

SHARON VIRTS

The
GRAYS
of
TRUTH

1 8 6 7

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there
wondering, fearing . . .

—Edgar Allan Poe

CHAPTER 1

MONDAY, APRIL 3, 1867, WASHINGTON, DC

“Mrs. Wharton!” A frantic young man pounded on the door of the brick house that fronted K Street. “Mrs. Wharton, please!” he shouted again, his blond hair blowing wildly in the blustering spring wind.

“My gracious, Danny,” said a slight woman with strong features and silvery blonde hair as she opened the door. With a shiver, Jane Gray Wharton folded her arms against the cold, her pale eyes studying the man on her stoop. “What has you so riled up this morning?”

Daniel Ketchum leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees as he attempted to regain his breath. “It’s Mother. She’s really sick.”

Daniel’s mother, Rebecca Ketchum, was Jane’s oldest friend.

“Has she been seen by a doctor?”

Daniel nodded. “My father insists that you come anyway,” he said, still panting.

A worried expression fell over Jane’s face, and a sinking uneasiness settled in the pit of her stomach. She knew General Scott Ketchum well enough to understand he would not have called for her if the situation weren’t desperate.

“Walk with me and tell me her symptoms,” she said, and headed down the hall toward the back of the house.

“She’s been throwing up something awful,” Daniel said as he

followed behind her. "The doctor said it's gastritis or something and would get better, but she's getting worse and not making sense."

"Not making sense?" Jane asked, her brows knitted. Daniel nodded again. "Wait here and let me grab a kit." She opened the back door with a jerk.

Having served as a nurse at the Armory Square Hospital during the Rebellion, Jane Gray had seen plenty of sickness and death, and had become adept at closing herself off from the anguish of such suffering. But Rebecca was like a sister to Jane. No amount of Jane's usual emotional shielding would immunize her should the worst occur.

Jane walked onto the back porch and took a deep breath, trying to cast her worry aside. The wind whipped through the yard as she hurried down the steps to the muddy path that led to her greenhouse and workroom at the rear of the lot. Unfastening the latch, she pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Rows of plants potted in coarse earthenware crocks sat on makeshift sawhorse tables and on the floor below. Dozens of jars, some filled with tinctures, others with a variety of herbs, roots, crystals, and powders, lined the shelves. Racks of tools and instruments hung from the walls: a spade, tongs, blades, a pair of scissors. A shelf beneath held vials, flasks, and beakers. On the counter under the shelf were a balance scale, mortar, and pestle, along with an assembly of glassware, coiled metal piping, pipettes, stands, clamps, and condensers. A small desk with a microscope was tucked in the corner at the rear of the room, its surface covered with piles of periodicals, books, and hand-drawn sketches.

Jane rushed past the laboratory equipment and rows of plants to the back wall and a rack of brown bottles filled with home-brewed tinctures and chemical compounds. Scanning the rack, she pulled down several of the bottled concoctions and carefully placed them in pockets that were sewn inside a carpetbag. At the desk, she removed a small leather case from the drawer and flipped it open to confirm its contents. Reassured, she snapped it closed and shoved the case into the carpetbag. Hoping she had all that she needed, she hurried down the aisle of plants to the yard and back into the house, where Daniel was waiting impatiently.

"Let's make haste," Jane said, ushering him through the hall with

the bag in hand. She grabbed her wrap, took an umbrella from the stand, and followed Daniel out the door.

Passing through the small iron gate that separated the yard from the street, they headed east on K Street. To their right, the half-built Washington Monument thrust into the sky like an accusation, its fragmented summit rising upward as if begging the heavens for its completion. Overhead, dark leaden clouds hung low, ready to unleash a torrent at any moment. A biting breeze tossed the branches of elms that lined the street in a chaotic dance against the pewter sky. A distant roll of thunder rumbled as Jane and Daniel reached the corner and turned north toward the Ketchum house. Three-storied Italianate row houses with smooth brick façades, large bay windows, and carved eaves lined both sides of Thirteenth Street. The Ketchum house was about halfway up the block.

“Mrs. General Ketchum is upstairs, ma’am,” the butler said, swinging the door wide as Jane stepped onto the portico. Once she was inside, he took her umbrella and wrap and waved an arm toward the stairway. “The general is expecting you.”

Even from the foyer, Jane could hear Rebecca crying out. With her kit bag looped over her arm, Jane took the stairs to a set of rooms at the back of the house. At the end of the hall, a doorway opened to a small dressing room that fronted the bedchamber. Esther Brice, General Ketchum’s sister, was seated next to the door. A woman with auburn hair was sitting beside Esther on the arm of the chair.

“Thank the heavens you are here,” Esther said and stood, her thin face drawn as tight as the gray bun pinned at the back of her head. The woman sitting on the chair’s arm eyed Jane with a look of skepticism. She was pretty, with a heart-shaped face and arched brows. But there was something in her hazel eyes that unnerved Jane.

“This is Mrs. Eliza Chubb,” Esther said. Jane recognized her name from Rebecca’s many complaints about the woman’s meddling. Eliza inclined her head. “Eliza is General Ketchum’s copyist. She’s been here with the family since all this started yesterday.” Esther turned to Eliza. “Eliza, this is Jane Gray . . . Mrs. Edward Wharton. Jane served as a lady nurse at Armory Square under Dr. Bliss.”

The Armory Square Hospital took its name from the city’s armory on Washington’s Mall, where the hospital was built at the onset of the

Rebellion. Near the steamboat landing on the Potomac River and the tracks of the Washington and Alexandria Railroad, Armory Square treated the most severely injured, those who could not be moved any further.

"I've heard much about you," Jane said to Eliza before redirecting her attention to Esther as Rebecca cried out again. "How long has she been like this?"

"About an hour now," Esther said.

"Danny says a doctor was here earlier. What was his diagnosis?"

"Gastritis. And the diverticulum is inflamed."

"What did he prescribe?" Jane asked.

"White willow, I think," Esther said, "and he gave her an antimony pill."

Antimony? Jane thought. While doctors commonly prescribed the capsule to relieve chronic bowel congestion, in Jane's opinion, if misused, antimony was dangerous and as deadly as arsenic.

"Who is this doctor?" Jane asked.

"Dr. Chisholm," Eliza answered. "I called for him at the general's request."

Something didn't sound right. "Did he give her anything for the pain?"

Esther shook her head. "I gave her a bit of laudanum from the general's bottle, but it has had little effect."

Jane frowned. "All right. Let me see her."

Rebecca lay on her side facing the far wall, her legs drawn to her chest. Rebecca's husband, General Scott Ketchum, sat on a chair next to her, his rawboned shoulders hunched over his wife. A dark-haired woman in a fitted red dress stood behind him, her hands resting on the back of his chair. A young woman with a ghostly pale complexion and long black braids was on the opposite side of the bed, holding Rebecca's hand. Jane recognized her and blanched. *Octavia?* Octavia Wharton was Jane's niece, the daughter of her husband's brother, and lived in Baltimore with her parents. And Octavia always traveled with her mother. Jane glanced again at the woman standing behind the general. She felt her anxiety rising as she realized the woman was her sister-in-law Ellen Wharton.

Like Jane, Ellen, too, had grown up in Philadelphia. With ebony hair and milky skin, Ellen “Nell” Nugent had reminded Jane of the lovely Schneewittchen—Snow White—in the Brothers Grimm fairy tales. But in Jane’s opinion, Ellen’s appearance had been the only thing beautiful about the girl. Ellen used her beauty like a weapon and manipulated those enamored of her to get what she wanted. From Jane’s perspective, not much had changed over the years. Ellen’s self-admiration had only intensified since she’d married Hank Wharton. While most were charmed by Ellen’s quick wit and charisma, Jane knew her as mean-spirited, and she often made Jane feel inadequate. Drawing a nervous breath, Jane tried to push her uneasiness aside, training her eyes on her sick friend.

“Rebecca?” Jane said, her tone soft and comforting as she approached the bed. Immediately, she noticed the pallor of Rebecca’s skin. From just a moment’s observation, it was clear to Jane that Rebecca was deathly ill.

“Mrs. Wharton.” General Ketchum stood and extended his hand. Jane took it in hers. “Thank you for coming,” he said, his blue eyes glassy and reddened. General Ketchum was taller than most men, with a muscular frame and angular features. Usually he dressed smartly, his beard neat and his gray-blond hair carefully combed to the side, but not this morning. From his disheveled appearance, Jane assumed that the general had slept in his clothes from the day before, if he had slept at all.

“She’s in a terrible way,” he said with a glance at the pail next to the bed. Jane followed his worried gaze to a bucket that contained bloody vomit.

“I’ll need to examine her,” Jane said, dropping his hand and turning to Rebecca.

“We’ll give you some privacy.” General Ketchum looked at Ellen and nodded in the direction of the door.

Ellen narrowed her dark eyes and threw a scornful look in Jane’s direction as Octavia stood from the bed.

“And it’s Dr. Jane to the rescue,” Ellen said in a low voice that only Jane could hear. Doing her best to ignore the remark, Jane swallowed hard to quell her nerves.

“Esther,” Jane called as Esther started to leave with the other ladies. “I’ll need your assistance. Please stay.” With a nod, Esther moved to the side of the bed where Octavia had been.

“Take all the time you need,” the general said, and closed the door behind them.

Jane placed her hand on Rebecca’s flank. “Can you show me where your pain is?”

“Just leave me to die,” Rebecca said, rolling away from Jane.

“No one’s going to die if I can help it,” Jane said. “Now, tell me, what hurts?”

“My soul,” Rebecca cried, curling into a fetal position. “I deserve to suffer.”

Jane gave Esther a questioning look.

“She’s been morose like this since yesterday,” Esther explained.

“When did her symptoms begin?” Jane asked as Rebecca cried out again, pulling her knees to her chest.

“Last evening,” Esther said. “The vomiting started suddenly, violently. By nightfall, her pain was so intense, she could barely move. My brother asked Mrs. Chubb to call a doctor. Whatever the doctor gave her caused her to sleep, and this morning, she was feeling better for a while. She got out of bed and came downstairs and went into the cellar. I went after her, concerned the dampness would only make her sicker, but she yelled at me to leave her be. She refused to join us for breakfast and went back up to her room. Not long after, the vomiting returned, and this time, she was purging blood. Her breathing became labored, and she’s been babbling all this nonsense about Arkansas.”

“Arkansas?” Jane asked.

“Fort Smith. She and Scott lived there when Scott and Hank Wharton were stationed together during the Indian conflict. All this nonsense about the devil’s work, quoting scripture, and telling Scott not to look at her. She won’t look at Danny either. She hisses at me, Eliza, Ellen, and the maid. The only person she’ll speak to is Octavia. And now you. Like I said, crazy talk.”

“Did you tell the doctor this?” Jane asked.

Esther nodded. “He said it was the fever.”

Jane put her hand on Rebecca’s forehead. “She doesn’t feel feverish to me.”

“We’ve had to change her sheets this morning from her sweating.”

“Before or after the doctor arrived?”

“Before,” Esther answered. “Why does it matter?”

Jane furrowed her brow. Had the doctor treated Rebecca’s fever, the sweating would have occurred *after* his visit, not before. Which meant something else was causing the sweating. Jane peered again at the bucket of vomit, trying to make sense of Rebecca’s symptoms.

“What is your body trying to purge?” Jane said to herself, ruminating. She lifted her kit bag from the floor and set it on the night table. She took a bottle and a jar from the bag and removed their tops. Using a small spoon, she measured the contents of each into an empty glass by the bed and poured in just a smidge of water from the pitcher on the stand.

“I’m making a cocktail of cerium oxalate with a little belladonna to calm the bowel,” Jane said as she stirred the concoction. Rebecca’s body tensed as another wave of pain roiled her. “But I should give her a bit of morphine first. Then we’ll need to flush her system.” Jane set the glass on the table before reaching into the bag again and pulling out the leather case.

“Jane,” Rebecca whispered, the pain flooding her face. “I’m so sorry.”

“You’ve nothing to apologize for,” Jane said. She removed a silver syringe and a small bottle of cloudy liquid from the case.

Rebecca turned in bed and brought her tear-filled eyes to Jane’s, then grabbed her arm.

“I have sinned,” she sobbed and tightened her grip.

Jane took Rebecca’s arm and held her wrist. Holding the syringe between her index finger and thumb, Jane used her middle and ring finger to tap the area at the crook of Rebecca’s elbow. When the vein rose, Jane pressed the needle through Rebecca’s skin and into the blood vessel. “There, there, my dear friend,” Jane said as she pushed the plunger. “Who among us hasn’t sinned against God?” She offered a sympathetic smile as she removed the needle from Rebecca’s arm and bent her elbow to prevent bleeding. “This should help for now.” Brushing the hair from Rebecca’s forehead, Jane watched as her friend’s expression relaxed.

“The palm of Christ,” Rebecca murmured.

Jane cocked her head. "What did you say?"

"I have taken the seed," Rebecca said, slurring her words, "so that I might be redeemed."

Jane's eyes widened and her mouth went dry. She looked at Esther. "I need to change the tincture."

"I don't understand," Esther said.

Jane pulled another bottle from the bag and handed it to Esther. "Give her a half teaspoon of this and make her drink as much water as she'll take. I need to speak to Daniel right away."

With an astonished look on her face, Esther took the bottle, and Jane left the room. Daniel was standing beside his father, who was sitting in a chair with his head in his hands.

"Danny," Jane said, "I need you to go as fast as you can to Dr. Barnes's office at Ford's Theatre." After President Lincoln's assassination, Ford's Theatre had been conscripted by the federal government and converted into office space for the surgeon general and his staff. Dr. Joseph Barnes was the army's top doctor and had been a student of Jane's father at the medical college of the University of Pennsylvania. Jane had met Dr. Barnes during her service at Armory Square, and once they'd realized their mutual connection, the two had become friends.

Jane turned to General Ketchum, who was looking at her in confusion. "Do you have paper and pencil close by?" With a nod, he rose and walked to the writing table near the window and retrieved a pencil and a piece of paper from the drawer and handed it to Jane. She hastily scratched out a note and folded it.

"Tell Dr. Barnes I need him here right away," she said as she passed the paper to Daniel. "He'll know what to do."

"Yes, ma'am," Daniel said, and hurried from the hall. A moment later, they heard the front door open and slam closed.

"What do you think it is?" Ketchum asked.

Jane bit her lip. "I can't say as yet. We need to wait for Dr. Barnes." She turned toward the adjoining room. "If you'll excuse me," she said, and went back into the bedroom.

"I gave her the medicine, but she won't take water," Esther said. "And she's still talking crazy."

"Dehydration is congesting her brain," Jane said. "I've called for

Dr. Barnes.” Jane looked at Rebecca, who was restless and mumbling. “Would you give me a minute with her?”

Esther nodded. “Call if you need me.”

“Becky,” Jane whispered as Esther closed the door and the two were alone. “What have you done?”

“It was not my intention,” Rebecca said, more to herself than Jane as she thrashed in the bed. “I was so young . . . I tried. I really tried. Oh, I prayed. God, how I prayed. And then . . . how could I? Again. And again. And again and again . . .” Rebecca curled her hands into fists and began beating on the mattress as she chanted the word “again” over and over.

Jane held her arms, trying to calm her. “Whatever it is you think you have done, it is not so bad that you should harm yourself. Now you must tell me, did you ingest the hulls?”

Rebecca continued thrashing her head from side to side, still chanting.

“Becky!” Jane said, nearly shouting as she shook her. “Please, Rebecca. Did you eat the outer shells of the beans?”

Rebecca brought her dilated eyes to Jane’s and nodded, sobbing. “I can’t live with it any longer.”

“Oh, Becky,” Jane said, trying to think of what had happened to cause Rebecca to want to end her life, while at the same time wrestling with how to save her.

“When did you take them?” Jane asked. Rebecca was drifting off again. “Rebecca!” Jane shook her again. “Did you consume them last night or this morning?”

“Both,” Rebecca mumbled.

“Both times?” *My God!* Jane thought. “How many? How many beans did you ingest?”

“All of them,” Rebecca said languidly as her eyes rolled white and she fell unconscious. Jane checked her pulse. Her heart rate was too slow. Jane was losing her. *Think, Jane, think!* She was at a loss.

By the time Dr. Barnes entered the bedroom, Rebecca was comatose and barely breathing. He asked everyone to wait in the sitting room while he conducted his examination. Everyone except Jane. After listening to Rebecca’s chest and abdomen, Dr. Barnes removed the aural tubes of the stethoscope from his ears. Jane recognized the

hopelessness on his face before he spoke. "I'm sorry, Jane, but the assessment in your note is accurate. Did she tell you how many castor beans she consumed?"

Jane shook her head. "Only that she ingested them last evening and then again this morning."

"And you are certain that it was a deliberate act?" he asked.

Jane nodded. "Rebecca had been using the beans for years to prevent pregnancy. She knows the husks are toxic and that they must be removed."

"And you know this how?"

"Because I taught her how to use them," Jane said. A look of disbelief engulfed Barnes's face. "My father introduced them to me after the very difficult birth of my daughter." Barnes stared at Jane in astonishment. Jane let out a frustrated sigh. "After Rebecca's sister died in childbirth, Rebecca was fearful, so I suggested using castor."

"So, the two of you use the beans regularly."

Jane did her best to ignore his judgment. Men could never understand what it was like to suffer the curse of Eve, or the risk of childbirth.

"As I said, Rebecca knows how to use them safely. When she told me that she ate from the palm of Christ, I knew exactly what she had done." The castor plant was often referred to as "the palm of Christ," not only because of its hand-shaped leaves, but also because of the reputed ability of its oil to heal wounds and cure ailments. When ingested during ovulation, the beans were fairly effective in preventing pregnancy. And in Jane's experience, when its oil was used during coitus, castor proved even more effective. But the hulls of a castor bean were deadly.

"And you gave her yellow jasmine?" Barnes was saying.

Jane shook her head to clear her mind. "Yes. To reduce the circulation and slow the effects of the toxin. I also administered a half grain of cerium oxalate to calm the bowel. Initially I was going to give her a little belladonna to paralyze the abdominal muscles, but once I learned she had consumed the husks, I was afraid it might amplify the toxicity of the poison."

"Prudent," Barnes said with a nod. "And while yellow jasmine will slow the progression of the toxin, it won't counter it."

“Can we take her to the naval hospital for further treatment? Surely they have an antidote of some sort.”

“I’m sorry, Jane, but there is nothing we can do at this point to stop the destruction of her organs. Perhaps had she not ingested more of the beans this morning, we might have had a chance to save her. The best we can do now is keep her comfortable until . . .,” Barnes’s voice drifted off.

“Will you tell the family?” Jane asked, her gaze lingering on Rebecca.

Barnes nodded. “We’ll need to come up with a palatable lie first.”

Jane turned to him, her brows questioning. “Lie?”

“I would think a lie is better than telling them that their beloved wife, mother, and friend decided to kill herself, the inference being that the grave was preferable than spending the rest of her life with them.”

Jane winced. That’s not how it was at all. Suicide had nothing to do with hurting one’s family; it had everything to do with one’s hopelessness. She shook her head as a great sadness pressed heavy on her breast. Although she didn’t know what had been weighing on Rebecca to compel her actions, Jane understood that Rebecca wouldn’t want her decision to upset her family any more than necessary.

“What do you suggest?” Jane asked, realizing that Barnes was right.

“Did she leave a note or indicate her intentions to anyone?” Barnes asked.

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Then I suggest we keep this between ourselves—and Rebecca.”

“What will you tell the general?”

“That she died from complications resulting from a rupture of her appendix.”

Jane furrowed her brow and frowned. “Peritonitis?”

Barnes nodded. “The symptoms of sepsis mimic the last stages of this type of poisoning. It’s certainly less painful for the family than suicide.” He riffled through the contents of his bag. Jane watched the doctor pull a silver hypodermic needle and a vial from the case.

“It’s too soon for more morphine,” Jane said as Barnes filled the syringe. “Her last dose was not two hours ago.”

Barnes gave Jane a sympathetic look. “It’s for the best.”

From the depths of her mind rose a distant voice, desperate and pleading: "I beg you, Janie." Lips swollen and blistered, eyes without lashes wide with misery. "Please." Jane jerked her head to shake the memory away.

Barnes removed Rebecca's arm from under the sheet and administered the injection.

"How long?" Jane asked, watching the rise and fall of Rebecca's chest slow further.

"A few hours perhaps," Barnes said as he closed his bag. "I'll stay at the house to ensure she doesn't suffer." He put a hand on Jane's shoulder. "I'm sorry I couldn't do more. But now we must tell the family." Barnes gave her shoulder a reassuring pat before leaving the room. Jane followed him and stood in the doorway between the two rooms, watching as Barnes relayed the grim news. Jane felt for General Ketchum, seeing the anguish on his face as he battled to keep his emotions in check. When Daniel broke down, Octavia rushed to embrace him. The two had been courting before Daniel ended their relationship the previous year. As Octavia neared, Daniel raised a straightened arm with his palm toward her to keep her away. An angry flush rose on Octavia's face as she stopped where she stood and glared at him. Daniel turned from Octavia and went to his father. General Ketchum lost his composure as he tried to console his son.

Ellen, too, was crying, and her sobs quickly turned to wails. Until that moment, Jane had forgotten the bond Ellen and Rebecca had formed during the years that their families were stationed together in Arkansas. Jane went to Ellen and took her in her arms.

"I feel so horrible," Ellen cried, resting her head on Jane's shoulder. "Like it's my fault."

That's an odd thing to say.

Perhaps she's just upset, Jane thought, dismissing the notion.

"There was nothing you or anyone could do," Jane assured her, patting Ellen's back. "And no reason to blame yourself."