

# In Heaven's Shadow

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## **Part 1** **Lamentations**

### **Chapter One** **Genesis**

There had been a battle somewhere. Lilith didn't have to look at the flood of dead boys tramping up to Heaven past her house to know it; her stomach had been in a knot all day. The dusk filling up the hollows of the hills rolling down from the Blue Ridge behind the cabin came as a pure relief; for a little while, anyway, she couldn't be surprised to grief by a familiar face.

The evening was so pretty, Lilith reckoned it must be God's way of saying sorry for such a parade. The sun had opened the box of paints hidden on the backside of the mountains across the Valley; the colors swarmed up into the sky over the dark lump of Massanutten Mountain, turning the Alleghenies beyond into the gateway to glory. Lilith wished she could catch that pretty purple into her garden: it might shame the lilacs into better form.

She leaned back in her rocker on the front porch with little gray Mamacat purring in her lap, watching the colors lace themselves into pretty knots. Her chair creaked against the rough boards, quiet counterpoint to the crickets starting in at the creek. But then a bunch of quail that had just settled for the night started up again where the run bent around in front of the house. Lilith looked down toward the footbridge and saw bad news coming.

She would have known Joab was dead just from the sight of the Reverend Fisk coming anywhere near her house, looming like a black scarecrow over Martha Fox waddling beside him. Little Hetty Gallagher and her husband's pa stumped along behind, their shoulders hunched like somebody had dumped the world on them. But Lilith didn't need all that because Joab himself was striding along right behind them, and he'd have never been content to trudge along in the rear if he was alive. No, he'd have run right up the road and splashed through the creek without bothering with the bridge, snatched her up and whirled her around and forget good sense.

Lilith's heart thumped hard in her chest. Between one blink and the next, her whole life flumped down into the dirt around her. This wasn't at all how she had pictured Joab coming home from fighting Yankees. She stared at him shining so pale in the gloom and heard a little whimper escape her throat.

*Oh, Lord, say it ain't so.* But there he was.

Her skin started to creep in rebellion. Lilith gulped and fought to suppress the bubble of grief swelling up from the center of her being. No telling what it might conjure up, and she didn't trust the parson not to get excited about whatever did appear. She didn't need trouble on top of sorrow.

Even so, she could hardly breathe past the lump clogging up her throat. She found herself standing up and didn't remember how she got that way. Behind her, the rocker creaked to silence. Only the water burbling over the rocks and the uneven chirping of the crickets broke the hush until the little parade got close, and then the heavy shuffle of their feet thudded like distant thunder. Lilith felt sorry for stout Martha puffing up the steep path, and especially for old Pappy Gallagher. Joab was like his grandson. She didn't feel a bit sorry for the parson having to walk all the way up here from town because he looked like he wanted awful bad to say I told you so.

The four of them stopped at the foot of the steps, looking up at her. Joab stopped too, watching her with his heart in his eyes and sorry in his face. The Reverend Fisk shuffled around, clearing his throat. Finally he up and said it.

"Mrs. Stark, I'm very sorry, but there's news of a battle up in Pennsylvania. General Armistead was killed, and a good many men with him. Joab too."

Martha started up the stairs, her arms outstretched. "Oh, Lil, I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry."

The other woman's thick arms felt solid and good around her. Lilith found herself hugging back, grateful, deep down, for something to grab hold of while the world fought itself into a new shape around her. For all that Joab was standing right there, she still felt empty and shivery and all upside down. She wanted time to think, but Martha seemed to feel she needed holding up, and Hetty had tears shining on her face in the painted light. The parson was staring down his nose at her the way he used to look at Pa. Lilith looked away, pricked by a sudden pin of anger. Even now the Reverend Fisk thought she wasn't worth his trouble.

She pulled away from Martha and stood between her and Hetty, the one solid as a barn, the other hardly bigger than a china doll. Half of her wanted to melt down and cry; the other half wanted to run everyone off so Joab could somehow make this all real.

"Joab," she whispered, but it got lost in Martha's bulky shoulder. The reverend stared down at her from his great height, maybe disapproving already that she hadn't melted down into a puddle of tears for him to raise up and comfort. Lilith turned her head away, wanting to send him back down the road before he banished Joab somehow, but she didn't know how. Ma had died before she could teach Lilith real manners, and then it was just her and Pa and Ben for years and years. Ben didn't know any more about town folks than she did, and Pa had never been much for tea and comfort. When Lilith was twelve, Ben got himself smashed under a falling tree, and Pa never said a word, just went off and sat in the woods, hoping Ben would come by and say how it happened. He never did, though. Pa said maybe Ben just couldn't stand to stretch out his leaving, but Lilith had thought maybe the parson's scarecrow presence in the cabin had scared him off. And now here was Joab looking at

her with his heart in his eyes. Lilith blinked back tears and tried in confusion to pay attention to the living when it was the dead who had the most to say.

Hetty slid an arm around her and hugged her. Pappy blew his nose a couple of times and said how sorry he was. The parson snapped open the big Bible he carried around cradled in one arm like a sick baby and read until the sun locked up the paints and it got too dark to see the words. By then Lilith felt a little steadier; she managed to resist Martha's insistence that Lilith should come along to her house for the night with a lie about the chickens needing tending and how it would give her something to keep her mind off things. Finally they went away, looking back like they thought she was going to collapse and die right there on the porch.

When at last they were safely gone across the bridge into the night, she turned to where Joab stood looking so hangdog. "A week! It took you long enough to get home, Joab Stark." She tried to make a joke out of it, but she heard a quiver in her voice and knew he would too.

He came up the steps, a long, tall ghost with broad shoulders and a face that still looked readier to laugh than frown, with the same short beard and the same unruly lock of brown hair falling over his right eye that he always had. He stopped in front of her, looking down with such regret in his face that Lilith caught her breath in dismay and reached to hold him.

He backed away. "No," he said, very low. His voice was still the rich, warm tenor that had sung so sweet on Sundays and caressed her ear on so many nights up in that feather bed in the loft. That voice had captured her from the first time he'd smiled at an old maid too shy to poke her nose out of Pa's cabin and said so low and quiet, "Hey there, Miss Lilith, I'm a'goin' to come courtin' you iffen you don't mind."

Oh, yes, she'd been a goner from that second on.

She stood very still, looking up at him. Folks expected ha'n'ts to be pale, wispy things, but Joab looked almost solid, full of colors, and only a little washy-looking. He shone faintly in the gloom, his face clear to her eyes.

"Why can't I touch you?" she asked, aching with the wanting.

"Reckon you could if you tried, but I ain't ready."

"Why'd you come home, then?"

He smiled that crooked smile. "Guess I just ain't got sense enough to go on to Heaven." The smile faltered. "This is Heaven, Lil. Right here. I don't want no other."

Lilith ducked her head, biting her lip hard. "I 'spect not. Come on in the house."

She held the door for him, though she suspected he didn't really need her to. The gloom inside set her reaching for the lamp on the shelf beside the door; the mite of a glow from the kitchen hearth just seemed to make the whole place sadder and emptier. She hadn't had the heart for supper, what with the steady march of dead soldiers past her door. None of them had bothered her, good Southern boys all; if Yankees went to Heaven, they took some other road. But looking back, she knew she must have been waiting all day for Joab to turn up. The parade of dead had never troubled her so before.

She carried the lamp into the kitchen and lit it with a splinter from the banked fire. Joab was standing behind her when she turned, gazing around with a look on his face like a kid eyeing the candy jars down at the store.

"I've missed this," he said softly. "Missed you, Lil. I am so sorry to be coming home like this."

Lilith closed her eyes for one second of anguish that tried to set her wailing. She blinked back tears and managed a smile. "Well, you came home. That's more'n a lot of women will get. Eliza Pettigrew's boy Dan tramped on home after Chancellorsville and knocked on her door, but she never heard a whisper. Finally he give up and went on."

Joab settled wearily into the old straight-backed chair beside the fire where she sat to warm her toes on cold days. "Might be just as well. I saw him catch a Minie ball in the face. He mighta scairt poor Eliza right on along to Heaven with him."

"I saw him. He didn't look that bad. Maybe that was *his* wish."

"We all get one," Joab agreed. "Me, I just wanted to come home."

"I'm glad." She inspected him in the lamplight. He was thinner than she remembered, and the butternut shirt she had made him last Christmas had a tear above the heart and a rip in one sleeve. No blood. It must have been quick. It pleased her that he hadn't suffered and saddened her that she couldn't feed him up and put him to rights. He had so loved her cooking.

She turned to poke up the fire before he saw her crying. Silly things, tears. Pa always said as how tears never watered the garden nor washed the dishes, so she fussed around with her back to Joab until she got them under control. When she turned back, he was sound asleep in the chair.

Lilith surveyed him, surprised, but then again, what did she know about being a ghost? Ben hadn't come home, and Pa had only stopped to say howdy. Nobody else she knew could see ha'nts at all. This looked like one of those times you had to learn as you went along.

"Reckon getting kilt's a weary business," she said softly, and leaned down to kiss his forehead.

His hair brushed her cheek, soft as the down in the feather tick. His skin under her lips felt more like the warm wind of a summer's day. She closed her eyes, wishing...but dead was dead. She wasn't ever going to feel the living warmth of him again, nor the solidness of his arms around her, nor make another baby to take the place of little Nate, who'd died after Joab went away to fight.

*Get on with it, girl*, Pa's voice said in her head. Lilith gulped down a huge lump and opened her eyes. Heaven had always been where Joab was. Nothing had changed about *that*.

So then. Get on with it.

She brought the rocking chair in from the porch and set it quietly opposite Joab in front of the fireplace, gathered up her mending, and sat sewing in the warm glow from the lamp. It felt almost normal, as if it wasn't two years since the last time they'd sat together like this. She glanced over at him now and again, learning anew the planes and curves of his face. It looked so much older

than she remembered. He was just thirty-six, only two years older than she was. He said he'd stayed a bachelor so long because he never knew what he was looking for until he rode up into the hills and saw her peeking down from the old oak beside the cabin where she used to sit and watch Pa make his elixir. And then they'd only had two years together before the war came along and smashed everything.

Dadburned Yankees. Anger fought with grief and a deep, inchoate dread; restless, Lilith got up to prowl over to the back door. Between the crickets and the creek, the whole bluebelly army could have ridden past and not been heard over the racket. She wondered if they would come now, if the battle that made all those ghosts meant the end of the war and Yankees running everywhere.

"Reckon I'd know what to do if they come," she muttered. She'd never actually made a black creeper, but Pa had told her she'd figure it out quick if ever there came a need.

She looked over at sleeping Joab. Maybe there wouldn't be much need. She doubted he was done fighting Yankees even now that he was dead.

She let him be and took up the mending again, though her heart wanted to know awful things like how and when and where this had happened to him, or whether she dared believe God would let him stay. The best part of a person went out of a body when it breathed its last; she had the part of Joab that had drawn her down out of that cabin up on Baldy and made everything they had together so sweet. Still, she couldn't help but wish for the part the Yankees took too.

The faded cloth under her fingertips darkened suddenly. Lilith blinked and discovered a little stain of sadness creeping out from her hands. She raised her head, looking through bright sparkle at Joab. Oh, it hurt to know this half of him was all she would ever have again.

*Half a blessing's better'n a curse any day*, Pa used to say when things didn't turn out quite according to plan. It looked like maybe God wasn't paying but half a mind when He answered her prayer to bring Joab back to her.

Still, He *had* brought him back.

Over by the fireplace, Joab began to snore. Lilith caught her breath on a laugh that was half a sob and shooed the darkness out of her sewing with a fingertip. "Ain't no call for black in *this* house," she told it fiercely. "Just you remember that, you hear?"

But she couldn't help wondering, with a little cold flutter down inside, what that old persimmon Reverend Fisk would have to say about Rafael Adair's daughter taking up with a ghost.