



*A Love
Restored*

KELLY GOSHORN

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Kelly J. Goshorn

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Dedication

To the two most important men in my life: My Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who wrote this story on my life, and to my husband, Mike, who lived it with me.

And for every woman who has questioned her self-worth because of unkind words or the reflection she sees in the mirror. Know that you are treasured by a loving God who sees your immeasurable value.

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*And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.
~ Joel 2:25a*

1

Loudoun County, Virginia
August 1873

Land sakes it was hot.

Ruth Ann Sutton peeled the black stockings from her legs and stuffed them inside her boots. If only she could do the same with her insufferable corset. She wiped her brow. Perspiration moistened her hairline, tightening the loose strands on her neck into corkscrews. Buddy's tongue hung from the corner of his mouth as he meandered to the stream for a drink. She stooped beside him, running her fingers through his plush, red fur.

"You must be hot today, too, boy." He raised his head. Ears alert, mischief danced in his eyes, reminding her of the pup he'd once been. "You stay right there. You'll splash around and get me all wet."

Rarely did a week go by from March to November when she didn't visit this spot. She'd loved it from the first time Papa brought her fishing in the little nook sheltered among the dogwoods. If she remained

absolutely still, she could hear Papa laughing as he cast his fishing line into the creek.

The peaceful melody of the stream as it coursed around the bend beckoned her. What would Mama say? She glanced over her shoulder. Why not? No one was around. Gathering her skirts, she eased into the creek, mindful to avoid the mossy rocks that rested in the shade of the poplars. Cool water assailed her shins as she waded to the middle. Despite the gooseflesh forming on her skin, the knee-deep water offered respite from the sultry temperature and her sour mood.

Her thoughts drifted to the conversation she'd had with her mother. She'd promised to write James about her new teaching position at the Freedmen's School more than a month ago. How would she convince her beau to let her continue? No one else wanted to teach these children. They needed her, and in a way, she needed them. Wouldn't she be a better wife and mother if allowed to pursue her passion before surrendering it at the altar?

Tilting sideways, she skimmed her fingers against the current, spooking the dragonflies hovering above the water's surface. She didn't want to marry James. Truth-be-told, she didn't want to marry anyone—yet. No one hired a married woman to teach. At twenty years of age, she had plenty of time for marriage and children.

Or did she?

Suitors weren't exactly lining up at her door. While she had no trouble getting along with the opposite sex, as her bevy of male acquaintances attested, none pursued an attraction to her. If she delayed, she might lose her bloom, as mama

suggested, and have more than her buxom figure prohibiting her from matrimony. Even if she could coax James into postponing an engagement, he would never allow her to teach Negroes.

What could she say to persuade him?

Did she even want to?

Tipping her head back, she released her cares to the only one who had her best interest at heart. "Oh Heavenly Father, guide my footsteps. May your perfect will be done in my life."

Sighing, she waded toward the creek bank. Mud squished between her toes. She dreaded the return home so soon. She scanned the meadow before glancing to her canine friend.

"Maybe just a bit longer. Huh, boy?"

She withdrew a bulging handkerchief from her skirt pocket and deposited it atop a large rock overhanging the creek. With a hearty thrust, she hoisted herself up beside her prize. Anticipating the treasure within, she untwisted the purple stained cloth. Hard to believe she'd found a whole cluster of black raspberries the birds had overlooked. She popped one in her mouth, savoring its mildly tart flavor. Leaning back on her palms, she dangled her legs over the edge, relishing her extended reprieve as her feet sashayed in the cool water beneath her. Singing might lift her spirits.

Besides, she really didn't need to fret about James. God would direct her path. He'd never disappointed her yet.

~*~

Benjamin Coulter cringed as the shrill tune hung

in the air. That woman sure knew how to ruin a Sunday afternoon. Sounded like something was dying and needed to be put out of its misery.

He shook his head. All he wanted to do was rest a while longer. His decision to go around his headstrong superior and talk to Mr. Farrell directly about his boss's inaccurate measurements had made for a nerve wracking week. That decision could have cost him his job. Thankfully, his discovery had been received well, saving the struggling railroad both time and money.

Benjamin leaned against the sycamore tree and tossed his line into the creek. A slight hint of remorse nicked his conscience. He now sat poised to guide the construction of the Washington & Ohio Railroad through the town of Catoctin Creek and over the Blue Ridge Mountains to Winchester, but he hadn't intended to get his boss fired. If only the man hadn't refused to admit he'd made a mistake.

Yep, it was all coming together. Just the way he'd hoped it would when he agreed to leave Texas and take this apprenticeship in Virginia. All he had to do was pass that examination next spring and...

He shuddered. The woman's screeching escalated to a bone-grating pitch. She'd frighten the fish away for sure. Like most folks, Sunday was his day off, and he didn't intend to spend it listening to her sing off-key.

Wedging his pole in the mud of the creek bank, he set off to investigate. Her ear-piercing slaughter of *The Merry, Merry Month of May* led the way. He spied his first glimpse of the lyrical assassin through the thin limbs of a dogwood tree. Perched on a large, flat rock at the edge of the creek, she swirled her bare feet in the water. Behind the rock sat a pair of woman's boots—fancy ones. Too bad she hadn't spent some of her shoe

allowance on singing lessons.

Her voice cracked. *"The skies were bright, our hearts were light, in the merry, merry month of May..."*

Benjamin winced. That was the fourth time in a row she'd sung that part. *For the love of Pete, didn't Miss Fancy Boots even know the words?* He needed to put a stop to this so he could continue fishing—and napping. He stepped forward then stopped. The woman reached up and removed a pin from her hair, then another. Mounds of long chestnut brown ringlets spilled over her shoulders into the middle of her back.

Curls. He groaned. Why'd she have to have curls?

"The skies were bright. Our eyes were light..."

Never mind. Curls or not, the woman's voice could haunt the dead. Twigs snapped under his foot.

A stubby-legged dog spun in his direction, barking relentlessly. The woman pulled her feet from the creek and hopped off the rock. "Who's there?"

He held his breath.

She hummed her tune again, cautiously this time as her eyes searched the woods. She stepped around the dog and picked up a thick stick.

He chuckled. Did she think she could fend him off with that?

"It was probably just a rabbit, huh, boy?" She stroked the little fur ball behind his ears. Still clutching the improvised deterrent, she retreated to her perch. The dog wasn't fooled. He stood, ears pricked and eyes fixed in Benjamin's direction.

Benjamin shook his head as she sang the same line of the song—again. He hadn't meant to alarm her. He could fish another day.

The fragrant woodbine tickled his senses. He pinched his nose. No use. "Ah-choo."

The dog charged.

"I know someone's in the brush." She tightened her grip on the stick. "I heard you sneeze. Come out."

The feisty dog chased Benjamin into the clearing. His graying muzzle and deep bark contradicted the little scrapper's size and enthusiasm.

Miss Fancy Boots stood on the rock, holding the stick high above her right shoulder.

Benjamin held up his hands as he moved toward her. "I intended to leave before your mutt ferreted me out. My apologies. I didn't mean to frighten you."

Raising her chin, she edged backward. "I'm not scared."

The tailless critter nipped at Benjamin's heels then zigzagged around him. "Call off your...dog, Miss. If you can call that runt of a critter a dog."

Fear shifted to indignation as her dark eyes narrowed. "He's a corgi—a herding dog, from the finest breeding stock England has to offer."

"What's he herd? Rabbits?"

Resembling a batter for the Cincinnati Red Stockings, she readjusted the position of the stick. "What do you want?"

"I want you to stop your caterwauling so I can enjoy my Sunday afternoon."

She lowered her makeshift weapon and rested her hands on her hips. "My caterwauling? First, you insult my dog, now my singing. I suppose you could do better?"

"Decidedly better." His attention shifted to the stocky animal nipping at the leg of his dungarees. "Your dog, Miss."

"Buddy, come." The dog ambled to the base of the rock where she stood. She angled her head, brows

furrowing. "You don't sound like you're from around here? Are you from up north?"

"Born and raised in Pennsylvania."

"Do you work for the railroad?"

"More or less. Is that a problem?"

She stiffened. "Not if you keep your distance."

"C'mon down from there before you slip."

Benjamin moved toward the rock but halted when she raised the stick again.

"Don't come any closer."

Maybe he should leave since she still had concerns about him. He scratched his scraggly beard. His raggedy appearance no doubt added to her apprehension. He diverted his attention to her dainty shoes. She had no reason to worry. While her curls were definitely attractive, he had no designs on a woman like her. Marcy had cured him of an eye for women with a taste for the finer things in life.

Still, he couldn't just leave and risk her falling in the creek.

Stepping forward again, Benjamin held his hands high where she could see them. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The woman crept backward. "Keep your distance."

"I'd be careful if I were you, Miss. You're awfully close to the edge."

"I'll be fine." She inched back. "You just stay put."

The lady was feisty and tenacious—qualities he might like if she weren't threatening to pummel him. Too bad she couldn't carry a tune with a handle on it. "Let me help you down before you slip." He reached up to take her hand. "Then I'll be on my way."

"I told you to keep your distance."

The stick swished through the air. Benjamin ducked, the limb narrowly missing his head.

Splash.

He straightened and peered over the side of the rock. She sat bent-legged in shallow water—skirts knee-high, water dripping from her nose. The waterlogged woman glanced at him through damp lashes. What a sight. Benjamin clamped his lips together in a futile effort to contain his mirth. He knew enough about females to know Miss Fancy Boots would be fuming mad. Even more so if he laughed at her predicament. Despite his best effort, a hearty guffaw escaped him.

Until her glare silenced him.

Benjamin waded into the creek. “May I help you?”

“No, thank you.” She searched the creek bed for the stick. “I can manage.”

The dog sat at the edge of the water, the nub where his tail should be wagging playfully.

“I think he wants to join you.”

As if Benjamin’s observation had been a personalized invitation, the critter jumped in, splashing his mistress.

“Buddy, no!” She shielded her face in vain.

Bringing his fist to his mouth, he feigned a cough to stifle his laughter. Poor woman. This just wasn’t her day.

She struggled to her feet and swiped wet tresses from her eyes. Without a glance in his direction, she lifted her soggy skirts and edged around him toward the creek bank.

“Watch your—”

Arms flailing, she wobbled as her foot slipped on a mossy rock.

Benjamin lunged forward and grabbed her waist, steadying the drenched woman. Mere inches apart, his gaze lowered to her rosy lips. He hadn't noticed those before. "Allow me to assist you?"

She sighed. "I guess I have no choice. I lost my stick when I fell."

With one arm wrapped around her waist, he grasped her elbow with his free hand and led her from the water.

Once on dry ground, she twisted the fabric of her skirt. Water pooled in the dirt beneath her. "Look what you've done!"

"What I've done?"

"Yes, I'm a mess." Mud-caked toes peeked out from underneath the hem of her dress.

A beautiful mess. Dark, wet curls plastered themselves against her creamy skin. Yellow flecks in her eyes sparkled like gold in the sunlight. She may be rounder than the other women who'd sparked his interest, but she was by far the prettiest.

"You probably could use a little putting back together." So could he. Benjamin rubbed his hand over wiry whiskers. Why hadn't he trimmed his beard?

Now that she was out of the creek, wet fabric cleaved to her ample curves. He shouldn't be staring. Averting his gaze, he cleared his throat. "Wait here, Miss. I'll be right back."

He returned with his fishing pole, three speckled trout and a wool blanket. He leaned the rod against a nearby tree. "The dog won't eat my fish, will he?"

"I don't think so."

Benjamin eyed the dog then handed the string of fish to her anyway. "Hold these, please." Unfolding the blanket, he draped it around her shoulders. "Name's

Benjamin Coulter, Miss."

"Thank you, Mr. Coulter." She grasped the blanket with her free hand. A smug grin crossed her lips as she lifted the string of trout. "Looks like my caterwauling didn't scare away all the fish."

Benjamin pushed his hat back from his forehead. "Begging your pardon, Miss, but I caught these before your serenade began."

"Here." She extended the fish in his direction. "I should be getting home." She grabbed her boots and stockings. "Come on, boy. Let's go."

"I'm heading back to town myself. May I escort you?"

"No, thank you." She pointed to her sodden clothes. "You've done more than enough already. Besides, I don't know you."

He should just let her go. Those fancy boots spelled trouble in his book, yet something about her captivated him. Benjamin grabbed his pole and followed her. "But I did come to your rescue. Surely, that must count in my favor."

She glanced over her shoulder. "True. But, if it weren't for you, I'd never have fallen in the creek in the first place. So that is a mark against you."

A mark against him? He wasn't some errant school boy. "Wait, please."

When she reached the edge of the clearing, she paused and removed the blanket from her shoulders. "Please, don't follow me. I can't be seen, like this, in the company of a stranger."

He tore his gaze away from the wet fabric determined to cling to her curvaceous figure. What was she thinking? She shouldn't be seen like that by anyone, including him. "All right, but you'd better

keep the blanket. You'll be...indecent without it."

A dash of pink graced her cheeks. "Thank you."

Resisting the urge to admire her curves, he focused his attention on the storm clouds drifting toward town. Not nearly as interesting, but much safer. "Are you covered?"

"Yes."

He corroborated her statement from the corner of his eye before allowing himself to look her direction again. Even wet, she was fetching.

"But how will I return the blanket to you?"

"Just keep it."

"You won't need it?"

"Not unless fate requires me to rescue another obstinate woman from the creek."

A spark flashed in her eyes. "Fortunately for you, I'm the most stubborn woman in town."

"No doubt."

"Good day, Mr. Coulter."

Her pace quickened as she followed the dusty road toward town. Just his luck. He would've enjoyed walking Miss Fancy Boots home. Benjamin stopped in his tracks. Miss Fancy Boots? He smacked his palm against his forehead.

Doggone it.

Why hadn't he asked her name?

2

Ruth Ann tiptoed across the veranda. Clutching the green wool blanket, she peered past yellow toile curtains into the kitchen.

Where was Myra?

The scent of rain lingered in the air. Dark clouds hovered in the distance. Relieved she'd arrived home before the impending downpour, she hurried toward the door. A loose board creaked beneath her muddy feet. She cringed. A low throaty bark crept from Buddy's mouth. Bringing her finger to her lips, she glared at the snarling little scoundrel. "Shh, that's just me, boy."

His barking intensified.

"Traitor."

She stiffened at the faint click of the latch. Oh well, she shouldn't be skulking around the porch in the middle of the day anyway. She was a grown woman for goodness' sake—soaking wet or not.

The door handle slipped from her grasp.

"Lordy child, what happened to you? You's a mess."

Ruth Ann sucked in a breath, as her fist flew to her chest.

Myra's coffee-colored hands grasped Ruth Ann's. "Its fine, Missy. It just me."

"Oh, thank heaven." She glanced past the older woman. "Is Mama home?"

"Mmmhmm, and she on a tear about somethin'

Mrs. Hirst told her followin' services this mornin'."

Ruth Ann could well imagine. Why hadn't she told Mama about Mr. Janney's offer to extend her teaching contract before now? Hearing the news from Mrs. Hirst would only inflame the situation. "Can you help me clean up before Mama sees me like this?"

Myra shook her head. "Mercy, child, I not sure we has that much time. Let's get you out that wet dress and put it to soak." She tugged the blanket from Ruth Ann's shoulders. Pinching it between her index finger and thumb, she inspected the covering. "Where'd you find this ol' scrap of a blanket?"

"A man at the creek loaned it to me. He said I'd be indecent without it."

Myra's mouth fell agape. "Some man you don't know seen you like this?"

Ruth Ann nodded. "He sort of caused my fall in the first place then he waded in to assist me."

"I bet he's one of them railroad men?" She shook her finger at Ruth Ann. "You heard your Mama. They not to be trusted."

"I remember and his disheveled appearance had me fearful at first, but there was something about his eyes."

"His eyes?"

Ruth Ann nodded and grasped her confidant's arm. "They were a delicious shade of amber." She sighed. "Like honey drizzling on a warm biscuit."

Myra quirked a brow. "What 'bout Mr. Thornton?"

"You know I've never fancied him."

"Makes no never mind. You practically engaged to the man."

Ruth Ann rolled her eyes. "Don't remind me."

Myra opened the larder and retrieved the metal wash tub. Yellowing teeth split her grin. "And what your mama gonna say 'bout this railroad man with the fine eyes?"

"Nothing. It's our secret."

~*~

Ruth Ann forced a breath, steeling her nerves before sliding open the mahogany pocket doors. Mama sat in her wing back chair in the corner of the parlor, her fingers strumming its velvet upholstered arm.

"Myra said you wanted to speak—"

Mama sprung from her chair. "Is it true, Ruth? You agreed to another term at the Freedmen's School?"

She kissed her mother's cheek. "I take it the gossip mill of the Women's Benevolent Aid Society is working fine?"

"Don't get sassy with me, Ruth. I spoke with Genevieve Hirst this morning. Imagine my embarrassment when I learned this news from her. She is none too pleased either."

"I had planned to tell you earlier, but it slipped my mind. Mr. Janney offered the contract Friday afternoon."

"I thought we agreed this would only be temporary."

Thunder rumbled, shaking the thinly-paned glass.

Ruth Ann hurried to the parlor window and lowered the sash as the first droplets of rain splattered against the glass. She glanced at the darkening sky. A storm brewed—inside and out.

Taking a deep breath, she faced her mother. "Mr. Janney said my performance is exemplary and asked

me to remain for the winter term while they continue their search for a qualified Negro teacher to replace me. I accepted. I don't see the problem."

Mama returned to her seat then adjusted her skirts to cover the thick sole of her left shoe. "You don't see the problem?"

Ruth Ann shook her head.

"Since you accepted the temporary position, Governor Walker has appointed James' father to fill the vacant state Senate seat. He's been courting you for nearly a year. You must realize by now that you are under perpetual scrutiny."

How could she not be aware of the scrutiny she was under? Constantly being told how to dress, what to say, and when to speak. Though he'd made his intentions clear, much to her relief, James hadn't proposed. She intended to retain her new teaching position as long as possible.

"Perhaps James can use my position at the Freedmen's School to his advantage."

Her mother's eyes narrowed.

"Aren't politicians expected to help those less fortunate and improve the lot of the poor?"

"Of course they aim to be seen as benevolent but not by teaching illiterate Negroes."

Ruth Ann crouched beside her mother's chair, resting her hand on the plush velvet arm. "Maybe it won't be quite as big of a problem as you think. James behaves rather... indifferent toward me."

The grandfather clock in the corner chimed four times. Ruth Ann's attention shifted to the pendulum as it swung inside its ornately carved walnut cabinet. "Mama, you should consider the possibility that my future may not include James Thornton."