

Advance praise for
A More Perfect Union

‘Amidst hunger, deprivation and the whimsical cruelties of slavery, two people dare to steal happiness. This graceful, assured debut novel creates an unusual slave narrative that starts in potato-famine Ireland and deftly weaves a touching American love story. The deceptively easy prose bristles with danger and possibility and I loved the at once thrilling and gentle pace of the novel. Tammye Huf is a wonderful storyteller.’
– Marina Salandy-Brown

‘A riveting love story across the challenges of race and poverty... Huf’s delicate blend of passion and compassion is compelling, impressive and never sentimental.’
– Andrea Stuart

‘A gripping and moving tale of romance. Tammye Huf shows meticulous care for details of setting and nuances of character and motive that make remarkable events deeply plausible.’
– Barbara Lalla

‘A resonant and topical love story, intricately plotted and compellingly told, and a visceral exploration of what it means to be deprived of one's freedom. The stories of Henry, an Irish immigrant escaping the Great Famine, and Sarah, who is sold into slavery on a southern plantation, poignantly illustrate the dehumanising experience of being deprived of choice, in small ways as well as large, on a daily basis.’
– Umi Sinha

*A
MORE
PERFECT
UNION*

TAMMYE HUF



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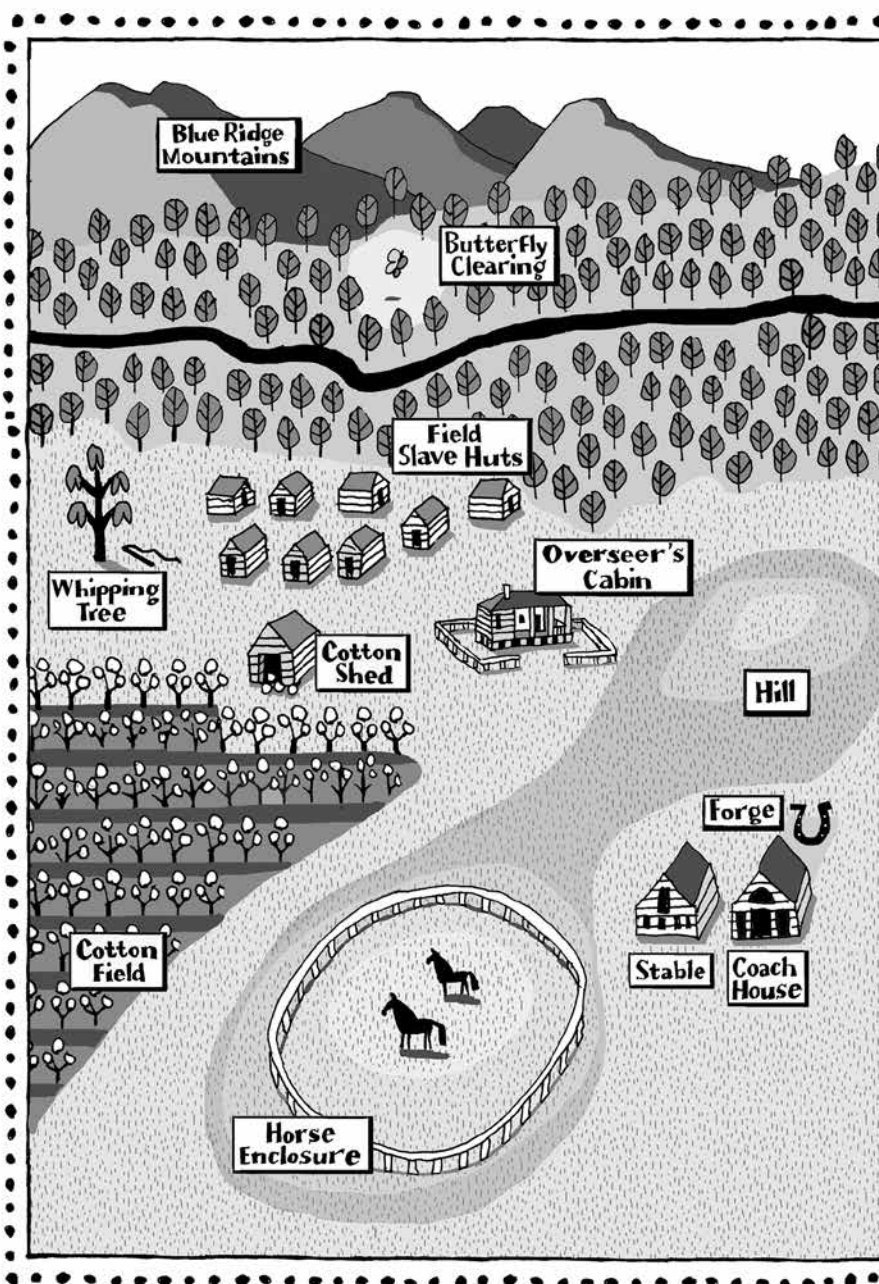
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For my family



Blue Ridge
Mountains

Butterfly
Clearing

Field
Slave Huts

Whipping
Tree

Overseer's
Cabin

Cotton
Shed

Hill

Forge

Cotton
Field

Stable

Coach
House

Horse
Enclosure

Jubilee Plantation Virginia

River



House
Slave Huts



Big
House



July 1848



Chapter 1

Henry

Two dead men walking up the road. That's what we look like, Da and me trudging out to the work gang in rags and tatters. Da hitches his threadbare trousers up. With nothing left to cling to, they've taken to sliding down every few steps. The string I use to tie mine still holds.

The deep pit we pass is one of ours. We dig ditches one week that we fill in the next, or build roads to nowhere, earning just enough to keep us alive. The English answer to the Irish starving.

Da and me walk three miles over dirt roads running through green hills, but when we get to the relief works station there's a grumbling crowd of surly men.

The relief works man, over from England, holds out his hands for quiet, but no one settles down, so he shouts over the noise, 'In light of the fact that your harvest will be ready in a matter of weeks, the decision has been taken to suspend the relief works programme. You should all go home and wait for the harvest.'

'Those bastards don't know what they're doing,' Da says.

'You can't cut off the work gangs before the harvest comes in,' a man behind me says. 'People've still got to eat.'

I grunt in agreement.

'That's the English for you,' Paddy Murphy says, from beside Da. 'They're sending us home to watch plants grow.'

The grumbles turn into shouts as the landlord's bailiff comes riding up.

He trots his horse right into the middle of the group and the men quiet down. 'I need five men for a job.'

He's barely got the words out before I say, 'I'll do it.'

It takes less than five seconds for him to get workers together. From the fifty men clamouring to do whatever it is he needs done, he picks Paddy, Killian, Liam, Seamus and me.

Da tugs at my arm. 'Let me go for you, Henry. You don't know what he wants you to do.' A heavy tiredness pulls at him, bending his back and pitching his body to the right where he struggles to hold his shovel. Five years ago, when he broke his arm, I watched him split kindling one handed with a single swing.

'No, Da,' I tell him. 'You go on home.'

'Aye,' says Paddy beside us. 'You'll want to make a start with your waiting for the harvest.'

The five of us follow the bailiff to the Doyle's place, and I get a prickling in my gut. John Doyle died in the spring leaving Mary to struggle alone with her four little ones.

From a burlap sack tied to the back of his saddle, the bailiff takes out poles and clubs and hands them to us.

'You can't mean for us to be tumbling Mary's home,' I say.

'She's not paid her rent,' he says. 'She's been warned.'

'Don't the landlords have enough?' Paddy says. 'They have to go after widows and orphans now too?' He throws his club in the dirt, his flaming red hair matching his fiery temperament.

'They're not orphans, they have their mother,' the bailiff says. 'Now, either you tumble it, or I'll get five others.'

Tumbling is what the landlords do to us when we can't pay the rent. Our houses are knocked together into a tumbled heap, stone on stone, so that the tenants can't sneak back in again once they're out. It's happening more and more, so that

now there're hundreds of tumbled homes sprinkled around the countryside.

All five of us are shuffling our feet and feeling wrong about it. But if we don't do it, it won't save her. He'll have another eviction gang here in the time it takes to ride out and come back again. This hut is coming down today, no mistake. We might as well get the money for it.

'Are they still in there?' I ask.

'Of course they're in there, Henry. Where else are they going to be?' says Paddy. He turns to the bailiff. 'The Devil take you,' he says, but he picks up his club. 'We'll not knock it down on their heads.'

'So, get them out,' the bailiff says.

None of us moves to do it.

He scowls down at the five of us from on top of his horse's back. 'The troublemaker can do it,' he says.

'Me?' Paddy blusters, gesticulating with his arms. 'What do I tell her then? That even though she's a poor, starving widow with four children to look after, her landlord isn't rich enough yet and he needs to boot her out of her little hut here so he can sleep at night? Is that what you want me to go in there and say?' Paddy throws his club back into the dirt.

The bailiff runs his hand over his face. We can all see he's regretting having chosen Paddy to come along. 'The black-haired troublemaker can do it. And if you don't stop throwing your club about, you're off this gang and they'll do the job without you.'

Killian, Liam and Seamus all have black hair too, but I'm the only other one who spoke out, which would make me the black-haired troublemaker.

'Off you go then, Henry,' Paddy says to me. 'You'll think of something to say.'

Mary's hut is rocks and dirt walls. There're no windows and I have to duck to get through the door. Inside it's dark and damp and there's a lingering scent of piss and shit from

poor John who couldn't get up in the end to relieve himself. I guess there's only so much you can scrub out of a dirt floor.

Huddled in a pile of rags on the ground, Mary sits with her four children. The hunger's hit her bad. Her arms are bone-thin and her skin hangs about her face with no padding to fill it out.

'There's an eviction gang here, Mary.'

She doesn't move or even look at me. She just stares at the wall of her hut.

'You have to go now.'

She doesn't seem to recognise me or hear what I'm saying.

'The bailiff's here and everything.'

She blinks a few times and lays her hand on her wee one's head. 'No,' she says to the wall.

'I'm sorry,' I say. 'But you haven't paid your rent. They won't let you stay.'

She sighs and settles further into the cluster of rags that serves as their bed. 'No.'

The bailiff yells into the squat doorway, 'Get them out, or we'll tumble it on their heads.'

I hold out my hand to her. 'Come on, Mary. You don't want your children getting hurt.'

'What difference does it make if we die in here today, or out there in two weeks?' she says. 'You know we won't survive with John gone and no place to live.'

'We look after each other here,' I say. 'You know that. You'll be alright.'

I'm lying to a widow so I can tumble her home. This is what Da wanted to spare me. There was a time when we used to help each other. Now we just survive.

'You can stay with us,' I say, surprising myself.

We don't have room for them, or food for them, and ever since Dermot and Emily died Ma's been in a bad way. I've no idea how she'll react when I show up with these five. I hold out my hand to her again, and she takes it.

We all come out and I breathe in deeply, clearing my nose of the stench of her hut. The air has a pre-harvest crispness to it that tastes cool and sweet against my tongue.

The bailiff's off his horse, standing back to one side of the hut, and Mary and her children stand a ways off to the other side and watch us hack at her home. We wedge poles in the crevices between the stones, shifting and pushing until the walls crumble and the roof falls in.

Then the five of us pocket our wages. When the paying's done, I wave Mary and her children over to me.

'Let's go then,' I say.

'What are you doing with them?' the bailiff asks.

'I'm taking them home with me.' My stomach gives a little flip worrying about Ma.

'You can't do that,' he says. 'They've been evicted.'

Liam, Seamus and Killian slip away, but Paddy steps up to the bailiff waving his freckled arms. 'Well, it's nought to do with you, is it?' he says. 'You've already knocked their home to bits. Your work here is done.'

'The law says you can't take them in,' the bailiff says. 'If you do, you'll get evicted too. They have to get clear off Lord Edwards's land.'

'All of it?' exclaims Paddy. 'That greedy English bastard owns the whole damn hill. And the next.'

'It's the law.'

'English law.'

'You watch your mouth there, laddie.'

'You watch my arse.' Paddy pulls his breeches down and we all get a good look at his scrawny white backside as he dashes away.

I tell Mary and her children to come on and we trudge off.

'It's not worth it,' the bailiff calls after me. 'It'll be your place next.'

I can't take them home. Instead, I take them to Father Michael. I don't know what he'll do with them, but at least

they can stay in the church while he thinks it through. Nobody'll tumble a church.

Father Michael used to be round and jolly. Now he's saggy and solemn. He comes out to meet us in the churchyard like he's walking in a funeral procession. I guess the last few years have put him in the habit.

'The bailiff says I can't take them to mine, so I brought them to you,' I tell him.

He nods. He knows what I've been a part of, but I don't think he judges me for it. He just looks sad and broken. 'I'll try to find a place for them at the poor house,' he says.

Mary looks stricken. 'They'll take my children.'

The poor house separates the men and the women and the children. I'm ashamed to look at her. For the thousandth time, I curse the English landlords for taking our healthy crops, our barley, wheat and rye, and shipping them away to sell. Lining their pockets while we starve. And I curse the rot that's come like a plague out of the Old Testament to blacken our potatoes and famine us. I stop just short of cursing God for letting it happen.

Father Michael says our blessings are coming, and that it's easier for a camel to get through a needle than for a rich man to get to Heaven. But no matter how much Bible he throws at us, I want to be rich. I want a warm house with glass in the windows, and a door with a knocker on it. And I want to eat my fill every day and never again feel this gnawing in my belly. People say it's the disease and the hunger that's killing us, but I say it's the being poor.

Father Michael leads Mary and her children into the church.

'I'm sorry,' I say to her retreating back.

When I walk home through the valley where whirling fog clings to the land, I pass eight more tumbled homes scattered among the grasses and the heather. I knew every single tenant. If this keeps up, none of us will be left.

Coming up the path to our hut, I pass our potato patch, mercifully full of green stalks and leaves. Beth's perched on the grey rock wall waiting for me.

'What's for supper?' I ask.

'Roast lamb,' she says with a smile.

It's a game we play. The Indian corn they shipped in for us to buy with our work-gang wages is bland and hard as rocks, no matter how long you boil it. Beth and I pretend we're eating lamb or beef or some other impossible food. We tell each other our stomachs ache from overstuffing. It's childish, for sure, but somehow it helps.

We eat our gruel around the rough plank table Da made years ago. Then we push the table aside and Ma, Da, me, Maggie and Beth all stretch out on the dirt floor waiting for sleep and morning.

We smell it when we wake. The stench of rot has climbed up out of the ground overnight and shoved its unwelcome way into our hut. Da looks at me. There's a panic in his eyes that shoots right through me. We hurry outside, already knowing. The smell in the air is worse as we rush, panting, to the rim of our plot, sucking in stinking lungfuls.

Every leaf that was lush and green yesterday is spotted brown. Every stalk, wilting and blackening.

I sink to the ground and dig. Scratching at the dark soil, my thumb plunges into a potato, easily breaking through the skin to the sludge inside, so rotten it's liquid. The foul stench catches in my nose making me gag. I pull my thumb back, wiping it clean in the dirt. Da is grey as the fog. The pain clenching my gut is more than hunger. It's fear for the days and months to come. It's knowing we have to leave, or we'll all be starved dead by winter's end.

