

Williamsburg, Virginia.  
February, 1815.

*Pound pound pound pound!*

George sat up like a spring from his parents' sofa. His heart raced as the sleepiness in his head tried to make sense of the noise. Who could be at the front door so angry, so early in the morning?

He pulled his blanket to his chin as he glanced about. Pa's pendulum clock on the mantel shelf chimed six o'clock. The fire in the hearth had flamed out hours before. It was not yet sunup.

"Pa," he called above to his parents' bedchamber. Whoever was at the door meant no good. His father would cut their business short. The knock pounded harder. George sprang to his feet, pulling the blanket with him, and stared at the ceiling again. Pa was not rushing down their narrow, creaky staircase, as expected. "Pa!" How George wished to be safe in his bedchamber instead of the sitting room, facing trouble. Why was his father dawdling? Something had to be done.

He put on his slippers, wrapped the blanket about him to ward off the chill, and crept to the door, white puffs shooting from his mouth. "I have a rifle," he shouted with manly authority at the intruders, with only the poor blanket to protect him, "and I'm a damned good aim, so you best run away."

"You be George Thompson?" came a man's gruff voice from the other side.

This stunned George into silence.

"Open up, lad. We've come to fetch Hannah Thompson."

"My ma? Why you want her for?"

Men's voices mumbled. Finally: "Ask your father."

George turned toward the creaking stairs and let out a breath of relief: Robert Thompson was coming down, tucking his shirt into his trousers. Robert was George's hero. Honorable. Trustworthy. His Hercules. Everything would be done proper, as always.

George rushed to him, breathless. "There's men outside looking for Ma."

Robert passed his son and opened the door. Two men hunched on the little stoop in their snow-dusted hats and shabby coats, stomping their feet and blowing into their fingerless mittens to ward off winter's bitter chill. They appeared hopeless, in a hang-dog way.

"You be Robert Thompson?" one asked.

Robert opened the door wide and motioned to the stairs. "My wife is in our bedchamber."

The men brushed past as George clung to his side. "Pa, what's happening? Why do they want to see Ma? Is she sick? She was fine at supper."

Robert would not look at him. "She's always been sick, George." He headed for the stairs, then turned and pointed at him. "Stay put. Do you understand? No matter what you hear."

George watched him disappear after the men. He listened intently, clutching the blanket tighter about him as his mother's startled voice asked in her broken English, "Who are you? Why you come? I don't have the typhus." She turns frantic. "My George, is he safe? What's happened to him? I have lost Richie, I do not want to lose George. He is only eleven."

George shivered as a blast of air blew through the doorway. When he went to shut the door, he saw a woman outside. Cloaked in black, she lingered, like Death, by a covered wagon harnessed to two horses; at the wagon's rear, a small chamber with double doors. The woman opened them, reached in, pulled out a straightcoat, and approached the house. George backed away as she entered.

Commotion erupted upstairs. Hannah Thompson rushed down in her flannel gown, her blonde hair hanging loose. Worry distorted her pretty face. She opened her arms to her son. "Do you need me, *Liebchen*?"

George dropped his blanket and rushed to her, and she pressed him to her breast and kissed his head. "I'm fine, Ma. What do those men want?"

Before she could answer, the men lumbered down, carrying her trunk, Robert moving close behind. Confused, Ma stared at them. "Why you taking my things?" They hauled her trunk outside, then returned and went for her. She backed away. They lunged and threw her body to the floor. She screamed, and George pounced on the men as Robert shouted at him. Fingernails, fists, and teeth became weapons.

"Leave my mother be!" George shrieked, kicking and pummeling them.

"Husband, help me!"

"George, get over here," Robert thundered.

"Let go of her, you have the wrong house!"

"George! Here. Now." Robert pointed at his black slippers.

"My ma's not sick!" George bit one of the men on the shoulder, and he cried out. Robert pulled George out of the tussle and pressed him against his body, his arm compressing across the boy's chest like a crossbeam in white muslin. George fought to pry himself free. His father's hold tightened.

"Let it be, George."

"But, Pa—!" Desperate, George watched his mother lose her fight. Her bare arms and legs flailed, like an animal caught in a trap, as her hair flowed back and forth until it twisted about her head. They tried to drag her, but her nails dug into the green floral rug. She once kitted that rug, in the Bavarian way.

George broke into sobs. "Please, stop with my ma."

They forced her into the straightcoat, pinned her arms back, and finished strapping her from between her legs to her neck. Her chin dug into the floor as she drooled and convulsed, staring at her husband and son with mad, wide eyes. "Husband, why won't you help me?" she whimpered.

Robert would not move.

"George, *hilf mir, bitte!*"

Frightened, George could only stare at her. His beautiful, wide-smiling mother, musical and luminescent, had turned into something savage. Hannah Bekker Thompson was not yet twenty-nine.

The sheriff appeared in their doorway. His wide-brimmed English hat shadowed his solemn expression. "Is everything to order?"

Robert nodded. "It is."

George looked up at his father, not believing what he heard. *What* is to order?

The sheriff tipped his hat and left. The men lifted Hannah, unnaturally lifeless and stiff in the straightcoat, and loaded her into the wagon's chamber as if she was lumber. The woman closed the doors, boarded with the men, and they drove off.

The clock on the mantel shelf tick-tocked softly in that harsh silence.

George broke away from his father and raced along Francis Street, chasing the wagon as it rumbled for the hospital. He slipped and fell on the ice-thickened road, stood, ran, and fell again, tearing his knees. His slippers had flipped off, landing nearby. The knees of his breeches were ruined. But nothing would stop him from fetching his mother – not those damned icy patches, not Pa, not God.

He pushed himself up, snatched his wet slippers and put them on, and ran again, this time to Phineas Poole's house. An adopted "grandfather" of sorts, Poole was his strongest confidante and ally. George's parents adored Poole as one of their own. He was family.

"M-M-Mr. P-P-Poole." George's teeth chattered as he pounded on the paneled white door. No answer. The cold grabbed his wheezing chest, making him shiver uncontrollably. His innards expanded as he forced energy into his whole being: "Phineas Poole!" He backed away to glimpse a welcoming face at Poole's black chamber windows. Nothing. "Why are you all against m-m-me?"

The wagon had long disappeared behind a snowy mound. Frantic, George followed its tracks, bounding the white slope until he reached the hospital's oak door, and pounded his palms upon it so hard they hurt. The peep window opened. The saggy face of a female attendant appeared.

"P-p-please, m-m-ma'am," George begged, "d-d-do you have mm-my mother? Hannah T-T-Thompson."

"Boy, what you doin' out here in just your shirt and bottoms?" she said in a low voice. "This ain't no place for you. Best you be gittin' home. The typhus ain't over. Do you want to fall sick agin? Do you want to die like your little brother?"

"But M-M-Ma doesn't have the t-t-typhus. She's well. This is a p-p-place for s-s-sick people. Here—" George tapped his temple. "You've made a God-fearin' m-m-mistake."

The woman's eyelids dropped in sympathy. "Go home. Your pa needs you." The peep window drew shut.

"No!" George pounded the door. "Please give me my mother." He jiggled the door's iron latch. "Hannah T-T-Thompson!"