

Blessed Shadows Dark and Deep

Chapter One: A Civil Brawl

A breeze blew through the open windows of the Stamford Print Shop, providing relief from the sweltering late-July heat. Sixteen-year-old Bill Stamford offered a beaming smile to the fortyish woman buttoned up in an austere summer dress as she strode up to the counter. Not entirely unadorned, Bill realized. A miniature Bonnie Blue Flag lay pinned to Julia Dickson's bodice.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Dickson," Bill said, relocating the novel he'd been reading to a shelf below the countertop. "How can I help you?"

Hair nearly invisible beneath a gray bonnet better suited for 1840, not 1861, the woman dug into her handbag and emerged with a sheet of paper swathed with intricate handwriting. Handing it to him, she said, "Kenansville sure could use an afternoon shower." She wiped a gloved hand across her forehead, soaking up beads of sweat. "Love the smell of hot lead in the wintertime, not so much in July."

Mrs. Dickson's pronunciation of her words was as meticulous as the writing on the paper. Bill glanced at her neatly spaced, perfectly drawn rendering of an enlistment poster. "This is the prettiest thing I've seen all day, except for you, Mrs. Dickson."

"I'm way too old for sweet talk, Bill Stamford." Mrs. Dickson's lips refused to quiver with amusement. "My husband plans a big blowout for the Duplin Rifles. A band, picnic, ice cream, games for the kiddies. The Second North Carolina Regiment needs more men, so we're going to recruit for Company C, our own Duplin Rifles. Mr. Dickson will take the recruits to meet up with Captain Kenan." Hand perched against her upper lip as if she intended to share a secret, she whispered, "I'd normally forbid it, but it's for the cause. There'll be a kissing booth, but only for boys who have signed their enlistment papers. Girls from the Female Seminary will man it."

Bill suspected his face must be redder than a Duplin Roads tomato. He fought to keep an outburst of giggling bottled in his throat. Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly, then said, "Every Duplin grandmother will be praying for your soul."

She finally laughed. "Chaste kisses. You're going to get one, aren't you, Bill?"

He shook his head. "I'm just sixteen. I'll be seventeen on September twenty-second, so it'll be fourteen months until I can enlist. Momma won't allow me until I turn eighteen. I'm not going to buck her."

"Icie Belle's a hard-nosed woman," Mrs. Dickson agreed. "She's raising three fine children in you, Mark and Laura. I have to admit I didn't realize you were just sixteen. You look older."

"I know. A few grandfather types have scolded me for not being in the army." Bill shrugged. "We don't have an artist to reproduce your drawings of a band and soldiers marching, but we do have woodcuts just as good. I'll bring the proof to your house in two days so you can make any changes you want, Mrs. Dickson."

“Your papa courted me in our younger days, before Icie Belle won his heart. I know he’ll do a wonderful job. What do I owe, Bill?”

“Two dollars for twelve posters. Enough to blanket the town.” He deposited the bills in the cashbox as soon as she paid.

“Will you be a volunteer, Bill? Not for the army, but for the picnic.” Mrs. Dickson patted Bill’s hand. “You can captain one of the children’s games... maybe shuttlecock.”

“I’d love to do it. It’s a game boys and girls can play together.” He waved goodbye as she beelined for the front door. When he heard the door shut, he took a final look at Mrs. Dickson’s mockup and pigeonholed it in the to-do box. The poster needed some jasm. He rested his thumb under his chin and wrote down some headline suggestions. Repel the Invader. That was catchy. In seventy-two point type, it would grab attention; the kissing-booth girls would do the rest. And below the Second North Carolina Regiment, the words Thunderbolt of the Confederacy. If Mrs. Dickson didn’t kill the kissing booth, she’d not kill these two advertising gimmicks, Bill figured.

Slipping his fingers under the novel’s back cover, Bill set the book on the counter. He’d left a bookmark between pages sixty-two and sixty-three of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*. As he rubbed a finger along the bookmark’s edge, Bill heard his papa amble into the front office.

“Someone escaping the heat? Or did we get some business?” Clarence Stamford slapped his son on the back.

Even teenage girls considered Clarence a handsome man. In his early forties, Bill’s papa parted his coal-black hair in the middle, a look that gave him a distinguished appearance, like a railroad president. With a clean-shaven face and slim figure, Clarence could pass for a man in his early thirties, since he’d yet to start turning gray. Even in his farmer’s shirt and railhead-striped work pants, he made women play vainly with their curls as he addressed them at the counter.

Bill retrieved Mrs. Dickson’s poster order from the workbox and handed it to his papa. “Looks like the Duplin Rifles are taking advantage of the whipping we gave the Yankees at Manassas. One of my school’s trustees, James Dickson, is going to do some recruiting for them. All day Saturday, August 10, on the courthouse lawn.”

Clarence looked up from Mrs. Dickson’s dummy sheet. “James and Captain Kenan are longtime chuckaboos. They attended Grove Academy together.” Grinning, Clarence eyed the ceiling. “It’s hard to tell if the blowout’s for recruitment or an excuse for a rip-roarin’ good time. Lord, help me keep my patience. Just one battle where both armies were ill-prepared, but the Yanks broke first. Now everyone thinks the war’s going to be over in three months, and we’ll be free of Yankee meddling. Bill, it’ll be more like three years. With the North’s industrial might, it’s going to be a ruinous war even if we win the damn thing.”

Considering all the Confederate portraits on the wall and the Bonnie Blue Flag flying above the print shop’s front door, no one would ever suspect Clarence Stamford harbored doubts. Or maybe realistic expectations, Bill thought. His papa wasn’t a man to get caught up in the turmoil of the moment. He prided himself on the ability to anticipate the consequences of

political choices men made on the national, state and local levels. Bill had never bested him in chess. His papa wasn't a stupid man; publicly he supported the war.

"Papa, I didn't know you courted Julia Dickson." Bill expected his father to flash surprise, then conceal it. He didn't. Instead, he crossed his arms and harrumphed. "Julia Dickson talks too much." Clarence put the woman's drawing on the counter. "Yes, I courted her. We were never serious. I admit we did share some spirited kisses and did the bear. When your momma and her family moved down from Ohio, my heart only had room for one woman."

Bill nodded. "I know you love Momma. I just find it funny you courted Julia Dickson. I don't think she ever fancied stylish hair. She's always wearing an ugly bonnet."

"She wasn't always so old-school, son."

"Obviously not, considering the kissing booth." Bill pointed to the mockup and the paragraph announcing the kissing booth. "See it, Papa?"

"I do now." Clarence actually giggled. "Honestly, I'd have never expected a kissing booth on a poster from the Dicksons. War makes for strange bedfellows." He tapped his finger along the top of Mrs. Dickson's drawing. "I don't see a work order."

"Whoops." Bill smiled sheepishly. "Forgot. Again."

Clarence tore a work order from its stack and slid it to his son. "No skimping on details. I'll probably have Dale Winland do the typesetting."

Dale was the shop's apprentice, and lived in an attic room in carpenter Ben Ezzell's farmhouse just outside Kenansville. Twenty-one years old, the Burgaw native from neighboring Pender County had been mulling joining up, maybe as early as the upcoming ice-cream social. If he did, he'd leave one person in a quandary, his sweetheart, Susannah Lelly, daughter of one of the town's lawyers, Isaac B. Lelly. She'd hounded him to do his military duty, yet she was a weeper, so Bill knew Susannah would blubber when Dale climbed aboard the Wilmington and Weldon train at Warsaw and headed north to drill, march and fight.

"I'd like to do the typesetting for Mrs. Dickson's posters," Bill told his papa. "I've some ideas for woodcuts and banners."

"Okay, but you need to fill out the work order." Clarence put a lead pencil in his son's hand. "Get in the habit, even though you'll—"

The bell above the front door rang. Both expected a customer to step into the print shop. Instead, Bill's best friend sauntered in. Charlie Kurtz settled his buttocks on a stool, then dropped a cloth bag onto the mahogany countertop. There was a solid thump when the bag came to rest.

"Fixin' for a game of marbles, Billy Boy?" Charlie splayed his elbows on the countertop, and gave Clarence a hopeful look. "If your papa agrees."

A scrawny lad, Charlie barely topped five foot, three inches, yet never backed down from a heavier, taller bully. Crowned with a head of uncombable red hair, Charlie seemed to draw unruly girls who liked sharing kisses in woodsy places. Hands stippled with freckles as numerous as those on Charlie's face opened the bag. Soon two of his fingers held a ceramic marble decorated with four-leaf clovers.

"Go ahead, Bill, take a break," Clarence said, his manner easy going. "I'll man the counter. No more than three games, though. Then back to work." As Bill and Charlie stepped toward the front door, Clarence shouted, "How many posters for Julia?"

"A dozen, Papa." Bill opened the door. "Don't give Mrs. Dickson's job to Dale. I want to do the typesetting."

"Then you need to get back in here soon. Just a few games, remember?" Clarence dismissed them with a wave.

Bill stopped unexpectedly in the doorway. Charlie banged into him. "Oh, can I take the Richmond Dispatch with me, Papa? I want to read its account of Manassas to Charlie."

"Sure," Clarence said, nudging the newspaper out from one of the counter shelves. He held it up, and Bill quickly had the newspaper perched between his arm and ribs.

They liked playing marbles in the alley between the print shop and Stephen Graham's law office. Bill dawdled, slipping into the alley's shadows. He planted himself on the bench underneath the print shop's storefront window. Wedging himself in a corner spot, he stretched his legs and, enjoying the smells of petunias and zinnias blooming in planters, opened the Dispatch.

Bill read the lead and the next four paragraphs, then Charlie interrupted. "They ran lickity-split all the way back to Washington? I thought the fellas up North were made of sterner stuff." Charlie kept shaking his head.

Bill expounded, "The correspondent says Yankee civilians drove their buggies to the battlefield to watch the fight and do some picnicking. They got caught up in the stampede. Papa says the Yanks will fight better next time. They realize it's not a lark."

"I've cousins livin' up in Pennsylvania," Charlie said, still shaking his head. "They're good people. They'd not run."

"Me too, Charlie. My momma's from a little town in Ohio... Arkona. Her people aren't cowards." Bill couldn't hold back a laugh. "Obviously, none of our relatives are in that Yankee army."

Playfully punching Bill's shoulder, Charlie said, "None of mine. Yours? I'm not sure."

They wrestled on the bench for a few seconds, then separated, out of breath, both giggling like five year olds.

“With the Yanks in Washington licking their wounds, we sure won’t see any of them marching on Kenansville.” Bill smiled at the silliness of his words. Why would any Yankee general want to capture Kenansville?

The town had grown tremendously in the last twenty years, but held no military value. Like all Southern towns, folks traveling to Kenansville first saw its church steeples jutting above the trees. One carpenter, Joseph Carr, had built more than twenty houses on streets radiating out from the courthouse square. These homes, the courthouse, city hall, and St. John’s Masonic Lodge were built in the Greek revival style. More than once Bill had heard Wilmington folks refer to Kenansville as “that dashing little town with the fine schools.” Not many towns with just six hundred people sported two schools with statewide reputations... Kenansville Female Seminary and Bill’s school, Grove Academy.

As the Bonnie Blue Flag flapped above him, Bill gazed across the street at the remodeled courthouse with its new third story. In just over a week, the courthouse lawn would be a fizzing place with band music blaring, old men tossing horseshoes, kids racing in burlap sacks, kissing-booth girls smooching boys bound for the Duplin Rifles, and everyone eating fried chicken and apple pie. The courthouse had been Kenansville’s *raison d’être* for the first half of the 19th century. Now the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad powered growth. The line didn’t pass through Kenansville, but that didn’t spell economic doom for the county seat. The Teachey depot lay nine miles away; the Magnolia depot, eight miles, and Warsaw station, six miles. The railroad meant rapid, cheap transportation for Kenansville’s farmers who needed to get their turpentine, lumber and cotton down to Wilmington’s bustling port. All Bill had to do was look left and right at the grand homes and see the railroad had brought prosperity.

“Yanks are going to want to capture Wilmington,” Bill muttered, sitting straighter on the bench. “They won’t stay cooped up in Washington forever. They could march through here on the way to Wilmington. Just because we aren’t a military target doesn’t mean the war won’t come here. I’d hate to see the courthouse and the houses burned.”

“You really reckon Yankees could come through here?” Charlie sounded doubtful.

“They can’t let the seaport and the railroad supply our armies in Virginia.” Bill glanced at the newspaper on his lap. “Momma and Papa say I can’t join up until I’m eighteen. But I’m feeling stubborn as a mule, Charlie. I wish I could enlist at the picnic next month.”

“What picnic?”

“Big doings on Saturday, August tenth, at the courthouse. Mr. Dickson’s helping Captain Kenan muster more men for the Duplin Rifles. Fried chicken, ice cream and, believe it or not, a kissing booth. Join up and you’ll get a kiss from a Seminary girl.”

“No way.” Charlie rolled his eyes. “Kisses got to be sneaked. Ain’t goin’ to happen no how. Their mommas will have a hissy fit.”

“Mrs. Dickson guarantees it. We’re doing up a poster for her, and it includes the kissing booth.”

“That’s why you want to join up. You’re after sugar from one of them seminary girls.”

“No how! If I tried to join up and wrangle a kiss, Momma and Papa would lock me in my room until I turn eighteen.” Bill held the Dispatch up to Charlie, pointed at an advertisement for a Wilmington shipper. “Let’s slink away to Wilmington and do it. We’ll lie about our age.”

Charlie shook his head. “I ain’t goin’ ’til I get drafted. No volunteerin’ for me. Why are you even askin’? You know how I feel about this war.”

Charlie’s family hailed from Asheville. Mountain folks were mostly struggling farmers with crops on hillsides and in the creek valleys. A man could walk for a day and never see a slave. Men and women like the Kurtz family didn’t much care for Tar Heel planters with their cotton and rice fields that stretched to the horizon and their addiction to slavery. And they sure didn’t like getting dragged into a civil war hatched by planters. A job at the Grove Academy brought the Kurtz family to Kenansville, but they remained mountain rebellious through and through.

“Aye, I know, Charlie, and I agree with you.” Bill folded the newspaper and laid it on the bench between them. “Papa says we’re in the industrial age; slavery’s a dying institution.”

Charlie harrumphed. “Then why does your family have two slaves?”

Bill’s ears perked. Boisterous voices, down at the intersection of Duplin and Seminary streets. One in particular, fifteen-year-old Ezekiel Merritt, barked drilling orders to three other boys, all shouldering wooden muskets: Ezekiel’s younger brother, fourteen-year-old Sam Merritt, and two beefy thirteen year olds, Frank Taylor and Ethan Wagner. They marched toward the print shop.

Azure blue for most of the day, the sky had turned dark just as Bill and Charlie exited the shop. As Bill eyed the marching foursome, the clouds parted and a sunbeam encased Ezekiel in an orb of light. He looked like an angel. That was an odd sight indeed. In spite of his biblical name, Ezekiel was a bully. Singing, Ezekiel blared, “We’re goin’ to drown Old Abe in Grove Creek. Sing, boys. We’re goin’ to drown Old Abe in Grove Creek.”

“Shush!” Bill said tersely to Charlie. “Can’t be bashing slavery when those rowdies can hear us.”

“I ain’t shuttin’ up for no one,” Charlie shouted above the singing. “Screw slave owners! Screw the Peculiar Institution!”

“Column right, march!” Ezekiel shouted. “We’re goin’ to drown Charlie in Grove Creek.” A few steps short of the print shop’s bench, Ezekiel yelled, “Halt! You’re a damned traitor, Charlie Kurtz! A yellow-belly coward!”

Brother Sam taunted, “Your momma’s nothing but a three-penny upright. A bangtail!”

“Bangtail! Bangtail!” Frank and Ethan hollered.

Scrambling to his feet, Charlie barreled into Ezekiel and drove him into the cobblestones. Straddling Ezekiel, Charlie drove his fists into the ringleader's face, bloodying the teenager's nose and lips. Howling, arms raised, Ezekiel blocked some of Charlie's punches but not enough to save his face from further damage. "I'll kill you," he wailed. "Kill... kill you!"

Bill blurted, "Charlie, stop! You're going to—"

Sam bashed his rifle against Charlie's back. Stunned, Charlie groaned and slumped against Ezekiel. Arms bulging, Ezekiel tossed Charlie aside and rolled atop him. Charlie did nothing to stop the punches raining down on his face.

Grinning madly, Sam raised his play rifle as if he intended to smash its butt against Charlie's head. Bill bounded from the bench and slammed into Sam, knocking him into his brother's legs. Stumbling, Sam toppled onto Ezekiel and Charlie, then scrambled toward his fallen rifle. Bill grabbed it first, hurled it away from the brawlers. Breathing rapidly, everyone's screams and shrieks pounding his ears, Bill reached for Ezekiel's toy gun.

Ethan's gun crashed against Bill's arm. As if God had dropped a bucket of paint on him, Bill saw everything in front of him turn red. Then he felt the pain, as if it had charged the air around him. He broke into a cold sweat. Any movement of his arm sent jolts of pain searing through him. Ethan raised his gun to hit Bill again.

Near the fighting boys, a buggy squeaked to a stop. "Confound it, hooligans!" The buggy's door opened. Dr. Chauncey W. Graham, a Grove Academy trustee, stepped down onto the cobblestones. "Stop the fisticuffs immediately! Don't make me say anything further!" On his knees, Ezekiel whirled at the sound of the doctor's voice. Shockingly, a white halo surrounded the boy, so brilliant the nimbus consumed Bill's red dots of pain. Bill had seen a halo only once, when he was ten. It encircled a playmate, a young cousin, as the two of them prepared to climb a tree in their granddaddy's front yard. She fell, and a day later died. He told his momma and papa, and they called in the Reverend James Sprunt, who conducted an exorcism. There'd not been a reoccurrence until this moment. Bill swallowed hard, forcing the bile back down his throat. He expected Ezekiel to die maybe within the hour. Lord, take this burden away. Drive this vile thing out of me! Six long years! Maybe if he prayed and prayed it wouldn't happen again.

Eyes huge at the sight of one of the town's most eminent governing fathers, Ezekiel and his gang fled as the annoyed doctor watched. "Explain yourselves, Charlie Kurtz and Bill Stamford." The halo burned more intensely as Ezekiel and the others disappeared behind one of the town's mansions.

Charlie wobbled to his feet and wiped a hand across his bloody mouth. "Ezekiel called me a traitor. Then Sam called my momma a bangtail. I had to fight, sir."

The doctor nodded. "Your momma's a sweet lady. I'll talk to their father. I expect Sam will apologize to your momma." He stepped closer to Charlie and grasped his rumpled vest, spotted with blood spatters. "Son, everyone in Kenansville knows how mountain people feel about secession and the eastern planters, but you need to keep your talk confined to your father's parlor. You can't fight every boy in town."

Charlie grimaced. "I got my licks in today. That's enough."

The print-shop door whined open. Bill's father stood on the plank sidewalk, hands pressed against his hips. "I step to the back to run the press for a few minutes and all hell breaks loose." Clarence fixed his harsh gaze on Charlie. "Those kisses you steal will dry up, Charlie Kurtz, if you don't watch your tongue. Better to keep quiet and keep those kisses coming, yes?"

Charlie grinned. "Since you put it that way, sir, I'm all for slavery and sweet kisses."

Stupidly, Bill braced his hand... the one connected to his hurting arm... against a cobblestone and tried to rise. Pain throbbed through his body, and he collapsed to his knees.

Charlie looked aghast. Clarence and the doctor raced to Bill's side. Doctor Graham examined Bill's arm, gently probing the bones. "It's fractured," Doctor Graham said matter of factly. "We'll get you home and get that forearm set and in a sling."

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Six weeks... that's the time it took for the bones to fully heal. Bill stayed housebound for a week, not wanting to risk reinjuring it. Charlie came by every afternoon and said he'd not got into further fights. Bill never did do Mrs. Dickson's poster, and stayed away from her ice cream social. Thirty boys joined Company C, some as far away as Beulaville and Teachey-Duplin Roads. In late September, Bill took off his sling and began working in the print shop as if he'd never been bashed by the rifle's butt.

Ezekiel died a day after the halo manifestation. Drowned in the Pollock swimming hole north of Kenansville. Bill said nothing to his momma and papa about the halo. Instead, he prayed every night that his Lord and Savior would keep him free of future manifestations.

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