

An exclusive excerpt from

The
BEREAVED

A Novel



JULIA PARK TRACEY



Prologue

NEWBURGH, NEW YORK OCTOBER 1859

MY MAN BRAM DIED ON A SATURDAY EVENING, when all the world and its children take their baths. He was just 33. The boys, Ira, twelve, and George, six, were sharing their bathwater at the folks' house, where I'd sent them to stay clear of the sick air, and my big girl, Sarah, thirteen, was up there, too, to keep an eye on them. No misbehaving before the grandfolks, I said. Respect your elders and be silent at table, not like home. Sarah said she'd see to it. Homer stayed with me, as he was still on the teat. I wanted to keep them safe from whatever dread disease crept through Bram's veins and wept through his skin.

Doctor had said he thought it was measles, then camp fever, and it turned out he was right the second time, though Bram hadn't been near any camp. The fieldhands, passing through with help for harvest, mayhap—they were Irish. They might have borne lice, which brought on camp fever—the burly men scratched at themselves when they paused for a drink of water or a pipe, and I suspected nits the time that orange-haired girl came by the little house. I told her to wait outside, fetched the bucket of buttermilk down cellar myself,

and sent her, scratching, away. I want to itch my own scalp now, thinking back on it.

Not a week later, Bram came in from the barn, bits of straw fluttering off his sleeves and a sharp pain in his head, squinting at the golden autumn sun. I put him right to bed. Within a few hours, he was fevered and chilled by turns. I sent Ira afoot to the doctor's house, and bid Sarah take George to the big house, to their young aunties. I kept Homer as far away as I could, instead of snug in the big bed with his mama and papa. I laid him on a quilt on the floor with a spool to gnaw while I simmered broth and spooned it into Bram; I sopped my own bread and ate it standing, while dirty sheets boiled white again and Bram moaned and sweated and fluxed. The days ran together while I fought for Bram's life. In those dark hours I prayed and cried, rocked my baby, sponged my husband, begged and muttered to an indifferent God. But before Bram breathed his last, I had known, I heard it coming as clear as the rumble of a train far down the tracks. It didn't matter now where he'd caught this fever, where the rough red rash had come from. The only thing that counted to me and our four children is that Abram Lozier, my husband, their father, was dead.

That Saturday night, I sat with my late husband's body, holding his heavy hand while his dead body cooled at last, my damp cloth no use to him now, my whispered pleas just a hiss of air between my lips, for all the good they'd done. His blue eyes still peeked beneath his dark lashes, and I pressed the lids down again and again, but they would open, his blue gaze upon me as if to say he was sorry. *I'm sorry, too*, I thought, scared and sad so deep I felt faint. *What will we do now, where will we go, where shall we stay?* Must I ask the favor of your folks to keep us? What will become of us in this new cold world? I've been alone before, been Martha to suit my name for all my thirty-one years—but with children

now—my heart hammered and then seemed to stop, and I felt my panic rising like foam in a pot.

Homer, heavy as a smoked ham, drowsed in my elbow, a string of white drool at his mouth. I set him on the trundle bed near the wall where he couldn't roll off and tucked the quilt around him. Thank the Lord for this sweet lump, his brown hair mussed, fat fists curled as he snuggled into dreams. Homer kept me anchored. Meanwhile, the bedroom stank like baby flannels and sick, sour as a milk pan left unscrubbed. I had spent ten days attending my husband, barely seeing the children, greeting them through the crack of the door. But work never ends.

When morning came, the women would come; we'd wash and dress Bram in his crisp white shirt, his fine broadcloth suit, and pin his tie in place, every stitch from my own needle. Blue socks I'd knitted and darned, the color of my eyes, he'd called his favorite color; polished boots on his feet, one of my finely hemmed handkerchiefs in his pocket for the hereafter. Charlotte and Malcolm, Bram's folks, would have a coffin made in town, and there'd be a funeral at the Dutch Reform church, and then Bram would be tucked into the family plot, near our two other babies, with a space at his side for me.

Between now and then I'd better sew black bands on the children's clothes, and dye Sarah's plain brown dress black. She was old enough to wear proper mourning at her age, so her dress must grieve with her. And there should be food for callers—we'd offer them doughnuts and pie, cider from the barrel—and me with two floors to scrub before the folks knocked at the door in the morning, and any small thing that Charlotte might fault in the management of my little house, she would notice.

I was tired. Bram was dead. I was still Martha, toiling instead of praying. There was so much for the newly bereaved to do. No time for tears.

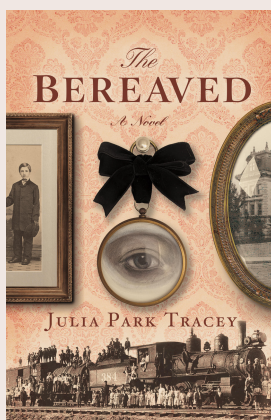


The Bereaved: A Novel **By Julia Park Tracey**

In 1859, women have few rights, even to their own children. When her husband dies and her children become wards of a predator, Martha – bereaved and scared – flees their beloved country home taking the children with her to the squalor of New York City. But as a naïve woman alone, preyed on by male employers, she soon finds herself nearly destitute. The Home for the Friendless offers free food, clothing, and schooling to New York's street kids and Martha secures a place temporarily for her children there. When she returns for them, she discovers that the Society has indentured her two eldest out to work via the Orphan Train, and has placed her two youngest for adoption. The Society refusing to help and with the Civil War erupting around her, Martha sets out to reclaim each of them.

HISTORICAL FICTION

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