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*The  
Wind Harp*

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Prologue

*A Decision Made*

Home is where there's one to love,  
Home is where there's one to love us!

*Charles Swain*



*Skingle Creek, Northeastern Kentucky*  
*August 1904*

The time had come for Maggie MacAuley to make a decision. She had used up most of the extended leave that Miss Addams had reluctantly granted her. There was no more time for delaying the inevitable. She had to decide, and she had to decide now.

For most of her childhood friends—the ones who had remained in Skingle Creek—there would have been no decision to make. After all, she was a woman grown: twenty-four years old with a hard-earned college degree, a teacher's certificate, and a respectable position at Hull House. To others, a choice between returning to the bustling city of Chicago and the opportunity to work with Miss Jane Addams, or

staying here, in the tiny coal town of her birth, would be no choice at all.

And yet lying here in the bed that had been hers when she was growing up, in the same bedroom she had once shared with her two sisters, Maggie felt an unexpected tug at her heart at the very thought of leaving again.

She sat up and began to loosen with both hands her heavy braid of hair, pausing at the sound of raised voices coming from the kitchen. Da and Ray were at it again.

With a sigh, she went on undoing her braid. By now she had become used to these almost-daily arguments between her father and her brother, but her stomach still tightened when she was forced to listen.

Today was Sunday, so the two had time to square off in the kitchen before church. During the week, what with Da leaving for the mine before daybreak, they didn't see each other until evening, so they usually waited until after supper to pitch their battles.

No matter what time of day they went at it, they were loud, increasingly hostile, and a constant distress to Maggie's mother.

As for Maggie, she hated arguments of any kind, but especially between members of her own family. One thing was certain: Her brother, Ray, was cut from a different bolt than she and her two sisters. Not one of them would have dared to argue with their father when they were Ray's age.

The truth was that not one of them, women grown though they were, would dare to argue with Da *today*. Matthew MacAuley was simply not a man to suffer backtalk from his children, no matter if they were now adults.

Maggie slipped out of bed and padded in her bare feet to the window. It was open, but not the slightest breeze stirred the curtains. The air was already muggy and thick, heavy with the acrid smell of coal dust. Trying to ignore the quarrel in the kitchen, she drew the curtain enough to look out on the narrow side yard, faded to a dull brown from lack of rain and the heat wave that had held steady for nearly three weeks.

A clothesline sagged from the side of the house to a limb on the gnarled old maple tree across the lot. A shovel leaned against the wall of the cellar near two overturned coal buckets, both empty. From here she couldn't see Dredd's Mountain, where the mine dug into the hillside, but she was aware of its hovering presence all the same.

The coal company still owned the town, and the mine still spilled its ash and dust over the entirety of Skingle Creek, painting it a relentless gray. The house next door, which Tom Quigley religiously painted white every five years, wore the same smoky coat as her parents' home and every other house in town.

Her sisters, especially Eva Grace, the older, hated Skingle Creek. Even as children, she and Nell Frances had spent many a night whispering from one bed to the other about the day when they'd be old enough to escape. And they had both followed their dreams. Eva Grace now lived in Lexington with her husband, while Nell Frances, also married and with two little girls, had moved even farther away, to a farm in Indiana. Only Ray, the youngest of the four, remained at home, and no doubt he was already planning his own flight.

Maggie's feelings about Skingle Creek had never been as bitter or as sharply defined as those of her siblings or many of her now-relocated schoolmates. She too disliked the drabness, the oppressive veil of dust and grime that colored the town, where boredom bred mischief or worse trouble among the young people, and where heavy spirits were all too prevalent among the parents.

But Skingle Creek was home, and in a way she couldn't begin to understand, she had never lost her sense of belonging to this place. Her roots seemed to have grown deeper and stronger than those of her sisters, and although she'd eventually gone away, she had never quite shaken free of the town's hold on her. Skingle Creek was a part of her, and no matter how long she stayed away, she never felt a total separation from her hometown.

Where her sisters saw hopelessness and an intolerable monotony of days, Maggie had always sensed the heart of the town and believed in the goodness of its people and in a way of life that, hard as it was, was meant to be valued and preserved.

She jumped as a sudden shout bounced off the walls of the kitchen. Then the door slammed and silence fell.

With a sigh, she turned away from the window and went to make her bed. She found these continuing disputes between her father and brother exhausting. The irony in the situation was that the dissension between them had been generated almost entirely by Ray's resolve to help ease the family's financial burdens—and Da's equally fierce determination to prevent him from doing so.

Though Maggie loved them both and hated this rancor between them, she could see both sides and thought she understood each. She, like her da, did not want to see Ray working in the mines. But at fourteen, her brother was already close to their father in height and on his way to being just as thick-muscled and sturdy. Most likely Ray felt it only right that he take his place in the mine to supplement Da's wages. To their father, however, Ray was still a boy who needed all the education he could get so he wouldn't be dependent on the mine for a living.

According to her mother, ever since the cave-in last year when Da suffered a broken back and a shattered knee, he'd been living with constant pain, which had slowed him down considerably. While Ray admitted that he didn't want to give up his education, it seemed to trouble him even more to see their father, given his condition, carrying the full weight of supporting the family.

From all appearances, the conflict was a draw. An encounter between two equally stubborn males whose intentions were the best—but whose emotions were highly inflammatory.

Maggie had tried talking privately with each of them with no visible results. And when she discussed the situation with her mother, she knew for a certainty that it was wearing her down, too. Last night, after one of the hottest bouts of quarreling so far, she had heard her mother quietly weeping in the bedroom.

Long after silence settled over the house, Maggie searched her thoughts for something—anything—she might do to help ease the problem. Although an idea had been lurking at the edge of her mind

for several days now, last night it appeared in full force, giving her quite a jolt.

She had wrestled with her emotions and prayed for guidance most of the night. Small wonder she felt so dull and weary this morning. But she finally knew what she had to do, as unsettling as it might be. There was no way of knowing what it would accomplish, if anything, but in the bright light of morning she realized her decision had been made.

She plopped down on the side of the bed, sitting very still, the knot in her throat tightening even more. She would write to Miss Addams this morning and tender her resignation.

Maggie was aware that she might give up her position at Hull House only to eventually find that it had been in vain, that she had made no difference after all in what admittedly seemed to be an unresolvable conflict between her father and brother. Any sign of change would almost certainly be slow in coming. But she simply could not leave her family. Not now. If for no other reason than to be here for her mother, she had to stay.

Besides, if she were to be brutally honest with herself, the hostility between her father and brother wasn't the only reason she was staying in Skingle Creek.

But that was another concern, one she wasn't ready just yet... perhaps would *never* be ready...to confront.

## Chapter One

# *A Sunday Surprise*

Write his merits on your mind;  
Morals pure and manners kind;  
In his head, as on a hill,  
Virtue placed her citadel.

*William Drennan*



### *September*

Maggie had almost forgotten how a big family dinner could wreck a kitchen. Even though they were a *small* family these days—only four of them—it seemed as though every pot and pan and most of the tableware had been used. She glanced around from the sink, relieved to see they finally had things under control. The table was cleared, the linens shaken, the dishes dried and put away. All that remained was to scour the stove and clean the sink.

She tugged the sleeves of her shirtwaist up a bit higher, though they were already soaked, and swiped a hand over her forehead to

blot the perspiration. The day was hot for September; the kitchen so steamy it was nearly intolerable. Most of yesterday had been spent in the same sweltering heat, helping her mother can tomatoes and corn. At the moment all she could think of was a cool bath, the quiet of her bedroom, and the book about Miss Helen Keller that she'd brought with her from Chicago. She was definitely ready for a rest—and some peace and quiet.

"I'll finish up, Mum. You go on out in the front room with Da and Ray. It'll be cooler in there."

Her mother shook her head. Kate MacAuley wasn't one to leave her kitchen until the last spot had been wiped clean. "Ray was going over to Tim's, and your da will be napping by now."

But obviously her father wasn't napping at all, for just then he appeared in the doorway. "Maggie? Jonathan Stuart is here wanting to see you."

Maggie stared at him. "Mr. Stuart? To see me?"

"Aye. Says he has something to discuss with you."

Maggie frowned. What in the world would Mr. Stuart want to talk with her about? She glanced down over herself and groaned. Her apron was stained with gravy. She felt damp to the bone from dishwater and perspiration. And she knew without looking that her hair was a disaster. "I can't let Mr. Stuart see me like this! I'm a fright."

Her mother was already tugging at the strings of Maggie's apron. "Oh, you're fine now! You mustn't make Mr. Stuart wait while you take time to primp. Go on and see what he wants."

"Mum! Look at me!" Maggie threw her apron off, scarcely missing the dirty dishwater.

"If the schoolteacher has come to the door on a Sunday afternoon," her da broke in, "then he has something important on his mind. Come along now."

For no explicable reason, Maggie suddenly felt like a child again. A child whose teacher had come to call and found her playing in the mud.

"You and Da come too."

"I'll be finishing this kitchen first," said her mother. "Then I'll come and say hello. Go *on*, Maggie."

"I've already said my hellos," Da told her. "I'll be helping your mother."

Still Maggie hesitated. She fumbled with her hair, tugged her sleeves down past her elbows, and ran a hand over her skirt, which, of course, was badly wrinkled.

Shooting her parents one more uncertain look, she sighed and left the kitchen.



She stopped short just inside the living room—the "front room" as her parents still called it—trying not to stare at Jonathan Stuart, who was sitting on the edge of her father's overstuffed chair. In the few weeks since she had last seen him, he had grown a mustache. It was a neat and closely trimmed mustache, but a surprise all the same.

He smiled and stood as soon as he saw her. "Maggie. I'm sorry if I've come at a bad time. Your father said it was all right—"

"Oh no. I mean, it's not a bad time at all, Mr. Stuart. Please, sit down."

He hesitated, clearly waiting for her to take a chair. Maggie plopped down on her mother's rocking chair, still feeling absurdly childlike and at a loss. She wouldn't have been surprised to find that her feet weren't touching the floor but swinging above it, as they had when she was six years old.

She couldn't have looked worse, she was sure of it. Damp and disheveled, she probably smelled like fried chicken and gravy. A touch of her hand to her temple confirmed that the steamy heat of the kitchen had caused her hair to frizz about her face.

Mr. Stuart was, of course, his usual natty self. Trust the man to look unwrinkled and totally unfazed by the sultry day. Not a fair hair out of place, as always, with his snowy white shirt starched and crisp, his pale blue tie perfectly knotted.

The man had no wife, so how did he manage to always appear so impeccably groomed and spiffy?

It occurred to Maggie that while her former teacher had always been a well-favored man—half the girls in school had had a terrible crush on him, herself included—he had grown even more handsome with age. What was he now? Thirty-five? No, he'd have to be older than that. She had been out of school for twelve years. He must be nearing forty if not more. Not for the first time, she was struck by the reality of how young he'd actually been all those years ago. Because his illness at that time had taken such a dreadful toll on him, she hadn't realized just *how* young.

It occurred to her that she was being rude. He was just sitting there, watching her with an uncertain smile while she indulged in her bad habit of woolgathering.

"If you're busy, Maggie—"

"No, not a bit. I mean, I was. But I'm not now." She was actually *stammering*. "Isn't it—hot?" she managed to say. Well, that would certainly convince him that she was the same clever girl she'd been under his tutelage.

He nodded. "I'm quite ready for fall."

Come to think of it, Mr. Stuart didn't seem to be all that comfortable himself. Perhaps he was embarrassed for her, given her appearance?

"Maggie, let me get right to it. Ray told me you're staying in Skingle Creek, that you're not going back to Chicago."

Maggie nodded. What Ray couldn't have told him, of course, was that she was already regretting the decision she'd made, already missing her friends and the children at Hull House in the worst way.

"I was surprised, to say the least. I thought you were happy working for Miss Addams."

"Oh, I was. I loved it there. But it—well, it just seems that this isn't a good time for me to leave again."

"You're worried about your father."

Maggie glanced around to make sure her father was out of earshot. "I am, yes. But that's not the only reason I decided to stay."

Although he had touched on an awkward subject, Maggie finally relaxed a little. This was Mr. Stuart, after all. The one adult she had trusted as much as her own parents when she was a child. She sensed he hadn't changed. There was the same steady kindness in his dark eyes, the same concern he had always held for his students, the same low gentleness in his tone of voice.

Clearly he was waiting for her to say more.

"It seems to me that my mother needs me here." Again Maggie glanced around before going on. "She didn't ask me to stay. In fact, I'm afraid she felt bad that I insisted. But Da can't do as much as he used to, and that puts more on Mum. She's...in truth, Mr. Stuart, I don't believe she's all that strong anymore. All these years of working so hard every day—perhaps it's catching up with her. She doesn't keep up as well as she used to."

He gave a slow nod. "No doubt you're right, although it's difficult for me to think of your parents as being any different than they've always been. I can't see that your mother has aged a bit over the years. And Matthew—" he smiled. "Well, he's still a fortress of a man."

"I'm afraid the fortress has crumbled a bit," Maggie said. "Da has a lot of pain, Mr. Stuart. Mum says it never quite goes away. And then there's this...terrible tension between him and Ray."

She stopped, unwilling to breach the privacy her family held so sacred, even with Jonathan Stuart, although she knew nothing she said would ever be repeated outside of this room.

But again he nodded, as if he already knew at least a little about the situation. "Ray thinks he needs to quit school and go to work in the mines."

"He told you?"

"No—your father did."

Maggie shouldn't have been surprised. She knew her da and Mr. Stuart had become good friends over the years. Still, it wasn't like Matthew MacAuley to confide in anyone except Maggie's mother... and sometimes not even her.

"Then you probably know that Da hates the very thought of Ray going into the mines. And so do I. Ray's bright—*very* bright—and he

should get as much education as possible. Poor Mum! She's caught in the middle. She wants the best for Ray, but she worries herself sick over Da having to work so hard, given the way his back and leg plague him."

Maggie felt a drop of perspiration trickle down the side of her face, and she reached to dab it. "I can't leave. I'd not draw an easy breath if I did. So I'll be staying. At least for now."

He studied her for a moment. "So—it wouldn't do for me to try to convince you that you deserve to live your own life? You're what now, Maggie? Twenty-two, twenty-three?"

"Twenty-four. And no, I don't suppose even you could change my mind, Mr. Stuart, although I value your opinion as I always have. I've already written to Miss Addams to tell her I'm not coming back."

He searched her face for another moment, and then got to his feet and went to stand with his back to the window, still watching her. "Well then, that's that. I wanted to make sure your decision was final before I offered you a job."

Maggie stared at him. "A job?"

"A teaching position."

"You mean...at the school?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "I should think so."

"But I thought you already had a second teacher."

His expression sobered somewhat. "Carolyn Ross, you mean. Here's the situation. Mrs. Ross originally hired on as school secretary, expecting to work only half-days. When she saw that I was getting farther and farther behind, what with trying to maintain the position as principal and being the only teacher, she agreed to work full-time, taking the youngest students in the morning and tending to her secretarial duties in the afternoon. We've reached the point, however, where we actually need another teacher so Carolyn—Mrs. Ross—can function as a full-time secretary."

Maggie hoped her excitement wasn't too obvious, but this was more than she had hoped for. A teaching position—and one with Jonathan Stuart at that! "The town has grown that much?" she asked, forcing a note of calm into her voice.

He nodded. "It may not look like it, but it has. I imagine the student enrollment is half again what it was when you were in elementary. There are a number of things I'd like to implement both as principal and teacher, but I can't find time enough for everything. I can't tell you how pleased I was when the board recently authorized the hiring of another teacher."

He stopped, lifted his head a little, and looked directly at her. "I'm hoping you might consider the position, Maggie. No doubt the money wouldn't be what you're used to, but I expect it would pay better than most anything else you'll find in Skingle Creek—if you're planning to work, that is."

"Of course I need to work," Maggie said. "In fact, I've already been going about from place to place, looking for something. But so far the only offer I've had was from Mr. Ferguson at the company store. And that would be only a few hours a week."

"Well, naturally, I don't need your answer today," Mr. Stuart said, "but I hope you'll give it serious consideration."

Maggie knew she probably should at least *appear* to be more professional, more mature. But then, this was Mr. Stuart, and if he remembered much about her at all, he already knew that a cool head had never been one of her strengths.

"Oh, I don't have to consider it, Mr. Stuart. I'll take the job."

It gratified her no end to see his expression brighten. "Well, that's wonderful! But are you quite sure you don't want to think about it...perhaps talk with your parents?"

Maggie shook her head. "No. In truth, I've been praying for days for a job—anything at all that would allow me to earn my keep and help my parents so Ray can stay out of the mines. This is far better than anything I hoped for. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your thinking of me."

"You're the *first* person I thought of, Maggie. How often does a town the size of Skingle Creek manage to come across a teacher with your qualifications?" He paused. "When do you think you might start?"

“As soon as you want me. Tomorrow’s Monday. What about tomorrow?”

He laughed. “You always were decisive. I’d love for you to start tomorrow. But are you sure you don’t need more time?”

“Wouldn’t it be good to start as soon as possible, before things get too far along?” Maggie asked. “School’s been in session, what—only a week?”

“Exactly a week. And if you’re serious about starting tomorrow, I couldn’t be happier. It might be good if you could come early, perhaps an hour or so before class takes up, so I can help you get settled. Would that be possible?”

By this point, Maggie could scarcely control her excitement. “Mr. Stuart, I’m so eager to get back to teaching again I’ll be there before the sun comes up if you want! I’ve been missing my children at Hull House terribly. I can’t wait to have a class again.”

His gaze went over her face, and Maggie fervently wished she could have been freshly groomed—and more composed. And she probably should have at least *pretended* to be less eager.

But when his smile came, she didn’t regret that she’d allowed her feelings to show. It was the same slow, fond smile that had always made her feel special.

Not that his smile had ever been for her alone. In truth, Jonathan Stuart had a way about him that could make even the most timid and retiring child feel favored and important. *All* his students believed they were special to him. No doubt they still did. As his student, Maggie had thought Jonathan Stuart a great man, a man with whom she would have trusted her life. And now, more than a decade later, the depth of kindness reflected in his eyes, the strength engraved upon his good, lean face, told her the years hadn’t changed him.

The thought of working each day under the supervision of this man, a man who had had such an incredible impact on her life, who had played such a significant part in her becoming a teacher to begin with, made her catch her breath.

If her sisters had been here, no doubt they would have teased her about being “sweet” on the teacher. Well, perhaps she did still have

a bit of a crush on Jonathan Stuart. He had once been her hero, after all, when she'd been an impressionable—and wounded—child. And he'd just made himself a hero in her eyes again by offering her a job that would certainly appear to be an answer to her prayers.

Jonathan Stuart was entirely deserving of her admiration. Even so, she would make quite sure he never caught her acting like a smitten schoolgirl. She would be professionalism itself. She would be such a good teacher—an *outstanding* teacher—that he would soon realize his faith in her had in no way been misplaced. Indeed, she intended to waste no time in proving herself worthy of *his* admiration.