

# ALONG A STORIED TRAIL

by Ann H. Gabhart

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Everybody thought Tansy Calhoun was heartbroken after Jeremy Simpson threw her over for Jolene Hoskins. Or that she should be. She had to admit her pride was bruised, but the whole thing was simply a shin bump in life. In fact, after pondering it some, she decided she'd gotten the best of things.

Of course, that had been some while back. Three years, when she counted it up. Jolene had a baby now, with another on the way. That could have been Tansy if she'd gone down the path folks thought she was ready to take. Married at seventeen. A mother at eighteen. Worn out by thirty, with more children than she had chairs around her kitchen table. A poor man's riches, some said. That was about the only riches a man was apt to see here in the mountains in 1937.

Family did matter. Tansy wasn't against marrying and having her fair share of children, but she was glad enough to put it off a while. Longer than most around here thought sensible. Marrying young and for forever was the way of life in these Eastern Kentucky hills. A person should marry with the intention of staying married forever, but that could still be a long time even if you waited a while for forever to start.

Her own mother had been eighteen when Tansy was born and she wasn't the firstborn. Her sister Hilda was nigh on two when Tansy came along. Hilda married young too, but that wasn't because she was following in Ma's footsteps. She had in mind to escape mountain life by marrying the schoolteacher and happily going off with him to live up in Ohio somewhere. Hilda sent a letter now and again and sometimes a book for Tansy, but no word of any babies on the way. Ma worried some about that.

She worried about Tansy even more. Ma was glad enough to still have her home to help with things. She needed the help. Giving birth to Livvy, the least one who was only four, had stolen her health. Did something to her hip so that moving was ever painful. She said Livvy might need to be her last and sounded sad about that, although Tansy thought five a fine number. Well, six. She couldn't forget her little brother, Robbie, who got the fever and died when he was

seven. He did count. Dear little Robbie. The sweetest of the bunch. Way sweeter than Tansy. But Livvy was turned sweet too.

Took that after their ma. Not their pa. Might be a blessing Pa took off on them last September. Him being gone would be a sure way to save her mother from the ordeal of carrying another baby.

Looking for work, Pa told Ma. No work was to be had here in the mountains. Coal mines had mostly shut down, with nobody having money to buy anything since what they called Black Tuesday happened off in New York City. Tansy still hadn't quite gotten her mind around how rich people losing their money through something they called a ticker tape had leaked down to close mines and bring such hard times to Robins Ridge. Didn't people still need coal to keep the fires in their grates burning? At least those who didn't have trees to cut for firewood.

But Pa never liked the mines anyway. Said working down under the ground stole his breath. Sometimes at night he did seem to do more coughing than breathing.

Ma hadn't wanted him to go. Tansy heard them talking the night before he left. Her bed in the loft was right over theirs, and she often covered her ears with her pillow to keep from hearing more than she should. But this time she'd done the opposite and leaned off the side of the bed to catch every word when she heard the pleading in her mother's voice.

"Joshua, looks to me it would be best you stayin' here. Little Josh can help you do the farming. We can get by."

Pa's voice rumbled in return. "Unless another dry spell comes along. Corn don't grow without rain, Eugenia. You saw that this year, what with the beans drying up in your sass patch and some of the corn ears no more than nubbins."

"We had enough sass to get by." Ma didn't like admitting her vegetable garden didn't supply food enough for their table. "I made pickles. We got some of the early planting for shuckey beans. They're hung up all over the attic."

Her father didn't say anything for so long that Tansy about decided he'd let Ma have the last word and gone to sleep. But then he said, "It ain't your fault, Eugenia. Ain't mine either. The Lord just didn't send us no rain."

"The Lord supplies our needs."

Tansy heard the absolute certainty in Ma's voice. She refused to hear complaints against the Lord. Even when Robbie died. She had sat by Robbie's bed night and day, praying fervently for

him to get well. But once the boy's breaths stopped, she folded his little hands together, kissed his forehead, and accepted it as the Lord's will. She didn't war against that, like Tansy wanted to. Or like Pa did. He'd gone off and not come back until after the neighbors dug a grave and helped lay Robbie to rest. Ma said that was the only way Pa could take losing a son.

"At times better than other times." Pa sounded worn out. "Lately he must not be paying much mind to what folks is needin' down here."

That went too far for Ma. "I'm thinking you best offer up a prayer for the Lord to open your eyes to the blessings he sends down to us."

"Maybe so." Pa's voice gentled. "Be that as it may, I see how you never put much on your plate at suppertime. If I head out to find work somewheres, that'll be one less mouth at the table. Tansy and Josh are old enough to take care of things around here."

"Tansy might find a feller and get married."

Tansy couldn't decide if Ma sounded worried or hopeful about that. Maybe resigned to their fates, whatever they were.

Pa made a sound of disgust. "She had a good enough feller and let him get away. That's been over two years back and I haven't seen no boys making paths to our door. The girl turned twenty in July. She ain't liable to find a suitor less'n a widower comes along. Maybe not then if she don't get her head out of them books. Hilda hasn't done us no favors sending storybooks that's got Tansy thinking above herself."

Thinking above herself. Those words had made her want to get up and climb down the steps to tell her father a few things. Like she had a right to think. To read. She didn't slack off helping Ma, but in stolen moments, books took her beyond the mountains. Let her fly like an eagle to take in the view of other places and ways.

That didn't mean she didn't want to roost right where she was. She loved the mountains. Time and again she did let a little daydream tickle her mind. That maybe a prince on a white stallion might ride into her life the way it happened sometimes in fairy tales. Not really a prince, but a man with aplomb. She'd discovered that word a while back and studied out what it might mean. A man who was handsome. Self-confident. Capable. Like the men in the stories she read.

She had lain stiff in her bed while the words she wanted to throw at her father boiled in her head. She never got the chance to say any of them. The next morning he was gone.