

EXCERPT OF CHAPTER THREE

(Kate Buchanan's story)

Death came for me on an April morning in 1916, two months before my sixteenth birthday. I wasn't afraid when I awoke and saw my dead mother standing beside my bed. The typhoid fever that had ravaged my body for nearly a month had taken its toll – I had ended up with pneumonia and I know I must have been delirious.

But I also know that she was really there. My mother, Emma, had died three days after I was born, but she never resented me for taking her life. I had felt her spirit watching over me throughout my childhood, just like a guardian angel.

It was no surprise to me that on the day I was dying she would appear at my side to make sure I felt no fear. She was dressed all in white. I remember looking up at her sweet smile and I felt so safe and loved. The pain in my chest subsided and my breathing became easier.

I lay on Aunt Laura's bed, alone in her little house on Tranquil Lane. Her bedroom had two windows, so there was a blessed cross breeze. Everything was quiet, except for the faint tinkling of the wind chimes that hung on the front porch.

Aunt Laura had died two weeks before. When the floodwaters had receded, we had thought our troubles were over. I did not want to guess how many victims the typhoid epidemic had already claimed in Cherokee Falls. I had no doubt that I was next.

I waited for death and wondered what it would feel like to pass on, and how long it might take to find heaven. Mother would know.

She sat down on the edge of my bed, and it seemed as though she had read my mind.

She spoke, and for the first time in my life, I heard my mother's gentle voice, as musical as wind chimes. "You can't go to heaven."

Why? What terrible thing had I done?

My mother smiled again. "It's not your time, Katie. You shouldn't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid. I want to be with you and Aunt Laura."

"Yes, but my baby girl will have a long life first."

The shock of ice cold rags being thrown upon my body made me scream out loud. The neighbor lady, Mrs. Tackett, hovered over me; my mother had disappeared.

"Poor child. We've got to get this fever down."

I let out a moan and then my teeth began to chatter. A man I had never seen before came into the room carrying a wooden bucket. Mrs. Tackett soaked another rag in the cold water and then placed it across my forehead.

I think I smiled at her. "I'm not going to die, ma'am. My mama said so."

It took a few more weeks for me to recover, and during that time my auburn hair fell out in clumps. I didn't cry, at first, because I knew how lucky I was to be alive. My hair grew out again quickly, but I suffered another terrible shock when I realized it was now

black and curly, not straight and red. I was never a vain child, but I must admit that I'd been proud of my unusual hair color.

The change in my appearance was only one of a great many new things I had to face and accept in my life.

Aunt Laura was gone, and I would have to leave the rented house that had been my home for nearly eleven years. My father, Luke Maguire, had died of a stroke when I was ten. I would be forced to return to Misty Hollow and move in with my uncle – Papa's younger brother, Morgan. I had five cousins and I did not look forward to sharing space with them either – especially the conceited Jessamine. She was far prouder of her looks and red hair than I had ever been.

I packed up mine and Aunt Laura's favorite books, my own modest wardrobe, and also remembered to take my aunt's one valuable pin – the cameo that had belonged to my maternal grandmother.

Mrs. Tackett's husband loaded me and my belongings into his wagon and gave me a bumpy, five-mile ride out to Misty Hollow. I fought back tears the whole way. I missed my spinster aunt and I knew I'd miss the life we'd shared together. Laura Justice had been a school teacher – and she'd taught me about the fascinating world that existed outside of the Appalachians.

One afternoon when I was five, she'd come out to the farm to visit my father and had ended up taking me home with her. She'd heard about the disappearance of Uncle Morgan's wife, Ruth, who had cared for me after my mother's death.

Aunt Laura hadn't believed Morgan's story that Ruth had run off with another man and abandoned her children. According to her, my uncle had been an "uncouth rogue"

since birth. She stopped short of calling him a murderer, but it didn't have to be said.

Most of the folks up Misty Hollow believed the long-suffering Ruth had been killed by her jealous husband and buried on a mountaintop.

Her body still hadn't been found, but that didn't make me feel any less apprehensive about living with Morgan Maguire.
