

Free Sample



THE GIRL I
LEFT BEHIND

Stephanie Bain

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Chapter 1

Drake

April, 1861

ALEXANDRA dug her fingers deeper into Shadow's mane, praying she had enough strength to hold out until the end. If she didn't, she would fall to her death, trampled by the mob of men and horseflesh that was chasing her, tumbling across Monty's Field like round shots fired from a Napoleon 12-pounder. With faith in her horse, Alexandra didn't flinch as the charcoal gelding charged toward the high, split-rail fence at the end of the field.

The jump would have been disastrous for Alexandra had she not disguised herself in men's clothing. The billowing hoop skirt she usually wore would have caught on the post and wrenched her out of the saddle.

Once she was safely on the other side of the fence, Alexandra readjusted her hat, hoping no loose strands of hair had escaped. Glancing over her shoulder, she smiled, estimating her lead to be two lengths. She was no longer Alexandra Corbin, the dead sheriff's daughter. She was the girl who was gonna win the Jackson County Horserace.

* * *

"Why should we fight if it is all going to the Devil anyway?"

Elias Kelson looked up from the racing bill in his hand and turned to Garrett Rainier who was standing next to him on the front porch of his stone, Gothic Revival mansion. "Because, we all must play our part, Rainier," Elias drawled in response to the young man's question. "I'm sure your progenitor never misses a chance to remind you of yours."

Elias smiled when Garrett huffed at the word "progenitor." He often found it amusing, if not necessary, to remind his fellow elites that while he did not possess a piece of paper signed by the chief administrator of a prestigious university, in his case such stamps of approval would be...superfluous. Ten lifetimes at the best universities in the world couldn't educate a man on the things Elias had learned on his own over the course of four decades. Whatever Garrett Rainier thought he knew about the Devil, Elias knew two things: the South was hell-bent on going to war, and win or lose, it would be the Devil to

pay.

Plucking a wad of U.S. dollars from his pocket, Elias waved the money at Garrett's father, Hanson, who was standing on the opposite side of the twelve-foot column against which Elias was leaning. "If you recall, Hanson, I advised you to put your money on the charcoal gelding."

With a stately tilt of his long, sharp nose, Hanson scoffed, "Anyone can see that mongrel beast does not have stamina. Besides, a man ought to bet on his own stock."

Elias chuckled as he returned the money to his pocket and tugged at the sky blue cravat that was cutting into his neck. "Oh, I never bet on my own stock. I find it more profitable when they lose, hence my lack of concern that both our horses are trailing by two lengths."

The porch rattled beneath Elias' feet as the horses thundered past the mass of onlookers who had gathered in his front yard for the annual Jackson County Horserace. At the commencement of the final lap, Hanson's blood bay was neck and neck with Elias' sorrel. The charcoal gelding was still in the lead.

Elias was just about to offer Garrett a cigar when he saw the blood bay stumble. The jockey tried to bring his head up, but it was too late. The bay went down and took Elias' sorrel with him.

The sorrel's jockey, a middle-aged black man whom Elias regarded as one of his better property investments to date, landed on his feet and sprang out of the way as the rest of the horses flew past him. The blood bay raised his head, but made no effort to get up.

The Rainiers' jockey wasn't moving at all. "Well, I suppose I ought to send someone to see about my jockey," Hanson grumbled as he scowled at the ball of emerald green racing silks lying in the middle of the road.

"Why, Hanson," Elias chirped, "you're among equals here. There's no need to pretend you care about the common man."

When the Rainiers' jockey finally stirred and crawled away from the injured horses, Elias waved his hand, and a large black man emerged from the smithy across the yard and trotted off to help the lad. It was neither the first nor the greatest disaster to occur during the Jackson County Horserace over the years. Elias hated to lose his sorrel, but that was a small matter. He had a dozen horses of equal speed and twice as much sense.

As for the people themselves, the initial shock would quickly subside, freeing them to carry on with the day's festivities as if no judgment would ever befall them. Elias considered sharing the correspondence he had received earlier that

morning from one of his business associates in Charleston, but he chose to let the people consume their pies and cakes in peace. The official news would come soon enough.

Elias laughed. In the midst of it all, the self-composed rider of the charcoal gelding was spurring her horse through the last stretch of the race as if she was oblivious to the calamity closing in on her. The world was coming to an end, and all Alexandra Corbin cared about was winning that damned horserace.

* * *

As the horses settled into the final lap, Alexandra nearly lost her seat when a meaty hand with banged up knuckles and filthy nails clamped down on her arm. Prichard Benefield glared at her from atop his lop-eared champagne beast that was straining to match Shadow's speed.

If not for the danger of the situation, Alexandra might have laughed at her assailant. His large, menacing frame was stuffed into a hodgepodge of gentlemen's hand-me-downs and an undersized planter's hat, giving him the appearance of a trained baboon or a performing bear from the circus.

Taking the reins in her teeth, Alexandra extended her free hand and whacked Prichard in the face with her riding crop. He didn't let go, and she didn't stop hitting him. Finally, Prichard's mount grew tired of the jostling and darted to the outside. With Prichard still clutching her arm, Alexandra almost came out of the saddle, but the rider who had come up on the opposite side reached over and pulled her upright.

Alexandra barely had time to send her twin brother, Cass, an appreciative glance before he spurred his chestnut stallion into the final stretch of the race. Furious that Prichard's interference had cost her the lead, Alexandra kicked Shadow a little harder than she intended. He snorted in protest and veered to the side, costing Alexandra more time.

Dismayed but not defeated, she waited for Shadow to settle down before she made her move. She urged her horse forward until she was on her brother's heels. Instead of overtaking him, Alexandra held back and let him cut the way through the pack.

When Cass broke out in the lead, Alexandra swung to the inside and closed the gap. She kept stride with her brother until he tapped her knuckles with his crop.

"Back off," Cass warned.

"No!"

"You can't win."

“Yes, I can.”

“No, they’ll find you out if you win.”

“I don’t care.”

Evidently unwilling to continue the argument, Cass bumped his mount into Shadow, causing the inexperienced gelding to lurch out of the way. When Cass’ stallion lengthened his stride, Alexandra knew the race was lost, but she pressed on.

Cass and his sister crossed the finish line with Cass winning by a length. Alexandra gritted her teeth. She would have to be satisfied with second place. This year.

As the spectators gathered around Cass, Alexandra dismounted and handed Shadow’s reins to Matthew, the spry, aging black man, who was waiting for her on the other side of the stable yard, away from the crowd. With a conspiratorial gleam in his eye, Matthew grunted, “Miss Alexandra, what you mean comin’ in second place when I trained ol’ Shadow here to outrun de Debil?” He rubbed Shadow’s ears as he gave Alexandra a sideways glance. “I reckon Mr. Jonas be proud of this ‘un.”

Alexandra wasn’t sure whether Matthew was referring to her or to the horse, but seeing as how he had consented to training them both only after she had threatened to tell on him for stealing sugar from the kitchen, she suspected he most likely meant the horse. It was Matthew who had given her that first riding lesson when she was eight. That he had done so at her father’s request gave Alexandra hope that if Jonas Corbin had been alive to see his daughter take part in the most important race of the year, he would have been proud of her, despite her appearance. Her mother, on the other hand, would not. No matter how well Alexandra had ridden in the race, no matter how significant the trophy might have been, Laura Catherine Corbin would never forgive any daughter of hers who was caught dead wearing pants.

Alexandra kissed Shadow on the nose and stole away to change out of her man clothes before someone recognized her. Leaving the stables, Alexandra pulled her hat down, keeping her face turned away from the townspeople who were milling around the stretch of outbuildings that separated the stables from the cotton barn where she had hidden her female clothing.

She had just passed the smithy, when she spotted Prichard Benefield standing on the other side of the smokehouse. Curse his hide. If he hadn’t slowed her down she would have beaten them all. After reviewing her arsenal of ugly words, she marched right up to him and stuck her finger in his face. “You cost me the

race, you skunk-faced, swellheaded jackanapes.”

Prichard seized her by the collar and dragged her to the back of the smokehouse. “You gonna pick a fight with me? The way I see it, *you cost me* the race,” he snarled as he shoved her against the building and brandished his fist near her chin. “Now, you’re gonna pay for it.”

Alexandra caught herself before she reacted as any woman with a drop of Scots-Irish blood would react to such an affront. Trusting the shadow of her hat to conceal her face, she cleared her throat and replied in as deep and assertive a voice as she could manage. “You’re the one who tried to knock me off my horse.”

“You listen to me, boy. I was s’posed to win that race. I made arrangements, and I don’t like it when folks interfere with my arrangements. That’s how folks wind up dead ‘round here.”

“Well, I’m not gonna be one of them. Now, let me go!” Alexandra demanded, turning her head away from the stench of his rotten onion breath.

“I’ll let you go when you give me what I want, and what I want is my winnin’s.”

“I don’t have any money, and if I did, I still wouldn’t give it to you,” she snapped.

Prichard grabbed her shirtfront and pinned her against the building with both hands planted on her chest. Whatever foul thing he was about to say, he didn’t say it. With a furrowed brow, he patted Alexandra’s chest. His squinty eyes popped open. “What the devil...?”

When Alexandra dug her heel into his instep, Prichard drew in a sharp breath and hopped back. She twisted away from him, but he caught her collar and snatched her hat, freeing a mess of honey-colored hair.

Prichard’s yellow teeth flashed through his thick, black beard. “Well, I’ll be damned. You’re that Corbin girl.” His fingers crept up her neck. “I have been known on occasion to accept other kinds of payment, but you ain’t my kind of woman, so maybe I’ll pay your brother a visit and get what I want outta him instead.”

Cass’ voice came from behind Prichard’s hulking frame. “What’s this I hear about you paying me a visit, Prichard?”

Alexandra peered over Prichard’s shoulder to see Cass standing no more than six feet away. Emboldened by her brother’s presence, Alexandra elbowed Prichard in the gut. When he doubled over, she punched him in the nose. He shook his head like a bear stung by a bee. He reared back, but before he drove his fist into Alexandra’s face, Cass attacked him from behind. When Prichard

spun around to face Cass, Alexandra jumped on Prichard's back. Both men went down. Caught up in the struggle, Alexandra didn't realize that her extra weight wasn't helping the situation.

"Alexandra, get off!" Cass yelled from underneath the pile.

Prichard rose to his feet and slung Alexandra off his back. He was about to take a swing at Cass when Elias Kelson suddenly appeared and whacked Prichard on the back of the head with the silver handle of his riding crop.

Dizzy from the blow, Prichard stumbled and sank to the ground with his back against the wall of the smokehouse. With Prichard subdued, Elias directed his attention to Alexandra, eyeing her closely as he reached into his pocket and pulled out the racing bill. He read through the list of names until he found the one he was looking for. "Hmm. I've never heard of *Drake* Corbin before today. A long-lost cousin, perhaps?"

Cass started to speak, but Elias cut him off as he slid the racing bill back into his pocket. "Now, Cass, you know your sister's aberrations are safe with me." His eyes glittered with amusement as he retrieved Alexandra's hat and dropped it on her head. "Why, the Kelsons and the Corbins are like family."

Cass raised his chin and tightened his grip on Alexandra's arm. "As we are *not* family, Mr. Kelson, I trust you'll excuse us. Good day, sir."

* * *

As Cass led his sister away, Elias leveled his riding crop at Prichard's face. "When I give instructions, I expect them to be followed exactly as they were given."

Prichard sat up against the side of the smokehouse, making no effort to stand as he squinted up at Elias. "If you don't like how I handled the rider of the charcoal geldin' durin' the race, maybe you shoulda told me from the start she was a girl and I'd have done somethin' different."

"Which is why I didn't tell you she was a girl," Elias growled. "That shouldn't have mattered, anyway. I told you to scare her out of the race, and I made it clear you were to do it without laying a hand on her. She could've broken her neck."

"What do you care? You sweet on her?"

"That is none of your concern."

"Suits me fine, but next time you want somethin' done 'bout the Corbin girl, you do it yourself. I don't want no part in it." Folding his arms across his chest, Prichard sneered, "Now, the way I see it, I'da have won that race if it hadn't been for you tryin' to fix it. So, somebody owes me my winnin's. I don't care who. Just long as somebody keeps on fillin' my pockets. Otherwise, I might start to feelin'

like I'm not 'ppreciated. You know how I get when I don't feel 'ppreciated."

Elias scowled as he waved a handful of Confederate banknotes in Prichard's face. "I'm astounded as to how a God-fearing woman like Viola Benefield could have raised such a scoundrel."

"Fortunate for you she did," Prichard huffed as he crammed the bills in his pocket. "And if you stick that ridin' crop in my face again, I'm gonna take your arm off."

Elias leaned close to Prichard's face. "If that's the worst you can do, it won't be enough."

* * *

Cass yanked his handkerchief out of his pocket and dragged it across his face. Though Cass' handsome features and sandy blond hair were slightly tarnished by streaks of mud, Alexandra could see his frustration in the set of his shoulders and the expression in his deep-set hazel eyes.

"Alexandra, what were you thinking?" he scolded as he dragged her along, away from the smokehouse and past the corncrib toward the back of the cotton barn.

"I told you I was gonna ride."

"I was talking about the fight."

"Ha! If you can call it that," she huffed, a little too arrogantly for a girl of nineteen who had narrowly escaped a fight she couldn't have won. She had just gotten the words out of her mouth when she suddenly dropped behind a rain barrel and covered her face with her hat.

Bewildered, Cass asked her what she was doing.

"Sshh!" She smacked his leg and pointed.

Cass stiffened as the cause of Alexandra's abrupt change in attitude approached.

"Congratulations on your victory, Cass."

Though the smooth timbre of Garrett Rainier's voice and his placid features usually masked any emotion he didn't want to communicate, Alexandra had known him long enough to pick up on the quirks that meant he was irritated. He cleared his throat just before he asked, "Where is your sister? She said she would be here today, but I have yet to see her."

Alexandra barely resisted peeking out from behind the barrel to gaze at the most sought-after young bachelor in Jackson County. Besides his good looks, Garrett Rainier was well-bred, well-mannered, and well-thought of by every female of his acquaintance. Hugging her knees tightly against her pounding

chest, Alexandra begged God to send him away.

Whether by God's initiative or his own, Cass replied, "Rainier, I thought if anyone could keep track of Alexandra's whereabouts, it would be you. Are you her beau, or aren't you?"

Garrett chewed his lips, but otherwise gave no further indication of his frustration. "When you see her, tell her I am sorry I missed her."

As Garrett strode away, Alexandra relaxed her hold on her hat. Though he was not her beau, officially, she still would have been mortified if he had seen her looking such a mess.

"You know you're gonna have to choose between Garrett and 'Drake,'" Cass remarked as he helped her to her feet, his frustration giving way to brotherly concern. "You can't keep them both, not forever."

Alexandra sighed as she brushed a glob of dirt off Cass' coat. She knew she would have to choose, and when the time came, she would most certainly choose Garrett. Until then, she saw no reason to stop wearing pants and riding horses. Dismissing her brother with a teasing punch in the arm, she scampered into the cotton barn and retrieved the bag she had hidden before the race. She yanked out her crumpled skirt and a tight-fitting blouse with bell sleeves and hauled her petticoat and four-bone hoop skirt out from under a mountain of loose cotton.

Several minutes later, cloaked in nearly twelve pounds of cotton, buttons, and bone, Alexandra emerged from the barn and made her way through the crowd toward the food tables where she hoped to find Garrett. She was surprised at the number of people who had turned out for the race. Some folks had judged it unseemly to indulge in such entertainments when the country was on the verge of war until they heard Reverend Land's most recent sermon on Paul's letter to the Corinthians encouraging them to "run the race so as to receive the prize." Whether Reverend Land intended his congregants to interpret this as a divine sanction for horseracing was a subject of debate eventually settled by the reverend's presence at the race and the well-known fact that he hailed from the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Perhaps it was national turmoil that made this race seem more important than all the races that had come before it. It was the one thing that had brought the local Unionists and secessionists together since the previous December when Alabama left the Union and cast her lot with the Confederacy. Now, here they all were, enjoying the festivities and keeping the peace, albeit at separate tables.

Alexandra frowned when Elias' son, Luke, got up from one of the "Unionist" tables and blocked her path.

“If you’re looking for Garrett Rainier, he gave up and went home,” he announced as his gaze skittered across Alexandra’s body. Luke was a year older than Alexandra, but his dark, curly hair and the long lashes that fringed his big green eyes made him look much younger. According to the women in Marlbridge who were old enough to remember Elias’ wife, Luke was the spitting image of Susannah Banks Kelson. The only resemblance Alexandra saw to Elias was his arrogant smirk.

Hiding her disappointment at missing Garrett, Alexandra ignored Luke and continued on her way to the dessert table. Her heart sank when she reached her destination. Crumbs and gobs of icing peppered the tablecloth stained with cherry pie spatter.

“I’m afraid the ravenous masses have left you nothing but scraps. Fortunately for you, I have a solution.” Luke waved his hand. Immediately, a slave boy hurried over with a tray full of cookies.

Alexandra paused, caught in the middle of a struggle between her stomach and her pride. Her stomach won. She snatched two cookies and marched off to find Cass.

Before she had taken two steps, a shout arose from the crowd. Leonidas Beaumont, the only prominent citizen of Marlbridge who had not attended the race, reined in his lathered mount. He had scarcely completed a full sentence before the crowd’s curiosity transformed into that peculiar blend of dread and excitement with which Southerners were expected to greet such news. As Alexandra strained to hear Beaumont over the crowd noise, two words overshadowed the rest: “Fort Sumter” and “war.”

Chapter 2

A Fight's Comin'

April 11, 1862

DESPITE the best efforts of his foes, Cana Ramsey had lived to be a couple years shy of thirty. Whether he would live to see his next birthday was much less certain than it had been before he and his company of eighty-nine cavalrymen boarded the train bound for Chattanooga.

As he leaned on the railing of the last car and looked down at the track of the Memphis and Charleston running along beneath him, he finally let his mind contemplate the bloodlettin' he'd witnessed a few days ago at Shiloh church. What the farmers, shopkeepers, teachers, preachers, blacksmiths, and wainwrights on both sides had achieved in terms of battlefield formations did not exactly match up to the textbooks, but still, it had been one hell of a fight. The Confederates in their mismatched uniforms may have been less martial in appearance than the Federals, but they had made up for it in ferocity. It had taken two full days for them to lose the battle, their commanding general, and a fourth of their army.

In spite of Ramsey's love for a good fight, something about the battle at Shiloh church had deeply affected him in a way previous battles had not. It wasn't the carnage of the battle itself that had bothered him. Nor was it the stench of the blood and bowels of slain men that turned his stomach. It was the sight of all those dead horses. The images of dying men he could easily put out of his mind. He could choose to assume that they, like him, had committed enough sins in their lifetimes to warrant an early death. As far as he knew, laying down their lives on the battlefield may have been the only chance for redemption they had left, but he hated that the destruction of man bled over to the rest of creation.

In his lifetime, there had been only one death that Ramsey couldn't shake. On the night Jonas Corbin died, Ramsey had sworn an oath to never set foot in Marlbridge again. Even now, as the train carried him closer to his birthplace than he'd been in the past twelve years, he had every intention of keeping his vow, but the need for some form of atonement no matter how slight compelled

him to offer Jonas Corbin's son the only consolation that was within his power to offer.

Grunting at the ache in his bones, Ramsey turned back from the railing. He started to enter the traincar but decided the roof would be quicker than picking his way through the bodies of sleeping Confederates. With one hand on the ladder, he hesitated, reconsidering his decision to let them sleep awhile longer.

Though his men didn't know the details of their present mission, Ramsey knew full well what would happen if the mission failed. Nevertheless, his faithful band of warriors had done every grueling thing he'd asked of them. At present, a few hours of peace was about the only thing he had to offer them in exchange. He climbed the ladder and stepped onto the roof.

No stranger to the rhythm of a moving train, Ramsey strolled along the top, hopping from one car to the next until he reached the stock car. For the second time that day, he cursed whatever idiot thought it was a good idea to build a stock car with no way to get in except through the large sliding doors on the sides. Fortunately, this particular stock car had been shot to pieces at some point in its service, and whoever repaired it improved its functionality by leaving a hole in the side just big enough for a man to slide through.

Ramsey lay on his stomach and dangled his right leg over the side of the car. When his boot struck the bottom of the window, he gripped the edge of the roof and swung down through the opening. The sudden movement and the thud of Ramsey's boots on the floor startled the horses and Cass Corbin, who had volunteered to keep the beasts company.

Cass scrambled to his feet.

"At ease, Corbin," Ramsey said as he patted the thick neck of a strawberry roan with a broken stripe that ran from the top of his head to the tip of his nose. "This is Jack. He's a good horse, but nobody wants him because they think he's bad luck."

Cass rubbed Jack's face and smiled for the first time since the battle. "I'll take him. Anything will be better than that stray plug I've been riding."

A rail thin jumper with an ungainly head and knobby knees snorted and twitched his ears as if he had heard the insult.

"The horse you lost at Shiloh—what was his name?" Ramsey asked.

"That's the funny thing," Cass replied, staring through the beams of sunlight that poured in between the slats of the car. "His name was Shiloh, like the place in the Bible. Reverend Land said it means 'peace.' It's where the people used to meet with God."

“ ‘Where the people used to meet with God,’ ” Ramsey mused. “That is funny.”

Strange as it might have been to some other soul, one unaccustomed to bloodshed, it was on the battlefield where Ramsey felt most at peace with himself and his Maker. The smell of gunpowder, the sound of artillery that shook the earth, the sight of warriors marching steadily en masse through walls of smoke to their doom—all of it set his Scots-Irish blood on fire.

He had been told all his life that he was Cranston Ramsey made over with a temper as black as his hair—there was no denying the bloodline—but he wanted no part in that side of his family legacy. Cana Ramsey would die before he would play the coward as his grandfather had done. After a year of fighting the war between the North and the South, he still wasn’t sure which side was ultimately responsible for starting it and was even less sure about which side was going to win, but as long as he had blood in his veins to burn, he would see it through to the end whether it was the war’s end or his own.

Ramsey pulled a flask from his pocket. “Here’s to Shiloh.” He took a drink and offered the flask to Cass.

Cass took a hesitant sip and returned the flask. “All those men died, and we’re drinking to a horse.”

“A friend is a friend. Don’t matter what form or color they come in.” Ramsey ruffled Jack’s mane and turned to his own horse, a tall, muscular thoroughbred named Solomon. “Don’t you have a sister?”

Cass blinked at what he evidently thought was an abrupt change of subject. “Yes, sir. Alexandra.”

“How is she?”

“Same as ever.”

Recalling the run-in he’d had with Alexandra at Pop Brady’s when she couldn’t have been more than seven or eight, Ramsey allowed himself a brief moment of amusement. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Cass sifted a handful of hay. “Do you think I made the right decision, sir?”

“About what?”

Cass took a deep breath and dropped the remaining bits of hay. “Leaving my family to fight for a country that isn’t even two years old. Heck, we don’t know what it’s going to become. I signed up because I wanted a chance to do something worth doing, but there’s no guarantee the Confederacy will be any better than the Union. If it’s not, then what are we fighting for?” He hung his head. “I know I must sound like a coward, but my father always said it was a

shame to throw good effort after vanity. Chasing the wind, he called it. I'm willing to shed every drop of blood that's mine to shed, but not for vanity."

Ramsey studied Cass for a moment, surprised at the ease with which the young man confided in him. Cass had fought well at Shiloh and Fallen Timbers, and there was nothing in his manner that would indicate even a hint of cowardice. If there was, Ramsey wouldn't have secured Cass' transfer to his company, and Leonidas Beaumont wouldn't have pitched a fit to lose him. Still, some men were afflicted with a dual nature, men whose public face never revealed the inner man. Maybe Cass Corbin was one of those people, or maybe he was just honest.

At that moment, Solomon snorted and pawed at the floor. Ramsey looked up when he heard boots clomping on the roof. He climbed out the window and peered over the top to see one of his men teetering along the roof. His heart sank; he knew the man by his gait. Ramsey had always been fond of Limpy McGhee, and it wasn't going to bring him any pleasure if he had to kill him.

He waited until Limpy slipped down the ladder at the far end of the adjacent car before he sprang onto the roof in pursuit. Ramsey paused when he reached the top of the ladder. Limpy was standing on the platform outside the rear door of car N^o. 211 tying a red cloth to the railing. Between the wind and the clatter of iron wheels on the train track, Limpy never heard Ramsey coming. He screamed when Ramsey grabbed him, and both men crashed through the doorway of the car.

Limpy was on the floor, squirming under Ramsey's boot when Cass appeared in the doorway. As he entered the car, he stepped on a mound of gold pieces that had spilled out of an overturned powder keg. He drew his revolver and closed the door.

"Move, and you're dead, Limpy," Ramsey threatened, aiming his Colt Dragoon at the crippled man's head.

Limpy nodded his head. Realizing he had moved his head, he shook his head, moving it again. "Wait. I's just noddin'. I weren't movin'."

Cass stayed back as Ramsey jerked Limpy to his feet. "Who told you about the gold?"

Limpy sputtered and whimpered. Ramsey asked again with his backhand. Limpy yelped, "Darby! It was Darby!"

Instead of cursing the bug-eyed ninnyhammer, Ramsey restrained his response to a low growl with which Limpy was already familiar, "Who else knows? Tell me, right now."

Limpy shook his head. Ramsey narrowed one eye. Limpy blurted, “Edwards! Billy Edwards.”

At the mention of that name, Ramsey finally let go of at least one swear word before he directed his next order at Cass. “Stay here. If anyone comes through that door, shoot him.”

When Ramsey returned with Billy Edwards and Darby, Cass was struggling to free himself from Limpy who was clinging to his leg for dear life. “Don’t let Ramsey kill me,” the poor wretch begged.

“Shut up and get over here, Limpy,” Ramsey ordered.

Limpy scrambled away from Cass and tried to hide behind Darby, the eldest of the perpetrators, but Darby shoved him away. “Get off me, Limpy, you worthless cur.”

“How did you know about the gold, Darby?” Ramsey asked with a placid tone that would have terrified a wiser mortal.

Darby glared at him from beneath his thick, dark eyebrows. “I ain’t tellin’ you nothin’.”

Ramsey turned to Billy Edwards who was shaking so badly Ramsey had to hold him against the wall so he could see straight. For a moment, he thought the boy’s heart would give out before he could utter a word.

“I d-don’t know nothin’, I s-swear, Cap’n,” Billy gasped, snot and tears rolling down his face. He winced and squeezed his eyelids shut as Ramsey gripped the top of his shoulder muscle.

“Billy, I know you and Limpy and Darby have been fraternizing with the enemy,” Ramsey accused, pointing to each malefactor in turn.

Limpy wailed, “We ain’t done it, Cap’n, I swear. We been steerin’ clear of them bluebellies like you said.”

“I don’t mean the bluebellies. I mean the yellow ones who’ve been riding around in gangs robbing their own people.” Ramsey glowered at Darby. “You’ve been working for Prichard Benefield this whole time. I know he’s out there layin’ in wait. Tell me where.”

Darby remained silent until Ramsey shot him in the foot. The rogue collapsed, screaming in pain, but still he refused to give up Prichard. Ramsey holstered his revolver, dragged Darby to the door, and hauled him out onto the platform.

Billy and Limpy clambered after him. “Have mercy, Cap’n! We won’t cross you never agin, we swear it!”

Ramsey clutched Darby by the throat. “Tell Prichard that Cana Ramsey sends

his regards. He'll know what that means."

Darby jutted his chin in defiance. Ramsey shoved him off the train.

Without bothering to draw his gun, Ramsey snarled at Billy and Limpy. "Where is Prichard?"

Billy shook his head. "I s-swear I don't know, but I-I know he p-plans to stop you b-before you get to B-bridgeport."

Limpy volunteered, "Yes, sir. He's right. I heard Darby say somethin' 'bout laying trees cross the tracks. You know Prichard won't fight 'less he's the one chooses the battlefield."

"I appreciate your cooperation, gentlemen. Now, jump."

They shook their heads.

"Stay here then." He drew a knife from his belt.

Billy and Limpy jumped.

When Ramsey turned back to Cass, he saw that his treatment of the three scoundrels had shocked him, but whatever was going through his head, Cass stuck to his duty when he opened his mouth. "Shall I stand guard in case anybody else figures out what's in these powder kegs?"

Ramsey looked at the floor where Darby's blood had smeared a path to the doorway. He picked up one of the gold coins. As he inspected it, he could feel the blood draining from his face. When he had agreed to escort the gold shipment with the promise that his cut would be enough to clothe and feed his men for a few more months, he had assumed Colonel Whisenhunt and his associates had stolen it from the Yankees. The distinct markings on the reverse of the coin—a phoenix carrying a snake in its talons—revealed the gold's true origins. How Whisenhunt, who was aptly nicknamed Madcap Charlie, had managed to get his hands on gold belonging to the most dangerous organization in the Tennessee Valley, Ramsey could only speculate, but there was nothing to be done about it now except to finish the job, hopefully in one piece.

He tossed the coin into the powder keg. "Cass, go tell Muley to stop the train and keep his head down. A fight's comin'."

Chapter 3

Rivals and Disasters

ALEXANDRA ducked her head as she crossed the street, hoping to avoid the two elderly gentlemen who were sitting on the bench outside Pop Brady's Mercantile. On any other day, she would have been delighted to hear all about the time they went with Old Hickory down to New Orleans to whip the British but not today.

As Alexandra approached, Tate Rollins grunted as he folded the latest edition of *The Marlbridge Sentinel* and used it as a seat cushion. "Wonder how come Beauregard run back to Corinth? Seems like he oughtta chased 'em Billy Yanks clear up to Ohio." He smoothed his breastplate of bushy, white whiskers and leaned back on the well-worn bench.

Cletus Gerry sucked on the few teeth he had left. "Betch-ee Forrest coulda drove 'em all the way to Canada if they'd give him the chance."

"Course, what can a body expect from a gen'ral with a name like Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard," Tate mused as he rolled the chaw in his mouth. "I know some folks is fond of him on account of the vict'ry up in Virginny, but I don't know how I feel 'bout some French-soundin' feller leadin' the whole dang army. Now, Albert Sidney Johnston—that's a good name for a gen'ral."

"A dead 'un," Cletus added, sucking his teeth again for emphasis. "Now, what I woulda liked to seen wuz ol' Forrest chasin' 'em Yanks up in Sacramenty, Kaintuck. They say he wuz a-slashin' and swingin', this way and that. Lockin' sabers at a dead gallop they wuz. Why, I hearded they laid 'em a trail to Abe Lincoln's door with 'em bluebellies."

"Well, laid 'em a trail they mighta done, but not in no cavalry charge," Tate scoffed. "If ya'd ever seen a real battle, ya'd know sabers is just for show. All ya do in a real battle is stand in a line and shoot acrost the field at the enemy line. Then they make ya march over to the other side of the field and fire at the enemy over thar for a while. Then they tell ya to fall back so's ya can re-form the line and do it all over agin. Ain't nothin' entertainin' 'bout that."

"But I seen 'em. They had sabers and bayonets and all manner of sharp objects, and they wuz stabbin' all 'em bluebellies and blood wuz a-goin' ever'whar."

“Whar d’ya see all that nonsense?”

“In the newspaper.”

Tate swatted Cletus on the shoulder. “I done told ya to quit readin’ that blasted paper. It ain’t good for ya health.”

The old codgers spotted Alexandra. “Hey there, Sheriff Corbin’s daughter,” Cletus halloed. “D’you hear ‘bout Nathan Bedford Forrest whippin’ ‘em Yanks all by his lonesome? They’re callin’ it the Battle of Fallen Timbers.” He popped Tate on the arm, “Now, you want a name for a battle, that’s a good ‘un.”

Reluctant to get roped into two hours of yarn telling, Alexandra nodded and waved as she scooted through the door at Pop Brady’s. She had heard the news from the battle that had taken place in Tennessee and was eager to see if the Huntsville paper had sketches. *The Marlbridge Sentinel* couldn’t afford a war correspondent with artistic ability, so if she wanted to see a decent rendering of the battle she would have to go over to Pop Brady’s to buy a copy of *The Democrat*.

A full year had passed since Cass had joined Leonidas Beaumont’s Volunteers and gone off to war. Alexandra had wanted to go with her brother, and if she had been a man, she would have. It would have been her duty to go, but a girl had no place in the army. Men fought wars, and as good as Alexandra was at pretending to be a boy, Drake was no man.

As a woman, Alexandra had proven herself useless to the war effort, or at least that was the oft-expressed opinion of Mrs. Kilroy, who had assumed the directorship over all the wartime preparations for which the women were responsible. Alexandra couldn’t sew, she couldn’t quilt, and she couldn’t knit-not up to Mrs. Kilroy’s standards-so she was assigned to fundraising duty, namely selling pies that other women baked. It wasn’t long before Alexandra proved herself to be unsuitable for that task as well. She was promptly discharged from her position after she dumped Mrs. Porter’s cream pie in Roger Culpepper’s lap for his disparaging remarks against Cass and all the other “secessionist traitors.”

After that incident, Mrs. Kilroy vowed that Alexandra Corbin would henceforth be banished from any activity related to the war effort as her participation would undoubtedly do more harm than good. A week later, Mrs. Kilroy repealed her banishment. Apparently, none of the men who had stayed in Marlbridge when the Confederacy called for volunteers would work for Mrs. Kilroy, who had acquired a reputation as a slave driver. Judging Alexandra to be the next best thing to a man, given that she was “tall, skilled in horsemanship, and utterly devoid of feminine grace,” Mrs. Kilroy assigned her to transporting

the supplies collected from the plantations and small farms scattered across the countryside and depositing them at the church which was serving concurrently as a place of worship, a storage facility, and a meeting house for Unionists and secessionists to accuse and complain about each other to Reverend Land.

While Alexandra relished the opportunity to spend so much time in the saddle, if she was going to do her part for the Cause and be seen doing it—otherwise what was the point, her mother said—she would have to ride as Alexandra, in a dress, and worst of all, side-saddle. As much as she hated to give up Drake, it was a necessary sacrifice and one she was willing to make in order to secure a place for herself in the service of her country. If folks were right in saying this was America's second War for Independence (or third, if one counted the War of 1812), Alexandra Corbin, a true daughter of the '76 Revolution, would not be missing it.

She had just walked through Pop Brady's door and was about to snatch up the last copy of *The Democrat* when she caught Mrs. Kilroy's daughter, Meredith, flirting with Garrett Rainier right in front of her. In Pop Brady's Mercantile! Since she was a child, Pop Brady had been giving her candy sticks every time she came to visit. If Meredith Kilroy thought she was gonna come in Pop Brady's, take Garrett's arm, and employ the same tactics she used to ensnare all the eligible males in town, Alexandra was ready to fight it out tooth and claw. Fortunately, before she lit into her rival, something told her that if she did, she might win the physical altercation and gain a moment's pleasure at Meredith squalling on the floor in a mass of petticoats, but she would lose Garrett forever. No gentleman of any stature would choose for his bride any woman capable of such an unbridled display.

As if she could smell Alexandra's powerlessness, Meredith smiled and stepped closer to Garrett. Refusing to take part in Meredith's game lest she punch the girl in the nose, Alexandra turned to leave, but her hoop skirt whacked into an ill-stocked crate, bouncing her back into a barrel of nails. She rode the barrel all the way to the floor.

If she hadn't been so intent on a masterful fall, she would have noticed Garrett's rescue attempt and would have fallen in his arms instead of landing at his boots. Garrett reached to steady her as she swished to her feet and untangled her long appendages.

"It seems I am too late to be your dashing rescuer. You have righted yourself." He offered her his arm and waited until she realized what she was supposed to do with it. "I promise to dash more quickly in the future," he grinned.

Alexandra smiled when Meredith rolled her eyes, snatched up an armload of fabric, and hauled it to the counter. Mama Brady, a short, stocky woman from Scotland, stepped up onto the little box she kept behind the counter and began sorting through Meredith's expensive, delicate, thin material.

As Meredith began to purchase the items on credit, a vulture-like fellow named Shanks shoved Meredith aside and stuck his hawk nose in Mama Brady's face. "You lettin' this twit buy on credit after you denied me? Looks like only rich folks gets credit at this 'stablishment. All you merchants is in bed with the big planters and their filthy niggers."

Alexandra's eyes widened in anticipation as Mama Brady leaned forward until she was nose-to-nose with Shanks. Alexandra half expected the woman's stubborn, red-gray hair to break loose from her bun like a cat o' nine tails.

"Credit, aye? Is that what ye'll be wanting, then? Weel, I'll no give ye credit this time, Shanks, for ye've never paid what ye already owe, ye wee fiend. Now, give me real coin for that sack o' flour and I'll let ye have it," Mama Brady declared, her face turning redder with every word.

Shanks sliced open the sack and slung the flour all over the counter and the floor, dousing Meredith and her purchases.

If Garrett hadn't acted quickly, Mama Brady would have sliced open Shanks' head with the butcher knife she wielded as she sprang out from behind the counter. "Mama Brady! There is already a considerable mess here. It would not do to add to it."

At that moment, Pop Brady, a thin man wearing spectacles too big for his face, appeared in the doorway that separated the store from the Bradys' living quarters. "Mama, what's the trouble here? And who strewed this flour all over the place?"

Shanks spat on the floor and made a few lewd remarks as he stomped toward the door, his nose turned up so high that he tripped over the threshold on his way out.

"Something ought to be done about Shanks. I've had all I'm gonna take from that ne'er-do-well," Pop Brady grumbled as he took a broom to the mess. "I'd have liked to seen Mama put him in his place, but I reckon it's for the best she didn't. The Lord has His own ways of dealin' with scoundrels, and it don't profit a man to interfere with the Lord's doin's."

Meredith was wailing about her flour-caked dress, so Mama Brady took a dusting rag to it. "Stop ye crying, lassie. It were just a bit o' flour."

Garrett handed Mama Brady enough "real coin" to pay for the flour. Then he

led Alexandra to the door. She bumped into him when he halted at the threshold. He was gazing at something down the street. Several townspeople were gathered around Johnsey Carroll who was still sitting atop his winded mount.

Before Garrett could stop her, Alexandra ran out to meet Johnsey and pushed her way through the crowd. As more citizens joined the group, Alexandra reluctantly stepped aside to make room for Mr. and Mrs. Porter who gasped in unison as Johnsey coughed out the news. "The Yankees! They've taken Huntsville!"

Raulston Porter, the largest planter in North Alabama (measured by his person not his produce) exclaimed, "Huntsville? Tell me, boy, does the city still stand or did those demons burn it? Have they cut the rail line? Where are they now? Are they coming here? Well, don't just sit there, boy! Tell us what's happened!"

"They—" Johnsey spit out between gasps for air. "They took the telegraph, the railroad, and God knows what all. It was a disaster, a pure disaster!" Johnsey turned when he spotted Garrett. "Secessionists are being hunted down like dogs and sold into the hands of the enemy by Unionist traitors!"

Garrett contradicted Johnsey. "I doubt they are being 'hunted like dogs.' The president has pursued a policy of reconciliation. It would hardly help his cause to allow such conduct."

"If you don't believe me, Rainier, go see for yourself. If you have the courage, that is, you Yankee-loving, Unionist cur!"

Fortunately, Mrs. Porter, a boisterous, heavy-set woman who had eight sons of her own, prevented any further hostilities between the two young Southern men by handing Johnsey a handkerchief and ordering him to wipe the dirt and sweat off his face.

Shanks came bounding up, hooting and hollering. "Hee-hee! Serves y'all right for wantin' to secede from the Union. All your big talk about rights when us workin' men knows all you secessionists is in with the big planters. Now, y'all gonna git what's comin' to ya. I'm gonna be right there on the courthouse steps with my pencil, ready to write down the names of all you 'secesh' and hand y'all over to the enemy. And I'm gonna be rejoicin' when y'all's hangin' from the nearest tree."

"Fiddlesticks!" Mr. Porter replied. "We all know you can't write, you filthy creature."

"Reckon there ain't no tree big enough to hang you on, Raulston," Shanks

sneered.

Arliss McKinney, a freckle-faced terror beyond his ten years, punched Shanks in the stomach and yelled, "Ain't no Yankees gonna take my town! Captain Ramsey's gonna come with the whole Rebel Army and kill 'em all!"

"Cana Ramsey?" Mrs. Porter scoffed. "Why, that boy wouldn't dare show his face in this town after what his scoundrel of a father did."

"Boy?" Mr. Porter argued with his wife. "He's a grown man now and a cavalry commander. Why, he and his men could swoop down upon us any minute, if they had a mind to."

Cana Ramsey's here? And he's a captain of cavalry? As Alexandra contemplated the possibility that Cana Ramsey might return to Marlbridge, she didn't notice that Elias Kelson had ridden up until he parted the crowd, urging his horse to the front.

"Y'all know as well as I do that Cana Ramsey isn't coming back," he avowed. "As for the enemy, there's only one thing we can do. We must ready ourselves to meet them."

Alexandra's heart pounded at his words. They would see the enemy and confront them! Elias was wrong—Cana Ramsey would come back this time. She knew it in her heart. He wouldn't let Marlbridge fall into the hands of the enemy. All the battle scenes she had envisioned from her childhood forays into her brother's books on military history and tactics sprang up in her mind: Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain boys storming Ticonderoga, Andrew Jackson smashing the British at New Orleans, Sam Houston sending Santa Anna running back to Mexico in a dress.

Mr. Porter's velvety tone sliced through Alexandra's visions of battlefield glory. "We can't fight off an invading army! We barely have enough able-bodied men to keep Prichard Benefield and his band of rogues at bay," he fussed as he wiped beads of sweat from his chins.

Elias coolly replied, "I said meet them. Rest assured, gentlemen, I have no intention of fighting them."

Alexandra's heart sank as Elias wheeled his horse around and cantered away. She stood horrified as the other men seemed to agree with Elias, nodding to each other as they dispersed. Were there no Francis Marions among them? No Davy Crocketts? No Andrew Jacksons? If the men of Marlbridge weren't going to fight the invaders...

"Alexandra," Garrett interrupted her thoughts. "Did you hear me?"

She hadn't noticed that Garrett had walked her back to Pop Brady's.

Evidently, he had been speaking to her the whole way, but she hadn't heard any of it.

Garrett took her hand. "Do not let this news frighten you. I am certain that the Union Army will not come here."

Alexandra stared at him for a moment. Sometimes he acted as if he didn't know her at all. She jerked her hand away from him. "I wasn't frightened. There's an invader at our door, and I want to know what the men in this town are gonna do about it!"

He didn't fight to get her hand back, but instead tried to reason with her. "Just over a year ago, the army that you now decry as 'an invader' was the very same army in which Beauregard, Johnston, Jackson, and even your own father served. It is hardly fair to despise the institution merely because a handful of men in Montgomery decided that Alabama should leave the Union. Besides, why would the Union Army harm civilians? The federal government is endeavoring to bring us back into the Union not drive us further away."

"The federal government sent an army to kill us! Return to the Union or die!"

Garrett removed his hat and rubbed his forehead. "You are not going to like what I have to say, but it is the truth, so please hear me. If the Union Army invades there is nothing you or I can do about it."

Alexandra was about to protest, but Chance Mullins beat her to it. He marched up to Garrett, inches from his face. "The hell, you say! No Yankee, or Yankee-lover, who wants to keep his life better set foot in Marlbridge. If you ain't gonna do somethin' about it, Rainier, I will. There's a few of us left who ain't cowards."

Chance turned to Alexandra, "Don't you worry, Miss Alexandra, and pardon my language. Me and the rest of us *men* are gonna form a Home Guard. Maybe we can't stop the Yankees from comin' down here, but we can sure make 'em wish they hadn't."

He whirled on the heel of his expensive, patent leather, stove pipe boot and trotted off to join Bryce Calhoun, Quinn O'Dell, and a few other young men who had been exempted from military service for various reasons.

Quinn had been declared unfit because he wasn't quite right in the head. The others were excused because they were the heads of their respective families, all of whom owned farms, businesses, and other enterprises that were deemed too important to the local economy to risk their collapse should their young masters go off to war and get themselves killed.

By the time Chance and his cohort mounted their steeds and galloped away,

Meredith had stepped out of Pop Brady's where she had been hiding. She ran up to Garrett all a-fright and latched on to his arm. "The Yankees are coming! Whatever will we do? Has our own army abandoned us?" Meredith jabbered on until she finally wheedled Garrett into escorting her home.

After Garrett hoisted Meredith into his buggy, he extended his hand to Alexandra. "May I have the honor of escorting you as well, Miss Corbin?"

Alexandra cut her eyes at Meredith who was smirking at her in triumph. Not a trace of fear remained on the girl's face. As much as Alexandra relished a long buggy ride with Garrett Rainier, she refused to share a seat with that lying, spoiled, hateful Meredith. She wondered what Warren Lydell would think of his fiancée flirting with another man while he was away from home fighting for his country.

"I don't need an escort, thank you." Alexandra turned away from Garrett, but before she retreated to Pop Brady's to hide her red face in the newspaper, she goaded her rival, "Oh, Meredith, in your next letter to Warren, do tell him how much we all appreciate his sacrifice." It pleased Alexandra to see Meredith scowl.

Chapter 4

Remember the Alamo

RAMSEY peeked between the slats of the rail car. He hoped his plan would work. If it didn't...

Gunfire erupted as Prichard Benefield and his gang, numbering close to forty, came tearing out of the woods. They fired several rounds into the stationary train before they realized no one was firing back. Prichard ordered his men to cease fire. He urged his horse closer to the train, slowly at first as if he wasn't sure the train was occupied.

Ramsey had hoped Limpy and Billy Edwards would run tell Prichard that he was waiting for him and that the information would deter Prichard, but evidently they hadn't told him, or he didn't care. It wasn't that Ramsey didn't want to put an end to Prichard Benefield—he just didn't have the time. The gold had to be delivered to Chattanooga, and they were already late.

He grimaced when Prichard rode past the car where he was hiding. None of the Confederates who were hiding on the rest of the train made a sound. The mounted Confederates Ramsey had stationed in the woods likewise remained out of sight.

Prichard waved his hand and two of his men rode up, dismounted, and climbed into the car Limpy had marked. They emerged a few seconds later toting a barrel.

“Open it,” Prichard ordered.

The balding one named Jenkins hesitated. “He's gwone know we open'd it.”

“You willin' to risk bringin' him the wrong barrel?” Prichard asked as he continually scanned his surroundings for any threats.

Jenkins opened the barrel and jumped back, letting loose a string of swear words.

Prichard looked into the barrel, but remained calm. “Stick your hand in it to make sure.”

“You do it!” Jenkins protested.

Prichard dismounted and shoved Jenkins aside. Without hesitation, he stuck his hand into the fresh horse manure and dug out about half of it before he decided the gold wasn't in there.

“Ramsey,” Prichard spat the name out of his mouth like rotgut. “Limpy, get over here!”

Limpy cowered as he approached Prichard. “Now-now, Prichard, I did like you told me. I marked the car and I told you Ramsey was the one guardin’ the train, so it was him that fooled you not me.”

Prichard roared and dumped the rest of the manure on Limpy’s head.

“Wonder whar Ramsey’s at?” Jenkins muttered. “Reckon the Yanks got him? They done took Huntsville, and last I heard, they was headed this way to secure the railroad. I bet ol’ Ramsey’s done got hisself captured. That’s what I think.”

Prichard kicked Jenkins in the leg. “Shut up about Ramsey and get to searchin’ the train.”

Ramsey waited until one of Prichard’s men opened the door of the car where he was hiding. The man froze like a scared rabbit when he saw Ramsey standing in the doorway. Ramsey fired, and the man fell backwards with a bullet hole in his head.

The rest of Ramsey’s men opened fire. Mounted Confederates poured out of the woods. Prichard sprang onto his horse and might have escaped, but he was cut off by a force of over two hundred Yankees who came charging in at the last minute, raining bullets down on anyone not wearing a Federal uniform.

Ramsey cringed when he recognized the man who was leading the Federal onslaught. Joab Barrymore rode his horse like a wraith, cutting down every mortal in his path. Prichard and his gang fled in the opposite direction.

Lieutenant St. Clair, who was leading the mounted contingency, re-formed the Confederate line and repelled the Yankee charge long enough for Ramsey and the rest of the men to escape to the other side of the train where the holders had secured the horses. Ramsey leapt onto Solomon’s back and took off in the direction he had sent Cass Corbin with the gold.

When he reached the place where he was supposed to meet Cass, Ramsey pulled Solomon up abruptly and jumped out of the saddle. Filled with dread, he rushed over to the body sprawled on the ground. From the looks of things, Cass Corbin was dead.

END OF SAMPLE

I hope you enjoyed the first few chapters of *The Girl I Left Behind*. If you would like to purchase the complete novel, it is available on my website, www.stephaniebain.com.

Many blessings,
Stephanie Bain

Available formats: paperback, eBook, and Audiobook

About the Author

Stephanie Bain grew up in Oxford, Alabama, home of the Oxford High School Yellow Jackets of whom she has been a fan since she was old enough to walk in her saddle oxfords and her homemade, black-and-gold cheerleader outfit. Today, her wardrobe has expanded to include business casual when she is teaching History and Political Science; jeans, T-shirt, and closed-toed shoes when she's on a film shoot; and writer garb that can double as pajamas and still be okay to wear to the grocery store. She has an MA in History from the University of Alabama, graduate work in Political Science from Jacksonville State University, and an MFA in Screenwriting from Regent University. What she has learned is that no matter what she's wearing or what she's doing, what is required of her is to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.



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