

THE KEY TO HER CHEST



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Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-63954-410-3
Print ISBN: 978-1-63954-411-0

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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CHAPTER 1



*W*oming, 1889

Doc Henderson opened the door and stuck his head out into the office and reception area of his medical office. "Naomi, I'll need your help in here, please."

"Of course, Papa," his granddaughter said, but as she turned to join him in his surgery room, the front door to the office opened and a man hurried in, obviously in distress.

The man was out of breath as he turned to address Naomi. "Wilma's about to have the baby. I need the doc."

"Oh, my," Naomi said. "Mr. Granger, I'm sorry, but Papa is busy with a man who was shot. I need to go in and help him. You go back to Wilma, and as soon as Papa's done with this surgery, he'll come out."

"But what should I do until he gets there?"

"Is anyone else there with her now?"

"Helen Carpenter, our neighbor, is there while I came in to get the doc."

"Good. She's had several babies so she'll be able to help some. Go home and put some water on to boil, lots of it. I'm going to go help Papa right now, and as soon as he's done,

he'll be right out." She turned him around and headed him toward the door. "Now don't waste any time; hurry!"

"Okay, thanks," he said as he ran back out the door.

Naomi smiled a bit, knowing that by telling him to hurry he didn't take the time to stop and argue with her, insisting he needed her Papa now, rather than later. Only having one doctor in town could sometimes cause problems, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. For now, she hurried in to assist him with the surgery so he could get out to the Granger place.

"There you are, good," Doc said as she took her place across the table from him. She saw what he was doing and jumped right in to help. They worked well together. In an emergency like this, he seldom had to tell her what to do or what he needed; she knew and simply did it.

"Ralph Granger came in to get you. It seems Wilma went into labor."

"Oh, no. What did you tell him?"

She grinned as she looked at her grandfather. "He was pretty antsy when he found out you were busy and couldn't leave right away to go with him, so I told him to go home and boil water and you'd be out as soon as you finish this surgery."

"Did that satisfy him?"

"I don't think completely, but when I told him to hurry, he left," she said with another grin and a bit of a giggle.

Doc shook his head. "Sometimes I don't know what I'd do without you here helping me. He was probably halfway home before it sunk in to him that I'll be a little while yet."

"That's what I was hoping for." Her confident grin brought a smile to his face when he glanced up at her.

"Someday, you're going to meet a man who catches your attention. When that happens, he's going to have his hands

full, and I just hope he's man enough to keep a little control over you."

"Ha. I can't picture ever allowing any man to control me," she said with a smirk.

"You never know. Life can be funny sometimes. Now, thanks to your help, I've got the bullet out, but it was deeper than I thought. Let's get him stitched shut and see how he does."

"Papa, this was bad enough that you really shouldn't leave him right away. Why don't you let me saddle up Thunder and ride out to the Granger place? You watch your patient long enough to make sure he'll be okay. Then if Mama can stay with him, you can come out and take over. I can come back in then and watch him in case he has any problems."

He finished the last stitch then looked up at Naomi. "You may be right. You can deliver a baby as well as I can, and I don't feel too good about letting this man alone yet. If he stays quiet and starts breathing stronger, I'll come join you."

"Good. Let me help you get him into the bed and I'll go get Thunder." Together, they got their patient into the bed they kept in the little nook off the back of the room reserved for surgeries.

She turned to leave as he was getting him settled in, but he stopped her with a hand on her arm. "I'll be out there as soon as I feel I can, but this is Wilma's first baby, so it's apt to take several hours yet. If I don't make it out before dark, you stay there. They won't mind at all, and I don't want you coming home alone after dark."

"Papa, you worry too much. I'll be fine."

"Naomi, you listen to me. I don't want you coming home alone after dark, and I expect you to listen to me. If I can't trust you, I won't allow you to go out on these calls. Do you understand?"

She was obviously not happy, as evidenced by her deep

sigh, but the steady glare she was getting from him told her he was serious. "Okay, I'll wait for you to get there. Now, I'd better get going."

"Be careful, and good luck. I'll get there as soon as I can, as long as our patient here doesn't have any problems."

She ran out the door and to the little barn behind their house. She had her beloved gelding saddled in no time and minutes later was heading out of town. Doc saw the dust flying from Thunder's hooves and shook his head. That girl was going to worry him to death.

She was extremely smart—maybe too smart for her own good. She picked up so much watching him that when he needed an extra hand, she willingly helped. She did such a good job, he'd begun letting her handle more and more over the last couple years. In his opinion, she was now just as good a doctor as he was, though she'd never had any training other than what he'd taught her.

At twenty-two, she was old enough she should be married, but she wasn't even courting anyone. Not that men weren't willing, because they were. She was just not interested. She would rather help him in his practice than step out with any of the young men who had come calling on her. On the rare occasions she did go out with one, there was something wrong with him that kept her from seeing him again. He worried about her ending up alone as he felt strongly that life was meant to be shared. He felt there was someone out there for everyone, and she needed to give young men a chance. He still held out hope that someday the right man would come along and sweep her off her feet. He hoped it was while he was still on this earth so he could witness it. He knew it would be fun to watch.



NAOMI HELD Thunder back while they made their way out of Cedarville, but as soon as they were out of town, she let him have his lead as they made their way to the Granger home. Ralph came out of the house as she was thundering up the lane and coming to a stop at the house. "I'm glad you got here. Go on in. I'll take care of your horse."

"Thanks. Papa's going to try to make it, too." Naomi untied her medical bag from her saddle and turned for the porch steps.

"Okay. I'm glad you came, and Wilma will be mighty glad, too."

Naomi was already up the porch steps and nodded at him before slipping inside. She heard voices and headed in that direction. Before she got there, she heard Wilma moaning in pain and ran the rest of the way to the bedroom. "Good afternoon, Wilma, Helen. How are we doing?"

"Oh, thank goodness you're here," Helen said, moving off to the side. "Thank you for coming."

"Of course. I'm sorry one of us couldn't get here sooner. A man was just brought in who had been shot and we had to get the bullet out of him. Papa's going to come out if he can, if our patient wakes up and is okay."

"Cedarville is very fortunate to have the two of you," Helen said.

"Well, I do what I can to help Papa out."

"From what I've seen and heard, you do everything he does, and just as well," Helen said.

"Thank you, ma'am," she said, taking her stethoscope out of her medical bag. "He certainly is a good teacher."

"And he says you're a good student and have learned real quick. We're all happy to have you and that you're willing to help out."

Naomi had done an exam on the patient while they were talking and turned to her now, looking a bit concerned.

"Wilma, where has most of your pain been?" After a few more questions and watching how Wilma reacted to the next contraction she had, Naomi was more concerned. She did a physical exam and confirmed the baby was coming breech. She worked hard for almost an hour but was finally able to get the baby turned around. Once she did, she wasn't sure who was more worn out, her or Wilma, but luckily, the baby was born with the next contraction. Seeing the newborn sent a sudden second energy gushing through her body, and Naomi quickly took care of the baby.

Once she was confident the baby was all right and breathing fine on her own, she passed the precious little girl to Helen and turned back to Wilma, who looked totally exhausted. She could understand why; she'd learned she'd been in labor for hours before Naomi had arrived, and it had been difficult to get the baby turned. Once she was turned, Wilma delivered easily, but it had been a difficult labor up until then, and one that had lasted over seven hours. Once she had the afterbirth delivered and checked to be sure Wilma was fine in her lower region, no excessive bleeding or other problems, she turned to look at her ashen face.

She looked so pale, Naomi wasn't even sure she was fully conscious of what was going on around her, and she didn't like that at all. "Congratulations, Wilma. You have a beautiful little daughter. I know that was difficult, but you did wonderful, and your little girl is fine. Now, how are you doing, and what can I get for you? Would you like some water?"

"Don't know if I can drink," Wilma managed to say, just above a whisper.

Relieved to know she was alert enough to answer, Naomi smiled. "I'll help you. Let me get a glass." She hurried over to the washstand and poured a glass of water from the pitcher and returned to her patient. She lifted her shoulders enough

to allow her to swallow easier, then held the glass up to her lips. She heaved another sigh of relief when Wilma took a couple sips of water, then smiled her thanks. She fluffed her pillow before laying her back against it.

"I'm sure you'll want more water soon after that long delivery, so just tell me when and I'll help you with some more. First, though, I'll bet you're ready to see your daughter."

A smile, however small, was a welcome sight to Naomi, and apparently to Helen, as well. She turned to Naomi with a look of relief as she brought the newborn to them. Naomi took her in her arms and carefully laid her on Wilma's chest, holding onto her tightly. She knew how important that first mother/baby touch was and hoped it would help Wilma regain some of her strength and color. "I've got her, Wilma, she's safe. I wanted her to be close enough so you could see her up close and feel her. When you get a little more strength back, I'll put her in your arms."

"Thank you," Wilma said, looking tired and appreciative. "She is beautiful, isn't she?"

"She certainly is," Naomi confirmed, "and she's doing fine." She held the baby where she was for a few minutes while Wilma looked at her, smiling and saying a few words, albeit softly. "Is it all right if I give her back to Helen for a few minutes now? Let's see if you're ready for another few sips of water. I'll bet you're feeling pretty parched."

Wilma nodded, and Helen took the baby again. Naomi helped Wilma take a few more sips of water and then helped her lie back down again. She talked to her a few minutes about the new baby but rubbed her arms rather vigorously while she talked. Wilma was still much too pale for Naomi's comfort. It was almost another hour before Naomi started relaxing as Wilma's color slowly started to return. She'd had several more sips of water, and each time it seemed to revive

her a bit more. Finally, two and a half hours after she'd arrived, Naomi asked Wilma if she was ready to have Ralph come in and meet their new daughter.

"Yes. I'm sure he's getting worried about us."

"I imagine he is. I would have asked him in sooner, but I wanted to give you a little more time to recover from the birth. With the baby being breech, we had to work hard to get her in the right position. You did wonderful, but I know it took a lot of strength from you. Do you feel up to it now?"

"Yes, I do," she said, and Naomi could tell she was much improved. Not only did she have more color and look better now, she sounded better. Her voice was much stronger. Naomi felt much better now as she stepped out of the bedroom and approached Wilma's extremely nervous husband.

Ralph hurried over to her. "Is Wilma okay? I heard a baby, but it wasn't very loud. Are they okay?"

Naomi tried to calm Ralph down. "Wilma and your new little daughter are both doing fine now," she assured him. "It was a little more difficult than I'd hoped because the baby was in the wrong position. We got her turned around and then she was born quickly. It was more difficult for Wilma, but she did really well. She's resting now. She'll need to get a lot of rest the next few days, but then she'll be right as rain. Do you have anyone in mind who may be able to come stay with you for a few days to help with the new baby and make some meals, or would you like me to talk to the preacher and see if he can recommend someone who may be willing to help?"

Ralph looked relieved, but she could tell he was still concerned, and rightfully so. "She'll be fine, Ralph. She's just physically exhausted right now. She is eager to see you and show you your new daughter. Why don't you go in and visit? I'm going to sit down out here in the kitchen and rest a few

minutes, maybe make a cup of tea if you don't mind, while you visit with your wife and daughter. Then we can talk again before I leave."

"Okay, thank you. I'll talk to her about someone staying, too. I don't know of anyone in particular other than Helen, but she has her own family to take care of." He turned to go into the bedroom but paused and turned back to her. "Thank you for coming out and helping her," he said sincerely. "I hate to think of what might have happened if you hadn't been able to come out." He turned and hurried in to see his wife and daughter.

Naomi sunk down into a chair at the table and took a moment to think about Ralph's words. Honestly, she didn't want to think about what might have happened, either, if she hadn't come out to help. She had a lot of respect for her grandfather. He was a good doctor, but she knew there had been a few times when something like that had happened. Two people needed help at the same time, and he couldn't help them both. He didn't talk about those times, but she'd heard a couple stories from other people in town. Everyone knew he couldn't be in two places at once and no one blamed him, but everyone also knew how bad he felt when that did happen.

He'd mentioned several times how thankful he was that she'd learned enough to be able to help him when he needed that extra hand. Tonight, was definitely one of those times. She was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't hear Helen come out of the bedroom and join her in the kitchen. "Are you okay, Naomi?"

Her words startled Naomi back to the present, but she quickly recovered. "Yes, just a bit tired, I guess. How about you?"

"Like you, a bit tired, but I'm fine. I'm so thankful you made it here. Things didn't seem quite right, but I had no

idea what was wrong or what to do about it. I don't know what we'd have done without you."

"Well, I made it in time, so let's not even think of what might have been. I could use a cup of tea. I wonder if Wilma has any."

"She does, and I'm sure she'd want you to have some. I know where it is, so you sit there and rest a bit. I'll put the water on and join you in a cup. Would it be all right if I take a cup in for Wilma?"

"If she enjoys tea, that would be a good idea. She needs to get more liquid in her, broth would be very helpful, and I'd like to see her eat a little bit, as well. She needs to build her strength back up so she can feed that little one."

Helen stoked the fire in the stove and put some water on to boil. They were visiting a bit when there was a knock at the front door. It opened before either of them had time to turn toward it, and Will Henderson walked in.

"Papa, you made it," Naomi said.

"I did, and you look exhausted. Is everything okay?"

"It is now," she assured him. She went on to explain the breech birth and what she'd done.

"It sounds like you did a fine job," her grandfather said. "I think you did everything I would have."

"She did a wonderful job, Doc," Helen said. "I knew she was working extremely hard, but she has such a way of staying calm and keeping everyone else calm. She talked Wilma through it all and kept her calm so she did everything Naomi asked of her. You should be proud of her."

"Oh, I am," Will confirmed. "I'm extremely proud of my granddaughter. She's a fine doctor."

"I'm not a real doctor," Naomi said, turning red from the compliment. "I never went to school."

"That doesn't make a bit of difference in my book," Will argued. "You're a better doctor than some who have gone to

school. I've told you before, maybe you should think about going to school and getting that piece of paper to prove you're a doctor."

"No," she said flatly. "For one thing, I'm a woman and they probably wouldn't even let me in. But I don't want to leave you. Besides, if I left, what would you do the next time two people needed medical help at the same time? No, I'm better off staying right here."

"Well, I have to agree she has a point," Helen said. "No one here cares if she's gone to some fancy school or not. She's proven to all of us she's not only a good doctor, but a good person. We'd miss her something awful."

"I won't argue with that, Helen," Will said. "I'm also glad you were able to come over here and be with Wilma."

"Wilma and Ralph are good neighbors. I'll help all I can over the next few days, but I'm wondering if there isn't someone who might be able to come stay here a few days to help Wilma take care of that new baby and do the cooking for them."

"Maybe we can talk to the Klines," Will suggested. "Mary Beth is out of school now and I know she does a lot of the cooking for Ruth. Maybe one of those two would be willing to stay here until Wilma's back on her feet again."

"Good idea, Papa," Naomi said as she took another long sip of tea.

"You look tired, Naomi."

"I am. Why don't you check on Wilma and the baby, make sure I didn't miss something, and if you think they're both okay, we'll head home?"

"Good idea." He took another sip of the tea Helen had made for him as well and went to the bedroom. Half an hour later, Naomi was again assuring Wilma and Ralph they were welcome for her help. She wished them both well and told Ralph to come get one of them if they had any problems, and

otherwise one of them would be out to check on them in a week.

Ralph had Thunder at the house ready for her when they walked outside. "Let's tie him on behind the buggy," Will said, "and you can sit up here with me. I know how much you like riding him, but it's late and you're tired. There's something I'd like to talk to you about anyway, so let's do it on our way home, unless you're too tired to talk?"

"No, I'm good," she assured him. "What do you want to talk about?"

"I'll tell you once we're on the road."

Naomi nodded, but was obviously curious. As soon as they were traveling down the road, her curiosity got the better of her. "Okay, Papa, what do you want to talk about; what's on your mind?"

"I got a telegram today from my brother."

"Oh? What's Uncle Jeb up to?"

"Probably no good," Will answered quickly. "As you know, he and I haven't always seen eye to eye on things. In fact, I don't trust him any farther than I can throw him, and he's a big man."

"I know," Naomi said with a chuckle. "So what did the telegram say?"

"He's coming for a visit. I don't know why, but I doubt he just wants to see us. He wants something, I'm sure. I wanted to warn you and remind you not to let him snow you over. He'll try—he always does—but don't trust him."

"I promise I won't trust your brother, Papa," she said with a laugh. "Does that make you feel better?"

"Yes, it does," he said as he joined in her laughter. Then he sobered and continued. "There's one more thing I want to talk about before he gets here, which could be any day now according to his telegram. Do you remember that chest my father made that we keep in our bedroom?"

"Yes, of course. Mama and I have talked about it a few times. She loves it, and so do I. It's so pretty, solid walnut with a beautiful carving on the top."

"Well, that trunk will be yours when your grandmother and I pass on. As I told you before, the farm we live on is only half mine."

"Yes, I know your father left it to you and Uncle Jeb."

"Yes, he did. I planned on buying Jeb's half from him and leaving the farm to your father, but he's stubborn enough that he wouldn't sell it to me. I still planned on leaving my half of it to your father, since he'd been running it. I figured he could handle any problems Jeb tried to give him."

"He could have," Naomi agreed.

"Yes, he could have." He turned serious before continuing. "I don't want you to have to deal with him, though, and I think you'll be too busy being Cedarville's doctor to try to take care of the farm, so I'm leaving him my half of the farm, but everything else goes to you."

"Papa, I don't like to even think of a time you're not here with me, but that's being awfully generous."

"I'm getting older, so I have to think about it. I had a new will made, but I wanted to tell you about it. I want you to know a few things. First off, I don't trust Jeb. If I pass on before him, he'll probably try to get his grubby little hands on anything he can."

"He doesn't need any money, does he?"

"No, he has plenty, or should, but he's a greedy man. I don't think he'll ever have enough to be happy. Lately, though, I believe he's begun gambling and has lost some money. But I wanted to warn you to be careful and watch out for him. He'll get the farm, but that's it. All the cattle and horses, I've bought personally from my half of the profit from the farm, so they belong to me, not to the farm. They,

along with everything in the house and barn, are to go to you."

"You're giving me the cattle and horses?"

"Yes, I am. He'll get the farm, which is just the land. He'll either have to sell it or start paying the foreman who's there at the time in order to keep it running. If he wants to keep the farm running as it is, he'll have to buy cattle and horses from somewhere. The easiest thing for him to do would be to keep the ones that are there and buy them from you. If he does that, it's up to you what kind of deal you want to make with him. If he gives you a bunch of trouble, I'm sure you can sell them to other people with no trouble. Don't feel you have to sell them to him, and don't give them to him for next to nothing."

"He really does upset you, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he does, and I don't want him giving you a difficult time. But I wanted to talk to you about the trunk. There are a few things that I especially want you to have, so I put them in the trunk. When something happens to your grandmother and me, find a place you can move the trunk to right away, before he can decide he wants it and helps himself to it, regardless of what my will says. Everything in there is yours, and your grandmother and I feel strongly about that. The trunk is yours, and everything in it."

"Okay. What's in it; anything he would want?"

"You'll see what's in it when we die. In the meantime, just know that we want you to have it. I'm just afraid he's going to think, for some reason, he's entitled to everything I have, so in an attempt to make sure the trunk and its contents go to you, I've had a lock put on the trunk. As you know, the beautiful hand carving he did in the top of the trunk contains several levers that need to be turned a certain way in a certain order to open the trunk. If you don't do it right, it won't open. You remember how to open it, don't you?"

"Yes. It took me several tries to learn it, but I know it now. That's one of the things I like so much about it. If you don't know how to open it, you won't be able to."

"Unless you cut it open or tear it apart. Now, on top of that, and as a way to prove you're the person meant to have it, I've had a lock installed on it. When we get home, I'm going to give you the key to that lock, and I want you to be careful with it. Don't lose it, but don't keep it in a place anyone else could come across it."

"Okay."

"When we die, you'll have the only key to the lock, and you'll know the correct way to open it. I'm hoping that will dissolve any claim he may make to it. Our father built it, so I'm sure he'll try to lay claim to it for that reason, but he built one for each of us. They're worth some money because of the time and effort it took to make such a nice piece of furniture, not to mention the detailed workmanship involved in making all the special levers and latches that are used to open it. After our father died, Jeb sold his. I don't want him to try to claim our father made it, so it should go to him. You having the only key, along with me having it put in my will that it's yours, should take care of that."

"I would think so. You're not going to tell me what's in it?"

"No. This way, it will be a surprise for you, but know now and remember always that it's a few things that meant a lot to us and we want you to have them."

"Okay," she said, obviously mystified.

"Now, Ralph's a first time father. How much of a nervous wreck was he?" They talked about Ralph and how the delivery went. "I'm sure it was a difficult delivery, and you've made me proud of you once again, Naomi. It sounds like you did everything just like I would have. I'm glad you hurried out there when you did."

"I'm glad, too. I'm also glad you taught me well, Papa. It's a

good feeling being able to help people, especially times like today. Things could have gone disastrous, but it's nice to leave knowing we had a good outcome." Will smiled, knowing exactly what she meant. It was a very good feeling, one that not many people would understand.