

Excerpt from *First Daughter* by Marlie Parker Wasserman

At the western edge of Cape Cod, in the grandest bedroom in the sprawling residence known as Gray Gables, Frances Cleveland couldn't stifle the rising sound of her own screams. Between pains, she rested. The late morning breeze drifted across the lawn from Buzzards Bay, fluttering the lace curtain and cooling the sweat on her forehead.

Even at this moment, Frances felt grateful that Grover chose to spend summers away from Washington's heat, away from the prying public. Here, in this secluded haven, she needn't fear strangers hovering near the windows of the Executive Mansion for a glimpse of their president—or, more likely, of his wife and daughters. She could concentrate her fears on her pains and pray for the safe birth of her third child, in the same way she had for her first and again for her second. Frances expected from experience that her suffering would soon recede, replaced by the joy of motherhood. She did not know that before the day was over, her bodily misery would end, yielding not to joy but to overwhelming terror.

The previous February, after sensing a flutter beneath her gown while greeting a crowd of visitors at a reception, Frances guessed the baby would be her third girl. Practiced at keeping confidences, she never mentioned her prediction to her preoccupied husband. When she gave birth to another girl, the blathering journalists would have their say. They would try out their jokes about the president's little harem. Most days, Frances ignored the journalists. Most days, she trusted Grover to love each of his babies.

The image of a trio of girls was far from Frances's mind now, as she suffered in bed. She cried out, too loudly. Dr. Bryant reminded her that she'd survived labor pains before. "Don't you dare say that again," she said, in a shrill tone that surprised her.

At last, Frances heard the newborn's cry, faint but lovely. Dr. Bryant chuckled while he clamped and cut the cord. "Mrs. Cleveland, should I bring the president upstairs to see his new daughter? He's pacing on the front porch. Once he sees this one—she's beautiful—he won't regret it's not a son."

"Yes," Frances said, with the strongest voice she could muster. A girl, as she'd guessed. For an instant, with the last of her contractions, she'd ignored her prediction and hoped for a boy. Now, she didn't linger on that momentary weakness of character. She let a surge of pride swell over her, above the exhaustion. She'd done it. Again.

Frances turned to the local midwife hired to assist. "Tell the steward, his name is Sinclair, to get Ruth and Esther. I want my daughters to see their new sister."

Frances raised herself a few inches, enough to see the midwife slip into the hall. The woman returned and gave Frances a nod. The girls would come shortly. Frances sank

back and watched the midwife wipe down the infant and swaddle her. She did look beautiful. "Here," Frances said, crooking her arm to make room for Marion, the name Grover chose that would serve for a girl or a boy. The same name as a town across Buzzards Bay, where many of their friends lived. Frances appreciated Grover's decision to buy an estate on the outskirts of a different but nearby town, Bourne. The family could escape Washington's heat and busybodies.

And escape the threats.

Hours earlier, Frances gave thanks for the breeze blowing through the open window, reminding her that Gray Gables was perfectly located on a point overlooking the Bay's east side. But now she blocked the sound of wind and waves, straining to make sense of other sounds, to hear what Grover would say about a third daughter. The doctor scurried downstairs. The midwife remained stationed over the bed, tending to Frances and crooning softly to the baby. Frances ignored the woman, mindful only of the voices wafting in through the window. First, low tones as the doctor talked to Grover. They were friends. Dr. Bryant saved Grover's life two summers ago, removing the cancer eating away at his palate. Now, Frances imagined the doctor patting her thickset husband on his shoulder and shaking his hand. She hoped Grover would offer the doctor a contented smile. Seconds later, Grover clomped upstairs. The doctor followed behind, with lighter steps.

"So happy, Frankie." Her husband used one of her nicknames. After their wedding, she asked Grover to call her by her more dignified name, Frances. He still used Frankie or Frank in private moments. She let him—the nicknames added tenderness to his gruff voice. "The doctor tells me you're fine. You managed without chloroform this time, too. And the baby's healthy. Marion, right? Three girls. They will enjoy each other's company."

He said the right thing. She didn't need to feel anxious about another girl. He was a good man, kind to her, whatever others thought. He wouldn't hold the baby, rarely did. But he wiped his chubby hand on a cloth, then touched Marion's forehead. He stood there for a few minutes, cherishing their third child. For him, it was a fourth, but no matter. His eyes shifted to gaze at her. He wouldn't see the tall, slender belle he married nine years ago, the one the reporters called lovely. He'd see a tired, sweat-drenched woman who looked every day of her thirty years.

"Ruth and Esther?" Frances asked again, eyeing the midwife. "Did you send Sinclair for them?"

"Yes, ma'am. The steward went a minute ago." The midwife spoke quietly, carefully. She'd feel nervous in the presence of the president.

Still almost flat in bed, Frances clutched Marion, admiring the infant. Perfect features. Ten fingers and ten toes. Another blessing from God.

A familiar sound at the door. Sinclair knocked softly. His usual pattern—soft, loud, soft—keeping to the household code. Another sound, when the midwife opened the door. Next, Frances would hear four little feet rushing toward the newest baby.

No feet. Only hushed words.

“Sinclair found Annie,” the midwife said. “She’s your older daughter’s nursemaid, right? He tells me she needs another minute to bring Ruth and to tell your younger daughter’s nursemaid to bring Esther.” The midwife stood far from Frances’s bed, speaking almost in a whisper.

Grover didn’t look concerned. His rough mustache skimmed Frances’s cheek as he kissed her lightly on her damp forehead. She was too tired to return the kiss. She heard him drop into the nearby rocking chair.

“Joseph,” he said, addressing the doctor, “you’re certain Frankie is fine? No complications?”

“Just fine, Grover. Ready for the next one before long.”

Four years earlier, when Ruth was born, Dr. Joseph Bryant told Frances how to manage her family. “Breastfeed for six months.” He looked straight at her, with no awkwardness. “You’ll not get in the family way, and the baby will stay healthy. After six months, well, you and Grover can proceed to another.” And so they had. Esther after Ruth. Marion after Esther. A daughter every two years.

Frances closed her eyes, relying on her ears. Dr. Bryant thanked the midwife for her assistance. The woman tidied up, gathering soiled sheets and opening a chest, hunting for fresh linens. The room went silent, except for the soft, repetitious squeak of the rocking chair. Grover leaned up, then back, up then back. Frances sensed herself drifting off.

Another soft knock, barely a sound, followed by a pause, and two more soft knocks. Not Sinclair. One of the nursemaids. Annie? The midwife opened the door. “Ma’am.” Annie’s voice came out as a croak. “I can’t find Ruth.”