in." Mother's faded voice filtered through the tightly closed door in response to Clara's knock. She balanced a tray with one hand and turned the knob. Hot, stale air assaulted her nostrils as she entered, its mustiness tasted of old cotton on her lips.

Mrs. Maxwell stood like a marble pillar, swathed from throat to toes in black. One alabaster hand had drawn a heavy drape to one side. She stared through the sealed window to the joyous hubbub below.

The other windows and drapes remained tight-lipped against the outside world. *How can she bear this stifling heat?* Clara wondered as she set the tray next to her mother's wine-hued Victorian chaise. She turned to leave. One did not linger in Mother's room.

"Stay." Mrs. Maxwell's muted voice shattered the stillness. Clara's feet froze on the faded flowered carpet. Nervous fingers twisted her turquoise ring, finding strength in its slender hardness. She waited.

Her eyes wandered over her mother's quarters as the silence lengthened. The handsome four-poster bed Papa had so lovingly fashioned stood in perfect, pristine order, close to the hearth. Mother had abandoned it the night Papa died.

Next, Clara noted Papa's portrait hanging over the mantle. Two sconces flanked it like sentries. Flickering candles tossed light and shadow over his handsome features.

Papa stood as straight as the brass buttons marching in perfect precision down his infantry jacket. The high collar emphasized his strong jaw. The sky blue fabric complimented his dark eyes.

A feeling of discomfort caused Clara to look up. Mother's eyes studied her with the same intensity as Clara had the portrait. She inhaled deeply and waited.

"Sit."

Clara sank down in a chair by her father's writing table, releasing her breath like a pricked balloon.

Mother dropped the drape, encasing the room in near darkness, save the lively candles guarding Papa. With a sigh, she moved to the chaise – where she slept, when she slept – and into its familiar contours.

"Colonel Fisher is dead," she stated in a flat voice. "What a waste."

Clara stiffened. *How did she know?* She wondered. *She never leaves this room and has refused to read any newspaper since Papa...*

“I want the details.” Mother’s firm words shocked Clara further. Her tongue remained fixed behind mute lips.

Mother’s eyes snapped. “Tell me how he died.”

Clara swallowed – hard. “At the Battle of Manassas,” she began. “He was leading a charge with his unit.”

“*His unit?*”

“Yes,” Clara answered. “He’d outfitted the 6th North Carolina Regiment from his own funds.”

“And what did the late colonel do before all this foolishness began?” Mrs. Maxwell waved a dismissive hand toward the sounds of Salisburians yet in the streets.

“He was....” Clara coughed. “He was president of the North Carolina Railroad Company.”

“Hmm. Quite a promotion ... to eternity ... and in his first battle.” Mother bit off each word through stiff lips. She laid her head back against the chaise, closing her eyes as if to shut out reality. “The first of many,” she muttered.

“He died a hero,” Clara blurted before she could stop herself. “He used his rail expertise to get a ditched train back on track, rushing our men to the front. They routed the enemy,” she finished in a flush of patriotic pride.

“And dead,” Mother shot back through trembling lips. “Just as dead as your father.” She half rose from the chaise. “You will take your brother to town when Colonel Fisher’s body comes back to Salisbury. Let him see all the fanfare that comes with a *hero’s* death. Then take him to the cemetery. I want Little Max....” She paused at her favorite nickname for her son. “...To see that beyond the praise lays a real corpse in a real grave.”

“There are no heroes in war,” Mother continued, her voice rising with each word. “Only death – and loss. Make sure Little

Max understands.” She stared at Clara. “Promise me,” she ordered.

“I promise, Mother,” she whispered through her own trembling lips.

Mrs. Maxwell leaned over the teapot to pour herself a cup.

Clara dared not move.

Mother brought the delicate cup to her lips. The steam swirled about her pale face like a halo. “I must save Little Max,” she stated, more to herself than her motionless daughter. She glanced up. “Bring me the *Carolina Watchman* when it comes.”

Clara stared, mouth agape.

“I have to keep up with this war no matter how distasteful it is to me,” Mrs. Maxwell continued. “Little Max will *not* follow his father’s footsteps – not while I have breath in my body. I will not lose my son, too.” She nodded a dismissal. “You may go.”

Clara left on quick, silent feet, moving across the hall and into her own room. She shut the door with a hushed click.

Only then did she throw herself upon her bed, allowing her pent up emotions to erupt. She jammed the pillows against her face to stifle great, gulping sobs.

She wept until the tips of her curled hair ached.

“O Papa”, she choked. “Why did you have to leave us?”

Clara flopped onto her back and frowned at the ceiling. Unexpected anger, bubbling like molten lava from the depths of her heart, shocked and confused her. For years she’d been tending to Jimmy’s and her own needs while their mother retreated from life. Only Aunt Sally kept her from feeling wholly abandoned.

Did it take another war to make her think of us – or at least Jimmy? The frown deepened. *What about me? It’s so unfair.*

She snatched up her father’s Bible, flipping through it with a desperate urgency. The word *vengeance* leaped from the flying pages. She stopped and backed up to relocate it. “Dearly

beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”

Even God's against me. She rose to pace her room. The animated voices of Jimmy and his friend, Peter, floating up from the yard below, drew her to the window. Earnest concentration molded the boys' faces as they practiced their parry and counter parry with stick swords.

A shout from Jimmy prompted Clara to tap a warning on the window. He and Peter looked up. Both saluted with a grin before returning to their swordplay in quieter tones.

Her mind flew back to *Ivanhoe*, filled with chivalrous knights ever ready to fight for justice, defend the honor of beautiful, but helpless, women and protect their homeland.

My, she thought. Those two are the South's next generation of Ivanhoes, Black Princes and Robin Hoods, just like their daddies before them. Our southern gentlemen live and breathe the code of the knights: Defend justice at all costs. Choose the harder path because it is right. Loyalty, even unto death. Her shoulders dropped.

Our men would rather duel than lose honor. They'll die before allowing the invaders to occupy our land.

She noticed the magnolia tree in the corner of the yard. A few snowy blooms, the last of the season, clung to its branches. *They hang onto the tree as stubbornly as the South does her ways – and Mother her loss,* she thought.

Clara shook out her hair, brushed and rebound it into a snood before exiting her room. She descended to the front door and out into the yard. With calm determination, she approached the boys.

“Jimmy, Peter,” she began. “I have to run over to Aunt Sally's. You must play quietly, do you understand?” She looked at their faces, flushed with their game.

“I promise,” Jimmy intoned. Peter nodded.

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Clara swung the picket gate open, flinching at its annoying complaint. She shut it behind her and moved down the street with the air of a sedate young lady. She could control her pace, but not her thoughts. They tumbled over her like a rain swollen waterfall.

Her mind flitted to the colonel's untimely death. The grim reality of war began to sink into her. *Poor Frances Fisher. First she lost her mama and now her papa. And she's only 15, with two younger siblings. At least I still have Mother – or do I?* The thought mocked her.

She peered up at the sun poking through the thick leaves shading her way. How she loved to gather sweetgum leaves every fall, with their five point star shape that changed to bright yellow at the stem before bleeding into deep red or maroon. And all had spots, as though God had tossed in a generous sprinkling of freckles.

How can the sweetgum produce such gorgeous leaves and those nasty prickly balls? She pondered that. *Maybe life is like that. Beauty and pain together. Papa died. Then Grandmother. And today Mother shows the most life I've seen since Papa left. What will happen next?*

Clara came to the square on Main Street. She spotted a placard in a storefront window as she waited for a platoon of soldiers to pass on their way to the train depot. Drawing closer she read, *Loyal Ladies of the Confederacy! Your government needs you to sew uniforms for our Brave Boys at the Front.*

"Oh," she exclaimed. "I wonder what Aunt Sally would think." She hurried on, stopping to look over the abandoned cotton factory across the railroad tracks before rapping on her aunt's door.

"Good afternoon, Cousin Clara." Louisa opened the door with a wide smile. "Mother's in the kitchen. Go on back. I'll fetch my knitting and be back in a flash."

Clara removed her summer bonnet, hanging it on the coat rack by the door, along with her parasol. The aroma of fresh baking teased her nostrils as she moved toward the kitchen.

“Aunt Sally!” she exclaimed. “That smells divine.”

“Hello Clara, my dear.” Aunt Sally greeted her niece with a quick hug. “’Tis only biscuits and no better than you can bake yourself.”

“Perhaps,” Clara said, “seeing as how you taught me. But somehow it seems to smell and taste better when someone else’s hands did the work.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Aunt Sally replied. Her cornflower blue eyes sparkled. *Same color as Mother’s, except laughter fills hers instead of ponderous grief.*

“I’ve steeped some tea,” Aunt Sally said, placing the pot in front of Clara, along with some biscuits and a small crock of preserves.

“Mmm,” Clara sighed, savoring her first bite. “Heavenly.”

Louisa returned and sat next to her cousin. She immediately produced a sock-in-the-making, her knitting needles flashing in and out with the conversation.

“More socks,” she laughed. “We can never have enough socks in this family. And I heard the government is asking for ladies to donate socks for the soldiers.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Clara exclaimed. “I saw a notice in the pharmacy window. The government is also asking for seamstresses to sew uniforms. Remember that new-fangled sewing machine Grandmother bought?”

Aunt Sally smiled. “She always liked to be the first in Salisbury to have the latest contraption.”

“I saw it in the attic today,” Clara continued. “Perhaps I could learn to sew and...” She stopped.

“And what?” Louisa prompted.

Clara turned worried eyes to her aunt. "Grandmother's money is melting away." She stared at her cooling tea. "I don't know how we can manage much longer."

"Poor dear," Aunt Sally muttered softly. "Such a heavy burden for one so young."

"I try not to listen to town talk," Clara started. "But it's hard not to. Manassas proved the war won't be over by Christmas, as everyone had hoped. And prices are going up already."

She placed a finger on Louisa's growing sock. "Perhaps I can earn some money sewing. And," she paused. "I've thought of renting out Grandmother's room."

"Take on boarders? Louisa exclaimed. "You can't be serious." She wagged her needles toward her mother. "Could I have a biscuit too? Smelling Clara's has made me exceedingly hungry."

"Of course, dear." Aunt Sally plucked one from the skillet, spread it with butter and placed it before her daughter. "Would you like some preserves too?"

"No thanks, Mumsie." Louisa smiled. "This is perfect." She turned to Clara. "Wherever did you get the idea for boarders?"

"I heard that officers stationed here are seeking places for their families to live. Grandmother's room is spacious. We could take on a family with one or two children, I think."

"And your mother?" Louisa's pointed question hung in the air.

"Louisa! Mind your tongue," her mother admonished.

"It's alright, Aunt Sally." Clara touched Louisa's arm. "I'm sure everyone around wonders about Mother." She shook her head. "Strange thing happened today. Mother actually talked to me."

"*What?*" both ladies chimed together.

"Yes," Clara continued. "I took her afternoon tea up and she asked me to stay. She knew of Colonel Fisher's death."

“How?” Louisa asked.

Clara shrugged. “I’ve no idea. She sees no one and hasn’t read the paper since Papa died. And yet she always seems to know what is going on.”

“What was her reaction to the colonel’s death?” Aunt Sally’s eyes studied Clara’s face.

“Bitterness.” Clara shrugged again. “Or maybe scorn.”

“Yes.” Aunt Sally nodded. “That’s Caroline.”

“She wants me to take Jimmy to see his funeral cortege and the ceremony. Then she wants me to take him to the grave and look at the coffin. She wants him to realize the colonel is forever *dead*,” she said, emphasizing the last word. “She vows she will keep Jimmy out of this war.”

“So,” Louisa remarked. “It took a war to get her to rejoin life.” She placed a gentle hand on Clara’s arm. “Sorry, cousin. My blunt tongue ran ahead of me again.”

“No need to apologize,” Clara assured her. She stared at her empty teacup and sighed from the depths of her heavy heart. “Those were my exact thoughts when I left her room – her sacred sanctuary.” Clara’s mouth twisted before tears overtook her. Great, rolling tears that gathered and splashed down her reddened cheeks.

“After I left her room,” she choked, “I hid in my own for a good cry. The first interest she’s shown in years is for Jimmy – her precious Little Max.” She lifted her tear stained face to her aunt. “What about me? I’ve been running the house ever since Grandmother died. Doesn’t she realize that? Doesn’t she care?”

Aunt Sally moved to her niece’s side, enveloping her in a long, hard hug. “I won’t make excuses for your mother,” she said, “but don’t let the unfairness embitter you.”

“Sometimes I feel even God is against me.” Once her emotions tasted freedom, Clara felt powerless to stop.

“Why do you say that, my dear?” Aunt Sally asked.

“Because I was rummaging through Papa’s Bible and found a verse that said something about God taking vengeance and not me.”

“Louisa, could you bring my Bible from my bedside stand?” Aunt Sally asked.

“Of course, Mumsie.”

Louisa returned moments later, cradling her mother’s worn and much consulted Bible.

“Clara, I believe the verse you are referring to is in Romans 12:19.” Sally turned some pages and stopped. “Yes, here it is.” She pointed with one finger. “But now I’m going to show you a verse a few chapters back ... Romans 8:28.” She turned the Bible so Clara could see.” Please read the verse to us,” she instructed.

““We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.””

“The most important word here,” Aunt Sally explained, “is *together*. God doesn’t say everything that happens is *good*. My John’s death wasn’t good. Nor was your father’s. But somehow, God takes all the bad and good that happens in our lives, puts it all together and makes everything right. Only he can do that. You have to trust that he is working in your life to turn out good. If you don’t,” she paused, “you will become angry and bitter.”

“Like Mother?” Clara whispered.

“Yes, Clara. I’m sorry that your mother has chosen to isolate herself since Max died – cutting herself off from her children, the rest of the family, and life in general.”

Clara fell silent, reading and rereading the words, *all things work together for good*. Finally, she drew a long, ragged breath and said, “Thank you, Aunt Sally. I will find this verse in Papa’s Bible when I get home and mark it. Do you think he would mind?”

“Not at all, child. Your papa would be so proud.” Sally gave her niece’s hand a gentle pat. “Now, you’d better scoot along before dusk falls.”

“Thank you, Aunt Sally. And Louisa.” Clara hopped up to hug each. I’m thankful I have you to turn to whenever I feel helpless.”

“And we’re glad you do, dear,” responded Aunt Sally. “But God is with you *all* the time. You don’t have to go looking for him. Just pray and wait for his answer. He’ll always guide you right.”

“Thank you again, Aunt Sally.” Clara tipped her parasol in salute. “I promise to remember.” With that, she sailed down the steps and turned her face toward home.

Chapter 3 – Prison

November 11, 1861

“Pshaw,” Jimmy snorted. “I’m a-thinkin’ this rain’ll never end.”

“Sorry, can’t help you there.” Clara lowered her newspaper to smile at her brother, who lay on his stomach in front of the parlor fire. He swung his feet like twin birds, scowling at the November rain droning its mournful dirge against the windows.

“Me and Peter was fixin’ to...”

“Oh no!” Clara gasped, staring at the *Carolina Watchman* clutched in both hands. “In all my born days I never expected...”

“Spected what?” he asked.

“Nothing ... nothing,” Clara muttered, struggling to regain her composure. “I’m going to visit Aunt Sally for a few minutes.”

“I’m a-comin’.” Jimmy rolled over and propped himself up on his elbows. “Seein’ as how yer lookin’ like yer ’bout ta have yerself a conniption fit.”

“Tisn’t necessary.” Clara caught her brother’s look. *‘Most as determined as I am when he sets his mind to it.* She couldn’t or wouldn’t label *herself* as stubborn. “Suit yourself, but be quick about it.”

With the speed of a startled deer, Jimmy bolted to his feet and snatched up their woolen wraps. He draped Clara’s about her shoulders and executed an extreme bow. “After you, Miss Maxwell.”

The chill air hurried their feet along. Jimmy bounded onto their aunt’s porch and knocked on the door. Clara paused at the

steps, gazed at the large brick building across the tracks, and shook her head.

“Come in, Clara.” Aunt Sally welcomed her niece with a quick hug. “And Jimmy too. What a pleasant surprise!” Jimmy screwed up his preteen face at her hug. Sally took their outerwear and shepherded them into the kitchen. “I just made coffee.”

Louisa sat at the table, poring over the latest *Watchman*. She greeted her kin with a warm smile and rose to get cups and fresh gingerbread.

“I see you got your paper, too,” Clara started. “I can’t believe our government went through with it.”

“Went through with what?” Jimmy asked.

“They purchased the Maxwell Chambers Factory to use as a prison,” Louisa explained.

Jimmy’s eyes widened. “The Ol’ Cotton Factory....” He waved an arm. “Righ’chere?”

“Yes,” Clara said, with a troubled frown. “It’s been in the news for months, but I kept hoping it wouldn’t come to Salisbury. Listen to this, Aunt Sally.”

Clara drew the newspaper from her pocket, shaking its pages straight. “Listen to what Editor Bruner wrote: ‘...The Government has bought the old Salisbury Factory, and is now preparing to fit it up for a prison to accommodate some thousands or more of Yankees who are encumbering the tobacco factories of Richmond.’” She stopped to sip her coffee.

“Go on,” Jimmy urged. Clara twisted her ring with her thumb before continuing.

“...Our citizens don’t much like the idea of such an accession to their population; nevertheless, they have assented to do their part of the hardships and disagreeables of war, so bring them along. We will do the best we can with them.”

“Bring them along,” Louisa mimicked. “We will do the best we can.”

“Real prisoners? *Here?*” Jimmy interrupted, with eyes as big and round as a hoot owl’s. “Bully.”

“Bully?” Clara snapped. “This isn’t a game, Jimmy. These are our enemies. And they’re going to be confined practically next door!” She shook her head. “A prison in the city. What was Governor Clark thinking?”

“What’cha meanin’,” Jimmy asked.

“He’s the only governor in the Confederacy who *offered* to build a prison in his state.”

“They’ve been searching for already existing buildings,” Aunt Sally put in. “To them, the old cotton mill is ideal. It’s a relatively young structure and situated right next to the tracks.” A train rumbled by at that moment, shrieking its arrival at the Salisbury depot. The cups danced in its wake.

“I remember how excited the whole town was when that mill was built back in ’39,” Sally continued. “I was 23 then, married, with my two babies.”

Salisburians had watched the factory grow into a sturdy, four story brick structure. A weathervane gracing its tower seemed a beacon of coming prosperity. Smaller buildings rimmed its spacious grounds, sheltered by stately oaks.

“I would imagine the main building will house the prisoners,” Louisa said.

“What about the outbuildings?” Jimmy asked.

“Kitchens and guard houses, I suppose,” said Aunt Sally.

“How come the factory closed?” Jimmy asked.

“It was steam powered,” Louisa explained. “Couldn’t compete with New England’s water powered mills.”

“Cheaper to run,” Clara added.

“Ain’t ya scairt, Aunt Sally?” Jimmy asked, eyes glowing.

He thinks the idea of danger lurking so close to our kin is exciting, thought Clara.

“No Jimmy,” Sally answered. “I have to trust God – as always.”

Workmen descended on Salisbury days later, swarming the factory grounds like hordes of locusts, cleaning, sawing and pounding. Soon the newly barred windows of the main building disappeared behind a hastily erected palisade.

Jimmy slipped in the back door just as Clara pulled hot biscuits from her spider skillet.

“Yum,” he said, reaching around her to snag one. “Hot, hot,” he exclaimed, tossing it from one hand to the other.

“Go on with you,” Clara retorted with a laugh, then sobered. “Where have you been, young man?”

Jimmy looked at the scuffed toes of his shoes. “Down at the factory,” he replied. “Watchin’ the men work. Helped ’em some too,” he added hastily.

“How?” Clara asked.

“I filled the men’s canteens down at the crik. An’ some asked me ta hold the boards steady-like whilst they nailed ’em up. One give me a 50 cent bank note.”

“Really?” Clara bent to examine the paper Jimmy held out for her inspection. “We need money powerful bad. If you’re very careful, and don’t let on to Mother, I think it would be alright to help.”

Jimmy placed a hand over his heart. “On my honor,” he promised.

“So, what is the wall like?” Clara asked, shedding worry for curiosity. “Will it be strong enough to keep us safe?”

“Shore will.” Jimmy puffed out his scrawny chest with manly importance. “They’re usin’ 15 foot logs an’ sinkin’ ’em

three feet into the ground. Then they nail boards across the remaining log that's above ground."

"Twelve feet high," Clara mused. "I hope that's enough to keep the enemy in."

"An' they're constructin' a walkway some three feet from the top, on the outside of the fence." He sighted down an imaginary rifle. "The guards'll be patrollin' from there." He pulled the trigger.

"They hafta hurry cuz the first prisoners is a-comin' in three weeks."

Clara's hand flew to cover her trembling lips. *Real prisoners here in Salisbury*. The war was getting too close – too soon.

Clara discovered Jimmy and Peter whispering, heads close together.

"Boys?"

They turned flushed faces toward her.

"What are you two up to?" Clara demanded.

Jimmy shoved his hands deep in his pockets. "Law." He glared.

"Peter?"

"Mebbe I should be a-runnin' on home, Miss Clara." Peter searched for a safe place to rest his gaze. "And see if Ma needs me."

Clara held up a hand. "Not so quick," she replied before turning again to her brother. "Jimmy?"

Jimmy frowned at the ceiling as if trying to see his absent mother's face. Then he stepped close to his sister. "The first prisoners is arrivin' on the afternoon train," he whispered. "I never seed me a Yank. Can we go, Clara? Purty please?"

“*Saw*,” Clara corrected. “It won’t happen today, either. I promised Mother.”

“Please, Miss Clara,” Peter begged. “My ma is goin’ and tol’ me to go, too. She’s a-wantin’ me ta get a good look at our enemy.”

“What do you think them Yanks look like?” Jimmy asked. Travel in the 1800s was slow and difficult. Only wealthy citizens had the means for travel beyond their own town.

“Do you think they’re big – and hairy – and skeery looking?”

Clara rubbed her arms against the chill of fear that swept through the warm parlor.

“Please,” Jimmy begged again. “It’ll be our first chance to see real live Yanks. An’ ’sides, I’m sure they’ll be guarded real close-like by our own brave soldiers.”

Clara held a finger to her lips, but a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. She handed the boys their coats and donned her own soft stole. The trio passed silently to the veranda. Clara stood between the pair, hooking her hands through their arms.

“Let’s go,” she whispered conspiratorially. “I’m thinking I’m as curious as everyone else in town.”

The boys grinned, each covering the slim hand resting on his arm. Carriages passed them as they strolled, everyone moving in the same direction.

A large crowd of people had already gathered at the depot. Clara allowed her youthful escorts to dash to the tracks, intent on being the first to view these strange creatures from the unknown and faraway north.

As the train’s piercing wail announced its approach, Clara noticed a flapping handkerchief in the crowd. *Cousin Louisa and Aunt Sally*. She smiled and made her way to the duo standing close to the tracks.

I'll get a better look at the Yanks from there. She resisted the urge to shove her neighbors in her haste to join them.

The train huffed to a stop, belching its importance to the war effort with its peculiar cargo. The crowd stood straighter as the reality of seeing the enemy face-to-face for the first time gripped them. Ladies shrank against the arms of their escorts. Men placed protective arms around their womenfolk. Children darted between voluminous skirts, maneuvering themselves as close to the tracks as possible.

Armed guards emerged first, wheeled to face each other and held their bayoneted rifles at the ready.

"Aren't our soldiers handsome?" Louisa whispered.

Clara nodded her agreement, eyes glued to the train. She caught her lower lip between her teeth as the first of 120 men filled the doorway, stepped to the ground and pivoted to his left.

Murmurs of astonishment swept through the gathering. The Yank looked like any man in the South.

Jimmy joined the ladies, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Bully," he said. "Our first Yanks." Then he scowled. "They don't look no different from our guys. How'd we know one iff in he snuck around 'thout his uniform?"

Louisa shrugged. "I expected northern folk to look different somehow."

"They may look the same on the outside," Jimmy growled. "But I bet they's all yellin on the inside."

"Ready ... march!" The Confederate officer ordered after the last prisoner had disembarked. Curious onlookers accompanied the unwelcome foreigners' short trek to the prison.

"How d'yer feel now, Yankee man? Shudda stayed ya home whar ya belong, 'stead of messin' in our business." Jeers bloomed like ragweed around the marchers.

Clara glanced at her aunt's face, recognizing the thinned lips and set jaw. *Aunt Sally's not appreciating the comments. She'll be doing something about it quick as she's able, I'll allow.*

The prison gates stood, like a chaste and untested virgin; at the threshold of a future yet unknown to both the new inmates and Salisbury.

Clara gazed at them and then at her aunt's small home. "Dear God, please keep us all safe." She beckoned to Jimmy and curled tense fingers around his arm. "We must hasten home. It's almost candle-lighting time."

"Clara."

She paused on the upper landing, mere steps from the safety of her room. Her pulse quickened.

"Clarabelle Maxwell. I know you're out there. Come in at once."

Clara flinched at the use of her full name. How she hated it. *Sounds like a cow's name.* She swallowed her annoyance and turned the knob.

"Yes, Mother?" The soft tone belied the apprehension she felt. She stepped into the stuffy gloom.

Mrs. Maxwell stood by the chaise, carriage as straight as that of her deceased husband in the painting. "Where did you and Jimmy go today?" She squeezed the words from flattened lips.

"We...." Clara studied the carpet under her feet. *Everything is dark in Mother's room. Even the air ... and....* Her eyes lifted a few inches; enough to view the hem of her mother's mourning clothes. ...*Mother.*

"I'm waiting."

"We went into town."

"Why?" The painful interrogation began.

Clara glanced at her papa's portrait and touched her ring. A train's whistle rent the evening air.

"We went to the train station."

"Meeting someone?" Sarcasm dripped like acid from her mother's lips.

"No, Mother." She swallowed.

"Jimmy and Peter wanted to see their first Yankee prisoners ... just like everyone else in town," she finished in a rush.

"Like everyone else?" Mrs. Maxwell echoed.

Except you. Clara inhaled sharply at the harsh thought.

"So you felt justified to take my son and do something I've expressly forbidden?"

Clara's eyes dropped like a heavy curtain. She fisted her hands behind her back, digging her nails into the palms. "No ma'am."

"I repeat – your brother is not to be involved with this war *in any way*. The absurdity of men marching off, stiff and proud in their crisp uniforms while the ladies stand by and cheer, only to return torn up – or dead."

"If anything happens to Jimmy, I'll hold *you* responsible."

Clara stepped back, as though she'd been physically struck, and bit down on her lip, desperate to imprison the hot retort boiling up from her heart.

"Go now and take heed." Mrs. Maxwell hurled each word like a stone.

Clara fled to her room.

Strength-sapping sobs tore at her. Then anger rose up. She paced her room in short, heated steps. "How dare she?" Clara raged through clenched teeth. "How *dare* she?"

She's not the only one who lost Papa. We all did. But we've been forced to move on while she hides in her room. I've been taking care of Jimmy all these years. She's done nothing but cling to her loss – that's all she clings to – with both fists.

She glanced down at her own hands, clenched in frustration. The thin silver band graced with three dainty turquoise stones caught her attention.

Two enormous tears gathered and rolled down her face, before melting into the floor. "Papa," she cried, remembering the day he'd given her the ring.

"A gift from Mexico," he proudly proclaimed, when he returned from the war that eventually took his life. "Unique beauty for my Little Belle," he laughed, picking up her small hand and placing the then too-big ring on her thumb. "You'll grow into it."

Now the ring scarcely fit her slender pinkie finger. A fleeting smile touched her lips. *Louisa says I'd as soon sacrifice my finger as remove the ring. The smile vanished. She's right. It's my only link to Papa.*

The energizing anger drained from her. She stumbled on weakened legs back to her bed and threw herself on it. Dragging her knees to her chin, she wished to shut out her misery. *Abandoned*, her brain screamed. *Abandoned by all*. She ceded herself to numbed slumber.

Clara awakened in darkness, both without and within. After lighting a candle, she spotted a small object on her bedside table.

Papa's Bible!

She snatched at it with hungry hands and heart.

"God," she prayed. "I am so alone. I need someone so much. Will you help me?"

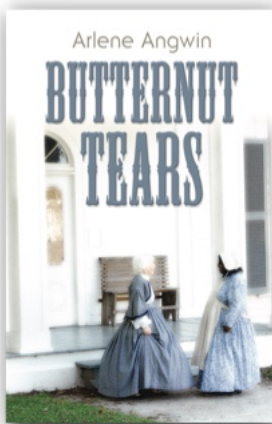
She found the book of Psalms. *Aunt Sally advised me to read there, because she finds such comfort in them*. She opened to chapter 27.

"The LORD is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?" She continued on, stopping at verse 10 with a little cry. "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take me up."

BUTTERNUT TEARS

“O God,” she sobbed, hugging the Bible close. She drew a long breath, allowing the words to sink deep into her being. “You do answer prayer, just as Aunt Sally promised. You *are* with me and watching over me, even in all this turmoil.”

Healing tears washed away every shred of anger and sorrow that had pressed her down. She immersed her soul in her newfound understanding. Then she dressed for bed, climbed in and pulled the blankets tight around her shoulders ... and drifted into peaceful slumber.



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