

## Chapter 2

### Ada Monroe

Ada sat in the porch of the house that was now hers, writing a letter. Putting the point of the pen in ink, she wrote: This you must know: although you have been away for so long, I will never hide a single thought from you. I believe it is our duty to be honest with each other and unlock our hearts. She blew the paper to dry it and then carefully read her letter. She decided that she did not like what she had written and threw the letter away. Aloud she said, "That is just the way people talk. It means nothing." She looked over to the kitchen garden, where tomatoes and beans grew that were hardly bigger than her thumb, although it was the growing season. Many of the leaves were eaten away by insects. Beyond the failed garden lay the old cornfield, now grown wild. Above the fields, the mountains showed faintly through the morning fog. Ada sat waiting for the mountains to show themselves clearly. 6 The house and gardens were now in a terrible condition and Ada felt comforted that at least the mountains were as they should be. Since her father's funeral, Ada had done hardly any work on the farm. She had at least milked Waldo, the cow, and fed Ralph, the horse, but she had not done much more because she did not know how to do much more. She had left the chickens to look after themselves and they had grown thin and wild, and it had become more and more difficult to find their eggs. Cookery was now a real problem for Ada. She was constantly hungry, having eaten little through the summer except milk, fried eggs, salads, and tiny tomatoes. She had been unable to make butter. She wanted to eat a chicken dish followed by a cake, but had no idea how to prepare such a meal. Ada rose and started looking for eggs. She searched everywhere but found nothing. Remembering that a red hen sometimes sat in the big bushes on either side of the front steps, she went to one of the bushes and tried to look inside it. Folding her skirt tightly around her, she went on her hands and knees into the empty space in the center of the bush. There were no eggs there, but as she sat there she was reminded of times in her childhood when she and her cousin Lucy had hidden in bushes like this one. Looking up through the leaves at the pale sky, Ada realized that she wished never to leave this fine shelter. When she thought about what had happened to her recently, she wondered how her father had allowed her to grow up so impractical. She had grown up in Charleston, and her father had given her an education far better than most young girls received. She had become a clever, loving daughter, filled with opinions on art and politics and literature. She could speak French and Latin quite well, and spoke a little Greek. She was able to sew and play the piano and was talented at painting and drawing. She read a lot. But none of these things helped her now, as the owner of a medium-sized farm, and she had no idea how to look after it. 7 All her life, Ada's father had kept her away from hard work. He had hired workers to help on the farm, and a man and his part-Cherokee Indian wife

to help in the house, so that Ada only had to plan the weekly menus. She had therefore been free to spend her time reading, sewing, drawing, and practicing her music. But now the hired people were gone, leaving Ada to manage on her own. Suddenly, the red hen came flying through the leaves, followed by the big black and gold rooster. He looked at her with his shining black eyes for a moment, then flew at her face. Ada threw up a hand to protect herself and was cut across the wrist. She knocked the bird to the ground but he flew at her again, and she escaped from the bush with the rooster scratching at her legs. She hit the bird until it fell away, and ran into the house, where she sank into an arm chair and examined her wounds. There was blood on her wrist and scratches on her leg, and her skirt was torn. This is the place I have reached, she thought. I am living in a world where this is your reward for looking for eggs. She rose and climbed the stairs to her room, removed her clothes, and washed. Finding no clean clothes, she took some from near the bottom of the dirty clothes pile. She wondered how to get through the hours until bedtime. Since the death of her father, Monroe, she had sorted out his things, his clothes and papers, but that was all she had done. Now, at the end of each empty day, the answer to the question, "What have you achieved today?" was always, "Nothing." Ada took a book from her bedside table and went to sit in the upper hall in her father's old arm chair by the window, where the light was good. She had spent much of the past three months sitting in the arm chair reading. She liked the fact that when she looked up from the page, she could see the fields and mountains, and the great height of Cold Mountain above them all. It had been a wet summer and the mountains, with their fogs, clouds, and gray rain, were very different from her hometown of Charleston. She began to read, but could not stop thinking about food. She had not yet eaten breakfast, although it would soon be time for lunch. She went down to the kitchen and spent nearly two hours trying to make a loaf of bread. But when the loaf came out of the oven, it looked like badly made hardtack. Ada tried a piece, then threw it outside for the chickens. For lunch she ate only a plate of the little tomatoes and two apples. Leaving her dirty plate and fork on the table, Ada went to the porch and stood looking. The sky was cloudless. She walked down the path a little way and turned onto the river road, picking wild flowers as she went. In fifteen minutes she reached the little church that had been Monroe's responsibility. Ada climbed the hill and went behind the church and stood beside Monroe's grave. She put the flowers on the ground and picked up the previous bunch, now wet and dying. The day Monroe had died was in May. Late that afternoon, Ada had prepared to go out for a time to paint the flowers by the stream. As she left the house, she stopped to speak to Monroe, who sat reading a book under the apple tree in the yard. He seemed tired and said he would sleep, and asked her to wake him when she returned. Ada was away for less than an hour. As she walked from the fields into the yard, she saw that he was lying with his mouth open. She walked up to wake him, but as she approached she could see that his eyes were open, his book fallen into

the grass. She ran the last three steps and put her hand to his shoulder to shake him, but she knew immediately that he was dead. Ada went as fast as she could for help, running and walking to her nearest neighbors, the Swangers. They were members of her father's church, and Ada had known them from her earliest days in the mountains. She reached their house breathless and crying. It had started raining, and when she and Esco Swanger got back to the cove, Monroe's body was wet and leaves had fallen on his face. 9 She had spent the night in the Swangers' house, lying awake and dry-eyed, longing for her dead father. Two days later, she had buried Monroe on the little hill above the Pigeon River. The morning was bright and windy. Forty people, dressed in black, nearly filled the little church. Three or four men talked of Monroe's fine qualities, his small acts of kindness, and his wise advice. Esco Swanger spoke of Ada and her terrible loss, of how she would be missed when she returned to her home in Charleston. Then, later, they had all stood and watched the burial. Afterward, Sally Swanger had taken Ada by the elbow and walked with her down the hill. "You stay with us until you can arrange to go back to Charleston," she said. Ada stopped and looked at her. "I will not be returning to Charleston immediately," she said. "I will be staying at Black Cove, at least for a time." Mrs. Swanger stared at her. "How will you manage?" she asked. "I'm not sure," Ada said. "You're not going up to that big dark house by yourself today. Take dinner with us and stay until you're ready to leave." "I would be grateful," said Ada. She had stayed with the Swangers for three days and then returned to the empty house, frightened and alone. It was a brave decision, as the war was not going well for the southern states. The Federals were just over the mountains to the north, and according to the newspapers, things were growing desperate in Virginia. People worried that the Federals would soon come south looking for food, take what they wanted, and leave people with nothing. Everyone in town knew how the Federals had robbed a family, taking every animal and piece of food they could find, and setting fire to the henhouse as they left. The Home Guard was as bad or worse. The story was that 10 Teague and his men had thrown a family called the Owens out into their yard at dinnertime. Teague claimed they were known to be lovers of the Federals. First they searched the house, and then they examined the yard to see if they could find soft dirt from fresh digging. They hit the man and later hit his wife. Then they hanged a pair of dogs, tied the woman's thumbs together behind her back, and pulled her up by them with a rope thrown over a tree. But the man still wouldn't say where he had hidden the silver. A white-headed boy called Birch had said he believed that maybe they should stop and leave. But Teague pointed a pistol at him and said, "I won't be told how to treat these people. I'll do exactly what I like." In the end, they didn't kill anybody and didn't find the silver either, but just lost interest and left. Walking back home from her father's grave, Ada stopped to rest by a rock that had a view of the river valley. She looked up toward Cold Mountain, pale and gray and distant, then down into Black Cove. She knew that if she stayed, she would need

help, but she doubted that she could find anyone, since all the men fit to work were fighting in the war. She sat and looked down at the farm. It seemed a mystery to her that she owned the farm, though she could say exactly how it had happened. She and her father had come to the mountains six years earlier, hoping to find a cure for the illness that was slowly destroying Monroe, so that he coughed up blood each day. His Charleston doctor had recommended living in the mountains, and Monroe had found a mountain church that needed a preacher. They had set off immediately, traveling first by train to Spartanburg, where they had stayed for several days, and then by horse and carriage. They had left Spartanburg in the hour before dawn, and had traveled all through the day, through land that climbed higher and higher. As the day went on, Ada became certain that the road would disappear completely, leaving them lost in a wild country. Monroe, however, was excited and from time to time spoke poetry aloud. Ada had laughed and kissed him, thinking that she would follow him anywhere. It was long after midnight when they came to a dark little church on a hill above the road and a river. They went in out of the rain and lay down in their wet clothes. The next morning Monroe rose stiffly and walked outside. Ada heard him laugh and then say, "My God, I thank you once again." She went to him. He stood in front of the church, laughing and pointing above the door. She turned and read the sign: Old Mountain Church. "We have arrived home," Monroe said. In the weeks that followed their arrival, Ada and Monroe had visited members of the church and others who they hoped would join it. People seemed distant and quite cold. Only the men would come out to meet them, and sometimes Monroe and Ada would be invited in and sometimes not. When they were invited inside, the men looked at the fire and did not speak. When Monroe asked a direct question, often they just looked at him. There were hidden people in the house—women, children, and old people—but they never introduced themselves. To Ada, these people seemed to care nothing at all for the things she and Monroe knew. These mountain people clearly saw life very differently. But Monroe and Ada remained at the church, living in a little riverside house that belonged with it. Then, when Monroe's health improved and people seemed to be accepting him, Monroe sold the Charleston house and bought the cove from the Black family. He liked the way the land was flat and open at the bottom of the cove, and he liked the wooded hillsides that rose from the farm toward Old Mountain, and the ice cold water from the stream. And he especially liked the house he had built there, with its big porch all across the front, and the great fireplace in the sitting room. When he bought the cove, the place had been a farm, but Monroe did not bother to manage the farm well, since he had put his money into rice and cotton and did not need to grow his own food. Still seated by the rock, Ada took a letter from her pocket and began to read it. It was from her father's lawyer in Charleston, and in it he informed her that due to the war, Ada's income from rice and cotton had been reduced to almost nothing. Ada stood up, put the letter back in her pocket, and took the path down

n to Black Cove. She wondered how she would find the courage to hope. When she reached the old stone wall that marked the edge of the farm, she paused again. It was a lovely spot, one of her favorite corners of the farm. The wall went north to south, and on this sunny afternoon it was warm with afternoon sun. An apple tree grew near it, and a few early apples had fallen into the tall grass. Ada thought it was the most peaceful place she had ever known. She settled herself against the wall, took her book from her pocket and began reading, until eventually she fell asleep in the long grass. When she woke, it was dark, and a half-moon stood high in the sky. She had never spent a night in the woods alone, but she was less frightened than she expected. She sat for hours watching the progress of the moon across the sky, until the first gray light appeared. In her mind, she considered the possibilities again and again. They were few. If she tried to sell Black Cove and return to Charleston, the little money she would receive would not last long. After a time, she would have to live with friends of her father, probably as a teacher to their children. It was that or marry. But the thought of returning to Charleston in order to hunt for a man disgusted her. She tried to see herself saying to someone that she loved him, when she actually meant that she needed his money. But she could not imagine the marriage act with such a man. She knew that if she returned to Charleston under these conditions, she could not expect people to welcome her, because in the opinion of Charleston society she had refused too many men who had shown an interest in her. She had told too many of her friends that these men bored her and that marriage was not a woman's only purpose in life. As a result, many people thought that she was very strange. In the year before they had moved to the mountains, Ada had lost many friends. So even now, the idea of returning to Charleston was a bitter thought. There was nothing pulling her back and she had no family there. And although she was an outsider, this place, the blue mountains, seemed to be holding her where she was. The only thought that left her any hope of happiness was this: the land that she could see around her was her own, belonged to her. She returned to the house in the early morning, and was sitting in the porch some hours later, wondering what her next action should be, when she saw a figure come walking up the road. It was a girl, a short one, thin as a chicken neck except across the lower half of her body, where she was quite wide. The girl came up to the porch and, without asking permission, sat in the chair next to Ada. She wore a blue, square-necked dress made of cheap cloth. "Sally Swanger said you're in need of help," she said. Ada examined the girl carefully. She was a dark thing, with a thin chest but strong-looking arms. She had a broad nose and her hair was black and thick. Big dark eyes, no shoes, clean feet. "Mrs. Swanger is right. I do need help," Ada said, "but I need help with the farm. It's rough work and I believe I need a man for the job." "Number one," the girl said, "if you have a horse, I can plow all day. Number two, every man worth hiring has gone to fight." The girl's name, Ada soon discovered, was Ruby, and after talking for a time, Ada began to think that Ruby was strong enough to

work on the farm. Just as importantly, as they talked, Ada liked Ruby and felt that she had a willing heart. And though 14 Ruby could not read a word or even write her name, Ada thought she saw in her something hard and bright. And they shared this: Ruby was a motherless child from the day she was born. In a short time, and to Ada's surprise, they came to an agreement. Ada said, "At the moment, and possibly for some months, I have very little money" "Money isn't important," Ruby said. "Sally said you needed help, and she was right. But I don't want to be your servant. I'm saying, if I'm going to help you here, both of us must understand that." As they talked, the black and gold rooster walked by the porch and paused to stare at them. "I hate that bird," Ada said. "He attacked me." Ruby said, "I wouldn't keep a bird that did that to me." "But how can I get rid of it?" Ada said. Ruby looked at her in surprise. She rose and quickly seized the rooster, put his body under her left arm, and with her right hand pulled off his head. He struggled for a minute and then went still. Ruby threw the head into a bush. "He'll need cooking for quite a time," she said. By dinnertime the meat of the rooster was falling from the bones, and bread was baking in the oven.

Chapter 3 The Journey Begins

It was dawn and the golden sunlight shone down on a tall man