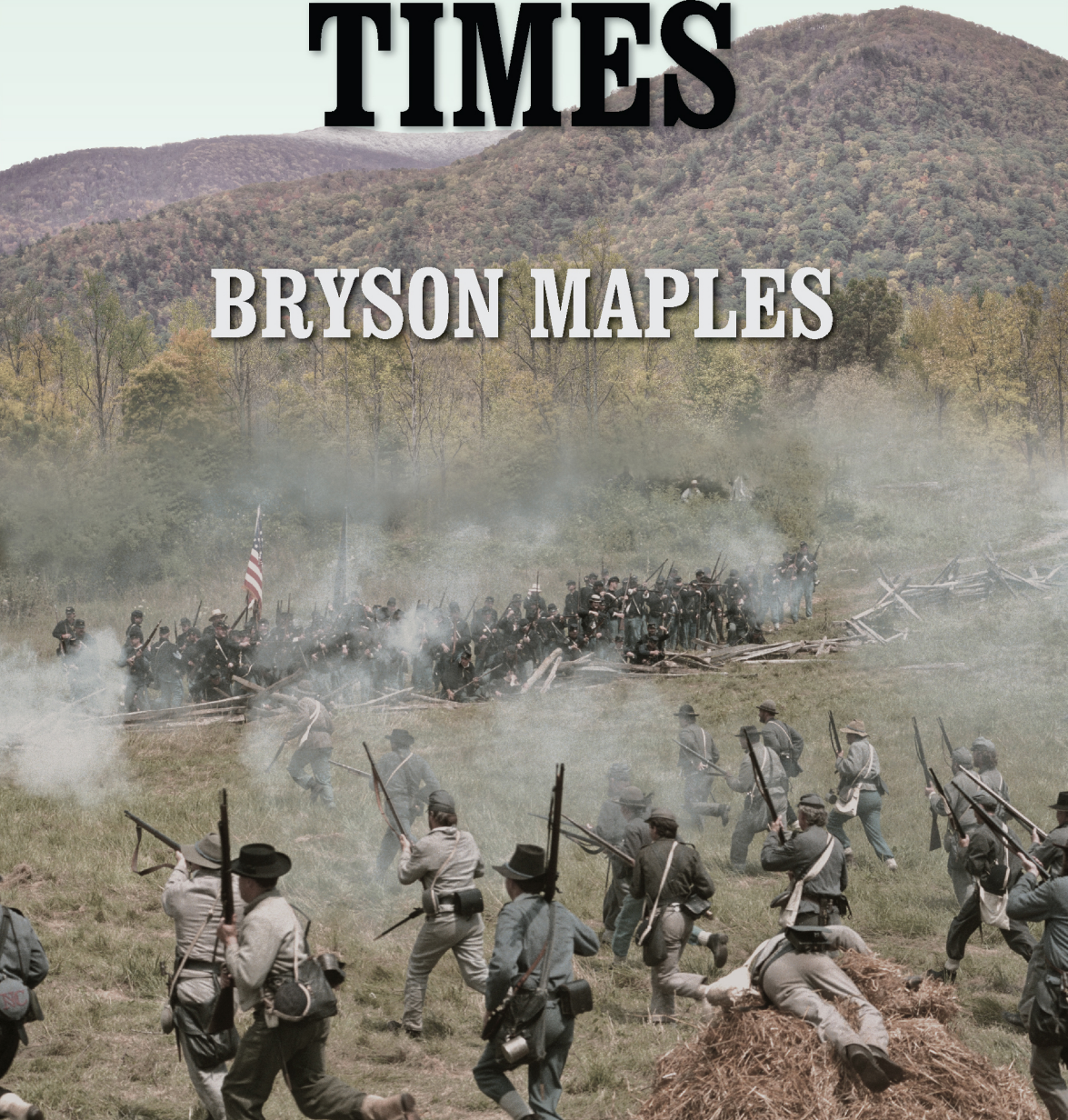

THE

UNCERTAIN TIMES

BRYSON MAPLES



CHAPTER ONE

Elkmont, Tennessee

1864

Just before the sun rose in the east, I jolted awake when a loud bang rang out from the hallway next to my bedroom. Without waking my younger brother, Alexander, or my sister, Emilia, I quickly grabbed the lantern from my nightstand and lit it. I leaned through the doorway to see what the intrusion could have been. I knew it was too early for Mama to be waking us for morning chores.

I raised my lantern. “Who is out there?” I asked, my voice shaking. Suddenly, a figure stepped into the hallway and I jumped, slamming against the wall. It was Mama. She just stood there in her white nightgown with her long blonde hair and her blue eyes staring at me. Her eyes were puffy and red, as if she had been crying for quite some time. Just as I was about to speak, she let out a sound of pure grief-stricken emotion. The sound she uttered was of great agony and despair, sending chills deep within my bones.

She ran over to me without saying a word, but I knew. She wrapped her arms around my broad shoulders and placed her hand on top of my short, blond hair.

“Papa!” I exclaimed. I dropped my lantern to the floor. He had been at war for almost a year. Mama had just received the news of his death.

I collapsed onto the cold, hard floor. The anguish of Pa’s death paralyzed me. Ever since Pa had left for the war, I had thought about what would happen if he were to die and how we would survive as a family, but I never could have been truly prepared for this reality.

I headed back to my room in a daze, careful not to wake my brother and sister. I lie in the dark as tears poured down my face, desperately gasping for my next breath. Pa was dead. How could I become the head of the household at the young age of sixteen? How could I be a provider for my family? My stomach churned with anxiety and uncertainty. I pressed my face into the pillow to muffle my sobs, allowing the cool night air to comfort my despair.

Somehow, I must have fallen asleep, because I woke up to my mother's voice ringing in my ear.

"Nathaniel, get up this instant. We must be strong for Alexander and Emilia."

Although I could hear her voice, I could not move. The last thing I remembered was crying myself to sleep, my heart heavy with thoughts of Pa. It was as if I was frozen in time, and the only thing I could think about was when we would all sit by the fire and Pa would read Proverbs 24:10 from the family Bible.

"If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small," Pa would say in his strong voice. He'd sit in his favorite rocking chair, his dark hair in disarray from a hard day's work. His skin was tanned and leathery from working out in the fields, his large hands blistered and calloused. But while his exterior was hardened, his blue eyes always held warmth and radiated compassion.

I sat up in bed, stifling a sob. My father was gone forever, but I would never forget his words or how he had looked sitting by the fire with the Bible in his hands.

Mama hovered over me, her face stricken with grief. "Please, Nathaniel. You must get up," she whispered in a tired voice.

As I pulled myself up, my damp eyes brushed against her worn white cotton gown. I realized at that moment that I must stay strong for not only myself, but for my two younger siblings and my mother. Pa had told me this day might come even before he had joined the Confederacy. I had to overcome this great adversity somehow.

Mama and I slowly made our way into the kitchen, my feet shuffling across the hardwood floor. In a daze, I helped her prepare breakfast, then sat down at the kitchen table, gazing at Mama, who was making biscuits over the hearth atop the open fire.

"A widow all alone having to raise three youngins," she said with a sob.

I walked over to her and placed my hands on her shoulders. "You ain't alone, Mama. You ain't alone."

She dropped the plate of dough on the floor, her hands shaky. I picked up the dough, placed it into the iron boiler, and closed the lid. Mama had

taken a seat in Pa's chair, and I sat across from her, unsure of what to say. Soon Alexander and Emilia would be waking up.

"How could he leave us? How could he?" Mama said. It felt like I had been struck by lightning straight in the chest, and I quickly stood up in a fit of rage.

"He did not leave us, Mama. He was protecting us. Do you not understand that? People in Appalachia join the war to protect their families, regardless of whether the side is Union or Confederate. Pa believed that joining the war on the side of the South would protect us from the troubles that he knew were approaching. If Pa had stayed, he would have been thought of as a coward. He was trying to protect us."

I knelt beside her and rested my head in her lap. She seemed surprised at what I'd said. She grabbed my head and looked straight into my eyes. "I know, Nate, I know. When people are hurting, they sometimes lash out and make false statements. I apologize. I know he did not leave us."

From that point on, we both agreed to remain strong and keep the secret of Pa's death from Alexander and Emilia for as long as we could. My soul and spirit were broken, but this was the time we lived in—a war raging in the North and South, brothers fighting brothers, neighbors fighting neighbors. And then there were those who were left to pick up the pieces.

CHAPTER TWO

The Routine

The next month went by in a haze. I barely slept. I tended to the cows emotionlessly. With Pa gone, my little world in the mountains of Appalachia was forever changed.

The War between the States had been progressing for three years; however, the ravaging effects seemed to have lasted for an eternity, at least for me, anyway. There had been talk of war before, but no one ever thought it would be this horrible. The Southern states disapproved of their treatment by the North and believed that state rights were being taken away. Others believed slavery was the main issue. Families were torn apart, confused about which side to support. Most people around my home in East Tennessee were fighting for loyalty to their state, loyalty to their country, or out of fear.

We were a poor family in Appalachia, on the outskirts of Knoxville in the little community of Elkmont, and we could not afford slaves, so that was a non-issue for us. Not that Pa ever agreed with slavery, anyhow. The truth was, I had never even seen a slave. Pa fought to keep us safe. He feared that the North, which was also known as the Union, would try to destroy the South, the Confederacy. He felt that it was his obligation to help protect the South, to protect his home. In Pa's mind, he was protecting his family by joining the Confederacy.

Many people in my town just wanted to be left alone, and most viewed the Confederate movement as treason. Despite this, Pa felt it best to join the Confederacy, which included South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee. Tennessee was the last to secede, and the state almost separated into two separate states, much like Virginia and West Virginia did, over the disagreement between the Union and the Confederacy. The middle and western parts of Tennessee had a large number of plantations, which required the use of slaves. East Tennessee, however, was populated by poor

white farmers and mountain folks who lived secluded lives. These people couldn't care less either way and did not wish to be involved until northern blockades were set up along the Tennessee River. This angered Tennesseans in the eastern part of the state due to the shortage of supplies that were shipped along the river as a result of the blockade.

Eventually, Tennessee broke away from the Union, much to the Union's dismay, but as a Southern state, it was no surprise. Although many people did choose to fight for the South, most able-bodied men in eastern parts of the state fought for the North. East Tennessee had long stood beside the Union, sending thousands to fight during the War of 1812 and doing so again during the Mexican American War, earning us the nickname of the "Volunteer State." People such as Davy Crockett, who was born just fifty miles north of me, paved the way for patriotism in the area. Local people were generally tough and resilient and did not take kindly to outsiders imposing on our way of life. Living rugged mountain lives, since the times of our Scotch-Irish ancestors, made us this way. There were only a few choices around here: live, die, or move. Or, in my father's case, join the war on the side of the South.

The Union and the Confederacy were both adamant and neither was willing to give an inch. The President of the Union, Abraham Lincoln, was trying to preserve the Union, whereas the President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, was trying to break away and establish his own nation. Issues escalated into war when the South Carolina militia attacked Fort Sumter shortly after the state seceded in 1860, or at least that was the way Pa had told it.

After I had finished the morning chores, Alexander and I hurriedly made our way to the schoolyard. With all the chores and all, I'd had no time for school ever since Pa left for the war almost a year ago, but Mama deemed it best that I accompany Alexander to and from school. We had grown very close because of this everyday routine, and I was more thankful with each passing day that I was able to build such a bond with my younger brother. Both of us seemed to understand the importance of brotherhood.

As we headed to school, we normally took turns talking about the future and making plans, but today seemed different. I was quite unsure of what was to come. Alexander, unknowing that Pa had passed, was chipper and lively,

asking me questions and laughing as he pointed to two mating squirrels quarreling in the forest.

“Look, Nate, they’re fightin’,” he said with a giggle. On any other day, I would have probably found his innocence amusing, but I just rolled my eyes and continued walking. I was in no mood for joking. After several more minutes of walking through the forest alongside the French Broad River, we finally made it to the schoolyard.

A small, aged wooden building stood at the edge of the forest line, with a large bell that rang three times daily. The school was nestled in a gully between two mountains. It was a nice, quaint place to do one’s lessons.

The sounds of the morning bell brought me back to when I was in school. I thought of the many lickings I’d received at the hands of Mrs. Gibson when I misbehaved or when I was too busy talking with Cymber Roberts. I sighed. Cymber was so beautiful, with auburn pigtails and a smile that could light up a room.

As I looked at the courtyard, I imagined all the times the boys and I would play marbles under the afternoon sun. It had been a year since I quit going to school. Even though I enjoyed being around people my own age, I would be lying if I said I missed it.

I really did hate schoolin’. All I thought about when I was there was being in the woods. With the many swimming holes and the caves that we would play in, it was a wonder I didn’t run away more than I did. Being in school always made me feel like one of the spring chicks that Pa used to put into cages so the coyotes and foxes wouldn’t get them. I always thought it was unfair that I had to sit in school and learn while the world passed me by. I did learn a fair amount, like how to read and write. I was never really all that good at arithmetic, but I also learned how to add and subtract.

In the midst of reminiscing about my school days, I heard a faint cry. I looked over and saw Mrs. Rule sitting underneath a large poplar tree that had just sprouted its leaves. Mrs. Rule was the mother of one of my old classmates, Jacob, and a personal friend of my mother. Jacob and his father had gone to war around the same time as Pa. I had a feeling that Mrs. Rule might have received the same type of news as Mama, but I was hesitant to ask. My hesitance was not only because I wanted to avoid intruding on her business, which Mama had taught me was rude, but also because Jacob and

his father chose to fight for the Union, whereas Pa was a Confederate. Still, I knew people around here were confused about which side to be loyal to, and in all honesty, I really did not think anyone around here much held it against one another. I sure didn't. Mrs. Rule was still Mrs. Rule.

I bid farewell to Alexander and handed him his poke, a small bag that held his lunch. I approached Mrs. Rule, who was weeping underneath the tree.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" I asked.

Mrs. Rule slowly gazed up at me, her green eyes watering. She had aged tremendously since I had last seen her, and it was evident that the war had taken a lot out of her by the forming wrinkles along her mouth and eyes.

"Nathaniel." She stood and wrapped me in a hug, towering over me. She continued her embrace as she whispered, "Both of my men, both of them . . . this damn war is gonna be the death of me." Then I felt her hug slipping away, and she grabbed my shoulders and stared at me. "How will I tell Edna?" Her daughter, Edna, was eleven years old, the same age as Alexander. I thought of the gruesome similarities that both my mother and Mrs. Rule shared at having to break the news to their young children of their father's passing.

"She's my last baby, you know. I can't tell her. I can't do this, Nate."

I sighed heavily but could not say a word. My throat felt like a crushed walnut. And then I couldn't take it anymore—all this loss and death.

I ran into the woods as fast as I could, breaking branch after branch with each stride. I made my way to Indian Creek, a secluded part of the forest, and cried until I could cry no more. Mrs. Rule was just another reminder that this whole war was tearing us apart from the inside out. While we weren't the ones on the battlefields, the deaths still hung heavy in the air.

I spent the rest of the day tilling up the farmland in preparation for planting vegetables and tobacco. I had learned many things from Pa, and farming this land was now my responsibility. My family needed money to survive, and with Pa gone, I needed to step up and take control. As the sun beat down on my back, I thought of Pa working the fields. More than once, I had to stop and contain my tears.

Just as I was placing the donkey and tiller into the barn for the evening, Mama walked toward me. I told her the story of Mrs. Rule and the suffering

that she was going through. Mama grabbed the folds of her neatly stitched dress and covered her face with it, letting out a small yelp. I tried paying her no mind, but the pain billowed in my heart.

“That poor woman, losing her youngest to the fever and now this,” she said. “It’s a shame having to pick sides—neighbor fighting neighbor, brother fighting brother. When will it end? People here are suffering, and we really have no cause for fighting. We are so secluded here. Why would either side want to bother us?” She sat down on a hay bale and tucked her head between her legs, crying.

“It’s war,” I said. “We cannot change that. We can’t bring the dead back, and we have to move on. We have to live. Go check on Emilia while I get Alex.” I tilted my hat toward her and said nothing more.

On my way to the schoolyard, I thought about what I had said, and I could not believe those words had actually come from my mouth. I honestly didn’t know how to feel about the war just yet. Obviously, I was scared—scared for my family and what was to come—but I sure wouldn’t show it to Mama.

The next couple of weeks were more of a challenge than ever. I spent most days chopping wood and farming with Alexander. With the hours of plowing, tilling, and chopping wood, I needed Alexander’s help with the farm. Mama finally allowed him to stay home with me instead of going to school. Alexander was smart and exceptionally strong for only eleven years old. It was early spring, and our hours of working seemed endless. The sun was unusually hot for this time of year, and beads of sweat continuously poured down the backs of our necks, never seeming to bring the coolness for which we had both hoped. I remembered only last year when I was fifteen and chopping wood for the winter with Pa. He would whistle old mountain songs to pass the time. As Alexander and I chopped wood, I realized I would never hear those melodies again.

Life was rough for Alexander and me, but we did find time to have fun. When we were not too busy farming or chopping wood, we went squirrel hunting and trout fishing. I passed down the tricks that our father had taught

me and, in a strange, roundabout way, I was becoming almost like a father to Alexander. I knew I could never replace Pa, but I felt like I was doing my duty as a mentor.

The good thing about hunting and fishing was that they not only provided us sustenance, but Alexander and I thoroughly enjoyed these activities. Life was still incredibly difficult for my family, but we managed to make it through each passing day.