

These Healing Hills

by Ann H. Gabhart

1

May 15, 1945

Francine Howard stepped off the bus into another world. She should have been prepared. She'd studied the Frontier Nursing information until she almost knew it by heart. That should have given her a glimpse into this place.

Hyden was in the Appalachian Mountains, but it was still Kentucky. While she lived in Cincinnati, she had spent many summer weeks on her Grandma Howard's farm in northern Kentucky. But somehow the train from Lexington to Hazard and then the bus from Hazard to here had transported her away from everything she thought she knew about Kentucky and dumped her out in a place that looked as foreign to her as the moon.

But wasn't that what she wanted? To be in a new place long before Seth Miller brought his English bride home from the war. That might not be long. The war in Europe was over. Now, with all the firepower of the Allies focused on the Pacific, surely an end to the terrible war was in sight.

When the news flashed through the country last week that Germany had surrendered, Francine celebrated along with everybody else. How could she not be happy to think about the boys coming home, even if Seth's last letter had changed everything? Seth might finally be on the way home, but not to her.

The news of his betrayal hadn't taken long to circulate through Francine's neighborhood. Not from Francine. Seth's little sister took care of spreading the news. Alice had shown everybody the picture Seth sent home of him with his arm around this English woman. She'd even shown Francine.

"I know you and Seth used to date when you were in high school, but he didn't give you a ring or anything, did he?" Alice must have seen the stricken look on Francine's face, because she pulled the picture back quickly and shoved it in her pocketbook.

"No, no ring." Francine managed to push a smile out on her face and salvage a little pride.

Alice fingered the clasp on her purse. "You want to see the picture again? I jerked it away pretty fast."

"I saw it. She's very pretty."

She'd seen enough to know that. The woman had barely come up to Seth's shoulder. Petite with curly blonde hair and a dimpled smile. Nothing at all like Francine with her plain brown hair and hazel eyes. Just looking at the woman's picture had made her feel tall and gawky. In heels, Francine was nearly as tall as Seth.

Built strong, Grandma Howard used to say. Her grandmother told Francine she was pretty enough, but a person didn't want to be only for pretty like a crystal bowl set on a shelf folks were afraid to use. Better to be a useful vessel ready to be filled with the work the Lord intended for

her. Back in her neighborhood, Francine had felt like a cracked bowl somebody had pitched aside.

People sent pitying looks her way. Poor Francine Howard. Going to end up just like Miss Ruby at church, who cried every Mother's Day. No husband. No children. No chances.

But where one door closed, another opened. If not a door, a window somewhere. Another thing Grandma Howard used to say. The Lord had opened a way for Francine to escape the pity trailing after her back home. The Frontier Nursing Service. She had a nursing degree and she could ride a horse. She needed an adventure to forget her bruised heart.

An adventure. That was what the woman had offered when she came to the hospital last November to recruit nurses to train as midwives at the Frontier Nursing Service in Leslie County, Kentucky. The need was great. The people in the Appalachian Mountains didn't have ready access to doctors the way they did in Cincinnati.

At the time, Francine imagined it might be thrilling to ride a horse up into the hills to deliver babies in cabins, but she gave it little consideration. Seth would be home from the war and she planned to have her own babies after they got married. Babies she might already have if not for the war or if she hadn't let her mother talk her out of marrying Seth before he went overseas. Then everything might be different.

Everything was different now as she stood in front of the drugstore where the bus driver told her she needed to get off. She had no idea what to do next. The people on the street were giving her the eye but staying well away, as though her foreignness might be catching. She squared her shoulders and clutched her small suitcase in front of her, the larger bag on the walkway beside her. She tried a smile, but it bounced back to her like a rock off a stone wall. Somebody was supposed to meet her, but nobody stepped forward to greet her.

She blinked to clear her eyes that were suddenly too watery. Francine wasn't one to dissolve into tears when things went wrong. She hadn't even cried when she read Seth's letter. What good would tears do? Prayers were better. But right at that moment, Francine didn't know whether to pray for someone to show up from the Frontier Nursing Service or for a train ticket back to Cincinnati.

"She must be one of those brought-in women."

The man was behind her, but she didn't need to see him to know he was talking about her. She was a stranger. Somebody who didn't belong. At least not yet.

First things first. If nobody was there to get her, she'd find her own way to the hospital. All she needed was somebody to point the way.

A man came out of the drugstore straight toward her. "You must be one of Mrs. Breckinridge's nurses."

"I'm here to go to the midwifery school." Francine smiled at the tall, slender man. "Somebody was supposed to meet me."

He didn't exactly smile back, but he didn't look unfriendly. "Been a lot of rain. The river's rolling. Probably kept them from making it to see to you. Do you know how to get to the hospital?"

Francine looked around. "Is it down the street a ways?"

"It's a ways, all right. Up there." He pointed toward the mountain looming over the town.

Francine peered toward where he was pointing. High above them was a building on the side of the mountain.

"There's a road, but since you're walking, the path up the mountain is shorter." The man gave her a dubious look. "You think you can make it?"

Francine stared at what appeared to be steps chiseled in the side of the mountain. "I'm sure I can." She tried to sound more confident than she felt.

"The path is plain as day. Don't hardly see how you could stray off'n it. But tell you what. Jeb over there is headed that way. He can take you on up."

The man he indicated with a nod of his head was the last person Francine would have considered following anywhere. In spite of the warm spring day, he wore a coat spilling cotton batting from several rips. A felt hat perched on top of a tangled mass of graying hair, and his beard didn't appear to have been trimmed for months. Maybe years. With a shotgun drooping from the crook of his arm, the man appeared anxious to be on his way and not at all happy to be saddled with a brought-in woman.

But what other choice did she have? She leaned over to pick up her other bag, but the man from the drugstore put his hand on it first.

"Don't bother with that. Somebody will bring it up to you later."

She left it, wondering if she'd ever lay eyes on it again as she fell in behind the man named Jeb. Back home, daylight would have a couple more hours, but here shadows were deepening as the sun slid out of sight behind one of the hills that towered around the town. Jeb gave her a hard look, then turned and started away without a word. Francine slung her purse strap over her shoulder, clutched her small suitcase, and hurried after him.

She had to be insane to follow this strange man away from town. He could be leading her to some godforsaken place to do no telling what to get rid of this interloper slowing him down. Not that he set a slower pace for her. She had to step double quick to keep up. Nor did he offer to take her suitcase or even look back to see if she was still behind him. He didn't have to look back. He could surely hear her panting. Where were those horses the Frontier Nursing brochure promised?

When the path leveled out for a few paces, Francine caught up to the man whose pace didn't change whether the way was steep or level. She could at least try to be friendly. "My name is Francine Howard."

She wasn't certain, but she thought he might have grunted. She was certain he did not so much as glance back over his shoulder at her and that, in spite of the path taking a sharp upward turn, he began moving faster. His foot scooted on the trail and dislodged a rock that bounced down toward Francine. She tried to jump out the way, but she wasn't quick enough.

The rock landed on her toe. She bit her lip to keep from crying out. Mashed toes practically required a good yell. She set down her suitcase and rubbed her toe through her shoe. Her fingers were numb from clutching her suitcase handle and she could see nothing but trees. No wonder they called this place Thousandstick Mountain. This many trees had to make a lot of sticks.

She'd been totally mistaken thinking her visits to her grandmother's farm would prepare her for Leslie County. Everything wasn't straight uphill there. A person could walk those rolling hills without losing her breath. Trees didn't close in on you and make you wonder if you'd ever see sunshine again.

She gave up on her throbbing toe and massaged her fingers. She started to call for the man to wait, but she kept her mouth closed. The path was plain, and while the shadows were lengthening, it wasn't dark. How far could it be? People obviously traveled this way all the time, and the man's footprints were plain as day on the muddy pathway.

The Lord had pointed her to the Frontier Nursing Service. He wasn't going to abandon her on this mountain. Francine ignored the little niggling voice in the back of her mind that said the Lord had given her a guide. Her task was keeping up.

Too late for that now. The man was gone. Francine rotated her shoulders and picked up her suitcase. Time to carry on. Find her place on this mountain.

She started climbing again, slower now as she looked around. Thick green bushes pushed into the path with buds promising beauty. Rhododendron. She couldn't wait to see them burst into bloom. Delicate white flowers near the path tempted her to step into the trees for a better look, but the thought of snakes stopped her. Snakebit and alone on this mountain might not lead to a happy outcome.

At first, the man's footprints were easy to follow, but then the way got steeper and nothing but rocks. No sign of the man ahead of her. Worse, the path split in two directions. Even worse, the shadows were getting darker. It could be she should have run to keep up with silent Jeb after all.

Even standing on her tiptoes, she couldn't see the hospital up ahead as the trees and bushes crowded in on the path here. Both traces went up, so that was no help. She had no idea how high this mountain was. She might be climbing all night. But no, she'd seen the hospital from town. It couldn't be much farther.

Francine set her case down again and chocked it with her foot to keep it from sliding away from her. The word *steep* was taking on new meaning.

With her eyes wide open, she whispered, "Dear Lord, I know you haven't left me alone here on this mountain. So can you point the way?"

She stood silent then. She didn't want to miss a second answer if the Lord took pity on her after she'd foolishly trusted too much in her own abilities instead of scrambling after her mountain man guide.

Just when she was ready to give up on divine intervention and pick a path, she heard whistling. Not a bird, but a man. And the sound was coming closer. The Lord was sending her someone to point the way. Certainly not Jeb coming back for her. She couldn't imagine that stone-faced man whistling the merry tune coming to her ears.

"Hello," she called. She didn't want the whistler to pass her by without seeing her.

The whistling abruptly stopped. Francine called again. This time an echoing hello came back to her, and a gangly boy, maybe fourteen or fifteen, scrambled into view down the path to her left. His overalls were too short, showing a span of leg above well-worn shoes, but the best thing about him were his blue eyes that looked as friendly as a summer sky.

"You lost?" He skidded to a stop and stared down at her.

"A bit," Francine admitted. "Could you point me the way to the Hyden Hospital?"

"I reckon you're one of Mrs. Breckinridge's brought-in nurses." He gave her a curious look. "Do you catch babies?"

"I'm here to train to be a midwife." Francine smiled at the idea of catching babies. "At the hospital. Is it much farther?"

"Not all that far, but night might catch you. You best follow me." He came on down to her and started up the other path. "Weren't nobody down there in town to show you the way?"

"I was supposed to follow somebody named Jeb, but I didn't keep up."

The boy laughed. "That Jeb. And I reckon he never said word one. Jeb, he ain't much of a talker. Not like me. My brother used to tell me I jabbered as much as a jaybird that had been sipping out of a moonshine still. At least that's what he said before he went off to fight the Germans. That's been nigh on four years now, but I'm still a talker."

"I was very happy to hear you whistling a few minutes ago." Francine picked up her bag and followed the boy. "My name is Francine Howard. Do you have a name other than Jaybird?"

“Jaybird might be better than what folks call me. Woody. Woody Locke. Sort of sounds funny when you say it, but my pa was Woodrow. Woodrow Locke, that’s a fine name. One I reckon I can take on after I get a little older.” His voice softened, turned somber. “Now that Pa passed on last year.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Francine felt an answering wave of sympathy. Her own father had died two years ago.

“Ma says the Lord calls people home when he’s ready for them, and we shouldn’t look askance at the Lord’s doing.” The boy looked over his shoulder at her. “I get in trouble all the time asking too much about everything. Pa, he used to say I had a curious mind, but Ma gets worn out by my wonderings.”

“That’s how you learn things.” Francine couldn’t keep from panting a little as she climbed behind Woody.

The boy noticed. He looked stricken as he turned back to her. “Give me that case. My ma would slap me silly if she saw me letting you lug that thing and me with two free hands.”

“Thank you.” Francine handed it to him. “But maybe you should just tell me the way now. You need to go on home before night falls so your mother won’t worry.”

“Ma don’t worry none about me. She sent me up here to get some medicine for Sadie. That’s my little sister and she’s been punying around. The nurse over our way said she needed some ear drops she had run out of in her medicine bag. So I came on to fetch them. Sadie being the youngest and all, Ma babies her some. We all do. She ain’t but four, nigh on five.”

“But it will be dark soon.”

“Dark don’t fret me. I can find my way light or night. But Ma knowed I’d probably find a spot in town to spend the night ’fore I head on up the mountain come morning. Get me out of chores.” He grinned at Francine and turned back up the path. “I oughta be shamed about that with Ma having to do them, but I laid in wood for her this morn and she milks the cow most every night herself anyhow. She’ll have a list of chores a mile long to make up for me being late home, but she wouldn’t want me not to help one of you nurses. No sir. I’d get in way more trouble if I didn’t see that you made it to where you’re going.”

“You don’t have any other brothers at home?” Walking uphill after him was easier without carrying the suitcase, but it didn’t seem to slow Woody down at all.

“Nope. It’s just me and Sadie now. Ruthie, she went north to work in one of the airplane factories and Becca got married and moved over to a mining camp in Harlan County. Ben, he’s the oldest. He joined up with the Army after Pearl Harbor. I been telling Ma I’m nigh old enough to go fight the Germans and the Japs too, but Ma don’t like hearing that. Says she’s busy enough praying that the Lord ain’t ready for Ben to go home with Pa.” He looked back at Francine again. “Ben’s the one what says I jabber like a jaybird. Guess you can see why now.”

“I always liked jaybirds.” That made Woody laugh. “Where is your brother? In Europe or the Pacific.”

“Europe last we heard. We get letters now and again, but places where he might be are all cut out of them. He’s a medic. Ma’s right proud that he ain’t just over there shooting people, but that he’s doing some healing too.”

“That does sound good. I’ll add my prayers to your mother’s for his safety and that he’ll get home soon.”

“That’s neighborly of you. I’ll tell my ma.”

They stepped out of the trees to see the hospital on the side of the mountain. Not that big, but sturdy. Substantial and a little surprising. A road circled right up to its door. To the side was

another building connected by a covered walkway. That must be where she'd be living for the next few months.

She'd loved working with the mothers and babies back in Cincinnati. And odd as it was here on this mountain with the long-legged boy beside her, she was looking forward to learning how to catch those babies, as he had said.

New life. And not just for the babies, but for her too. A new life in a new place. A window of opportunity for her to climb through. If only she could stop looking back at the door she had dreamed of walking through with Seth.

After she thanked the boy, she watched him disappear back down the hillside. Then she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and walked straight toward the hospital doors.