

August 12, 1832
Millsworth, Ohio

Please don't let her be home. Jim Brooks hurried through the gentle rain along the path to the Taylors' back door. He lifted his hand to knock, then hesitated.

When Mr. Taylor had offered Jim the job of painting the Taylors' fancy front parlor, Jim almost turned the banker down. Then he'd remembered First Tuesdays. Nearly all the women hereabouts met at the church every first Tuesday of the month to spend the day gabbing and maybe adding a stitch or two to whatever quilt they was working on. According to his ma, Nora Taylor never missed a quilting bee.

Unless it were raining.

Jim glared up at the warm, late-summer rain and received a drop in the eye for his troubles. He rubbed the sting away and glanced back the way he'd come. Maybe he ought to go home, tell Mr. Taylor something came up. Jim could do the job some other day. Any day the man's daughter weren't around. Jim shook his head. No, that wouldn't do. He'd promised Mr. Taylor he'd do the job today. Jim may not be the sharpest scythe in the tool shed, but if he said it'd get done, it got done.

Sucking in a deep breath, he squared his shoulders, knocked on the door, and waited.

The persistent rain drummed against the top of his wool felt hat. Water plopped into a bucket left beside the back door. Several minutes passed, with Jim growing wetter by the second. But no tapping of a maid's shoes sounded across the Taylors' wood floor.

Well, I tried. Jim pivoted away.

Then he turned back. Set his jaw. He'd given his word and he weren't no coward. He knocked again, harder this time.

Still, no sounds came from within.

Side-stepping to the window beside the door, Jim cupped his hands against the glass and peered in.

Nothing but calico curtains.

Before Jim could pull away, the fabric drew back to reveal a pair of wide brown eyes over pink lips pursed in surprise.

Jim jumped back. *She's here.*