



*Flirtation*  
WALK

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*For Tony.*

Thanks for giving me the time and space  
to write and for putting up with all the  
craziness. You've always been my hero.

*And for K.*

Dreams take a lot of hard work, but  
you've always been so good at doing  
things that are hard to do. Can't wait  
to see your dreams come true.

This story takes place at a U.S. Military Academy that looked quite unlike the West Point of recent memory. Academic courses were taught in a single building (the Academy); the old mess hall and old barracks were quite new back then. There was no Camp Buckner for summer training, and Callum Hall wasn't yet in existence. Highland Falls was known as Buttermilk Falls. The corps of cadets numbered about 250 in 1855, and it was organized into one battalion composed of four companies; there was no brigade. The cadets ranking lowest in the order of merit were called Immortals.

Though the setting might feel strange, it's my hope that those who are acquainted with the military academy might come to find it surprisingly familiar.



MAKE US TO CHOOSE THE HARDER RIGHT  
INSTEAD OF THE EASIER WRONG,  
AND NEVER TO BE CONTENT WITH A HALF  
TRUTH WHEN THE WHOLE CAN BE WON.

—FROM THE *WEST POINT CADET PRAYER*



1*Lucinda*

AUGUST 1855

The churning of the steamboat was relentless as it chugged down the Hudson River. Columns of steam and smoke trailed from twin chimneys, defiling an otherwise cloudless sky. Wrapped around the iron railing, my gloved fingers buzzed with the vibrations of the engine. Though the wheel was covered, I could imagine its paddles slicing into the river to scoop up water only to fling it all off at the top and plunge down into the current to do it again.

It put me in mind of my father.

Everything did, ever since I had received the notice of his death. Though my green-and-salmon-colored tartan dress didn't show it, I was still mourning my loss. Still uncertain what I should do.

Madame Mercier, my finishing school headmistress back in

St. Louis, had drawn me into her office to give me the letter. I didn't have to retrieve it from my reticule to remember what it said.

*I regret to inform Miss Lucinda Pennyworth that her father, Mr. Ezra Pennyworth, has died. He succumbed to the ravages of his long illness on July 4th. His affairs have been taken over by me.*

It had been signed by a Mr. Christopher Barnett. But I'd never heard of the man. And my father hadn't been suffering from the ravages of a long illness. He'd never been ill that I could recall.

Granted, I hadn't seen him since he'd left me at the finishing school early in March, but that wasn't unusual. He always came to retrieve me when he had need of me for one of his schemes. But now, nothing was going according to plan, and that in itself was quite dire. My father had always had a plan. *"If you keep one step ahead of everyone else, they'll never be able to trip you up, my dear. No need to panic. If you can't go out the front door, then you'll just have to go out the back."*

I'd grown up going out the back door with him, sneaking out of frontier towns or slipping away on the steamboats that plied the Mississippi River. Of course, just as often, we'd lodge ourselves at the finest of hotels as a much-deserved reward for our troubles. We'd had dreams, my father and I. Dreams of establishing ourselves in one of Europe's finest cities . . . just as soon as he came into his fortune.

The sunlight no longer glanced so glaringly off the water, so I adjusted the tilt of my bonnet, allowing my face to emerge from the long late-afternoon shadows. The gusting wind seized the chance to steal beneath my hat and ruffle the ringlets I'd carefully arranged atop my ears. Closing my eyes, I fixed my

mind on my imagined paddlewheel. Just like the river's waters, there had been no end to the people willing to invest their money in one of my father's schemes. Out west, he had plunged into a town, sold deeds to plots of land that didn't exist, and then shoved off to do it somewhere else all over again.

*"Most people are waiting for someone to give them hope. If you can do that, then they're more than happy to give you their money in exchange."*

That's what father had always called it: an exchange. Perhaps in taking their money we got the more useful part of the bargain, but my father insisted they got what they were after as well. He gave them hope in return. Hope for wealth, hope for prominence. Hope for success.

But I couldn't rely upon my father's provision anymore. And I couldn't do what he had done. I was a woman, after all. Who would entrust their money to me for the purposes of investment? In fact, we had begun discussing how best to make me someone's wife. Someone quite important. Someone worth the effort. But I couldn't vault myself into society now. Not without help.

Cigar smoke drifted back from the front of the boat, where a group of men had gathered. They were military men, dressed in blue uniforms.

I stole another glance at them. My, but they were fine to behold.

And I stopped myself from doing so immediately!

If I was to present myself as a respectable girl from a proper family, I would have to act like one, and a lady never solicited the interest of a gentleman.

Turning my gaze from them, I tugged my bonnet back over my eyes. My father had always had as little to do with the military as possible. I put a hand to my temple, beneath the spread of my bonnet, where my head was beginning to pound.



I was doing the right thing, wasn't I?

There had been nothing left me but to strike out on my own—no matter that a lady wasn't to travel by herself. “*Do what's expected until you have to do what's necessary.*” That's what my father had always said. The danger of being attached to his memory could not be discounted. It was precisely why he had moved about so often and why I had been stashed at boarding schools in more places than I could remember.

Since I could no longer be my father's daughter, I'd decided to become my mother's. I put a hand to her locket, which hung beneath my bodice. Before the day was out, I would have to throw myself upon the good graces of her family. But they owed me something. At the very least, if they were not as welcoming as I hoped, any hospitality they extended would give me a bit more time to come up with a better idea.

As the men in uniform disembarked, a deckhand approached. “You for Buttermilk Falls, miss?”

“I am.”

He pointed downstream. “Next stop. At Cozzen's Landing.”

Five minutes later, the boat pulled in to a landing that lay at the base of an enormous cliff. Atop the cliff, overlooking the river, sat a large establishment, but the area appeared to be wilderness. That was disappointing. I'd imagined a setting much like Paducah. Or even Natchez. But I smiled my thanks to the deckhand and let myself and my trunk be handed off the steamer.

At the foot of the rugged road that climbed a rapidly rising hill, an old man was loading a pyramid of crates onto a cart. I asked him the way to Buttermilk Falls.

“Why? You going there?”

I nodded.

He pushed back his cap with the heel of his hand and scratched

at his grizzled side-whiskers. “Then you might as well ride with me. Road’s a bit rough. You’d probably get there faster if you walked, but you’d risk getting that dress of yours dirty.” He loaded my trunk into his wagon, took a sprightly hop up onto the seat, and leaned down to offer his hand. I put mine in his, and he hoisted me up.

As I settled my satchel beside me, he pointed the horse up the hill.

“There were quite a few men in uniform on the boat, but they all got off at the last stop. Where were they going?”

“Up to the Point.” The road wound between a tall boulder that towered over us and a tree-topped cliff that looked capable of subsuming us. “Bout a mile back there.” He nodded behind us.

“The Point is a . . . What is it exactly?”

He gave me a long look. “It’s West Point. The military academy.”

Military academy? “And Buttermilk Falls is quite close?”

“We’re just about there. Couple minutes more.”

If my father could see me now! Soldiers were even worse than sheriffs and their deputies in his opinion. I’d fled the West and its territories only to find myself a short walk from the nation’s military academy.

The old man chuckled. “Don’t you worry none. They don’t get let out much.”

I hadn’t realized my thoughts were so obvious.

“Which don’t mean you’re entirely safe. They have hops over in the mess hall every Saturday in the summer—dance until the wee hours sometimes. And they give concerts now and then. Don’t mean you have to go though. Have to say, they look all bright and shiny, but the soldiers’ life isn’t meant for ladies like you.”

Ladies like me from a well-established family of good reputation. “*Seeming is just as good as being.*” “Do you know, are there any Curtises still left in town?”

“Curtises? Well, sure. There’s the Curtis girl—only she isn’t a Curtis anymore. She married a Hammond, the fellow that teaches over at the Point.”

“He teaches there? Is he a soldier?”

“No.” He scratched at an ear. “Yes. It’s hard to say. So many of those fellers started off in uniform. He might be a soldier, and then again, he might not.”

“And Mr. Curtis?”

He sighed. “Died of a broken heart about . . .” His words trailed off as he consulted with the sky about something. “Must be ten years ago this winter. One of his girls ran off a while back. He was never the same after.”

One of the cart’s wheels dipped into a hole, and I grabbed for my satchel to keep it from tumbling onto the road.

“You here to look up the Curtises, then?”

What was I to say? News was likely to spread quickly, so I might as well use that to my advantage. “I am. You might say we’re family.” They might not like me, they might not want me, but if I made it known they were my relations, fear of public opinion might keep them from casting me out.

He grinned. “Good. That’s real good. Mrs. Hammond sure could use the help.” He halted the horses in the middle of the road. “We’re here.”

“Here?” Here was just a few houses scattered over a rise in the land divided by a road that seemed to go nowhere. “Here . . . where?”

“Buttermilk Falls.”



*This* was Buttermilk Falls? “But . . . isn’t there supposed to be a waterfall?” And an actual town? My mother had been the Belle of Buttermilk Falls. “*Annabel Curtis, Belle of Buttermilk Falls.*” That’s what my father had always said. And though he’d said it with a wink and a smile, although he’d always mentioned it as a place it was better to be coming from than going to, it had sounded as if it meant something. As if she could just as easily have been the Belle of Boston or Burlington. As if she’d lived in a place that had Society. Where there had been more than just her competing for the title.

I’d always wondered where it was.

When the postal clerk in St. Louis told me it was in New York State, I couldn’t have been more surprised.

The only times my father had ever mentioned it was when things hadn’t worked out the way he’d hoped. “I suppose we could just go back to Buttermilk Falls . . .” he would start. “But I was thinking that maybe . . .” A smile would overcome the words and then he’d chuckle while he told me of his latest scheme. Buttermilk Falls had been the symbol of all that was respectable, dull, and dreary, of all that was wrong in the world.

Which was why I’d decided to come.

And now I was here.

As I looked around for signs of civilization, I couldn’t say that I disagreed with my father’s assessment. My mother might have been from here, but for the first time I wondered where my father was from. Where had he once called home? I had never thought to ask. The future was where our expectations lay, where our hopes and dreams had always been fixed. We’d spent so much time longing for the day when Lady Luck would smile upon us that we’d rarely ever spoken of the past.

The old man gestured off behind us. “The falls’re down over there, along with the grist mill. It’s a nice walk if you want to

take it, even when it hasn't rained and there's not much of a waterfall." He turned and nodded toward a dignified white clapboard house with black shutters. Chimneys jutted from both ends and a porch ran the length of its front, while a picket fence marked off its shallow yard. "That's Richard Hammond's place." He clambered down from his seat and then walked over to my side of the cart and helped me out.

I eyed the house as he shouldered my trunk.

I had that feeling in my stomach again. That disconcerting, weighted feeling that always preceded my entrance into a new place. But this time it was heavier. This time, if the plan didn't work, I had nowhere else to go.

Squaring my shoulders, I set out across the street, skirting holes, as I approached the house. My past was gone. It had died along with my father. My future was entirely up to me.

Smiling, as much to cheer myself as to make a good impression, I opened the gate, went up the front steps, and rapped on the sturdy wooden door.

By that time, the old man had deposited my trunk on the porch and gone on about his business. There were few people on the street. In truth, it wasn't much of a street, in the same way that Buttermilk Falls wasn't much of a town. I'd seen bigger settlements out in the territories. I shifted my satchel to my other hand.

Footsteps scuffed across the floor inside. I heard the latch lifting. As the door cracked open, the scent of supper, of a roast, of onions and carrots, and freshly baked bread, drifted out. The woman who was silhouetted in the door's opening turned back toward the interior of the house. "Just a—" She broke off in a sigh and turned to face me as she opened the door wider.

"Mrs. Hammond? Aunt Catherine?"

I had the impression of auburn hair gently pulled back into a bun and hazel eyes set into a face quite surprisingly like my own before her eyes went wide. The color drained from her cheeks, and she lifted a trembling hand to her bosom. “Oh, my stars!”