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“*To Wager Her Heart* is a wonderful historical romance . . . Alexander has certainly done her research in this lovely Belle Meade Plantation inspirational romance!”

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“A vivid glimpse into Nashville’s history, *To Win Her Favor* is excellent historical romance with a gentle faith thread that adds depth to the tale, proving once again that you just can’t go wrong picking up a Tamera Alexander romance!”

—USA TODAY

“Strong characters, a sense of the times, and the themes of love, friendship, and the importance of loyalty and determination make this a triumph. It will be popular not only with Alexander’s many fans but also with readers of Judith Miller and Tracie Peterson.”

—LIBRARY JOURNAL, STARRED REVIEW ON *TO WIN HER FAVOR*

“Alexander continues her ode to the magnificent Belle Meade Plantation, using it to illustrate questions of race, faith, and loyalty that continue to haunt today. Fans will appreciate and applaud the smooth merging of social commentary and a sweet love story.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY ON *TO WIN HER FAVOR*

“Already a *USA Today* bestseller, this novel draws a fresh thread in this author’s historical fiction tapestry. Tamera Alexander’s painstaking research into the people, places, and times of which she writes is evident on every page, and she depicts the famous residents of postbellum Nashville with great detail and even greater affection.”

—USA TODAY ON *TO WHISPER HER NAME*

WITH  
THIS  
PLEDGE

# BOOKS BY TAMERA ALEXANDER

## THE CARNTON NOVELS

*Christmas at Carnton* (novella)

*With This Pledge*

## BELLE MEADE PLANTATION NOVELS

*To Whisper Her Name*

*To Win Her Favor*

*To Wager Her Heart*

*To Mend a Dream* (novella)

## BELMONT MANSION NOVELS

*A Lasting Impression*

*A Beauty So Rare*

*A Note Yet Unsung*

## TIMBER RIDGE REFLECTIONS

*From a Distance*

*Beyond This Moment*

*Within My Heart*

## FOUNTAIN CREEK CHRONICLES

*Rekindled*

*Revealed*

*Remembered*

## STAND-ALONE NOVELS

*Among the Fair Magnolias* (novella collection)

*The Inheritance*

WITH  
THIS  
PLEDGE

TAMERA ALEXANDER



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*With This Pledge*

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*In memory of all those who fell at the Battle of  
Franklin, and for the ones who either tended  
their wounds or helped usher them Home.*

I lie awake thinking of you,  
meditating on you through the night.  
Because you are my helper,  
I sing for joy in the shadow of your wings.  
I cling to you;  
your strong right hand holds me securely.  
Psalm 63:6–8 NLT

Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God,  
the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness  
to a thousandth generation with those who love Him  
and keep His commandments.  
Deuteronomy 7:9 NASB

Dear Reader,

The journey you're about to embark upon is drawn heavily from the pages of history and from the lives of people who lived through the events portrayed in this novel. I am deeply honored to have been given the privilege to write about both. But along with that honor comes a weighty responsibility to accurately convey the events that took place. This is the story of what happened on the evening of November 30, 1864, at Carnton Plantation in Franklin, Tennessee, following the tragic five-hour Battle of Franklin, in which nearly ten thousand soldiers were either killed, wounded, or captured, and how the people who lived at Carnton dealt with the aftermath.

To that end, I've written this novel with a careful consideration of history—including oftentimes disturbing descriptions of combat—coupled with a deep desire to weave a compelling story of hope. Because hope is what I experienced time and again as I pored over the history of these events. I read literally thousands of pages of historical and personal accounts through which we can witness, with awe-filled admiration, the courage and strength that characterized these men and women.

My thanks go to the staff at Carnton for allowing me access to their extensive historical resources, with special appreciation to Joanna Stephens and Elizabeth Trescott for answering countless questions with never-failing patience. I also extend my gratitude to David Doty, the great-great-great-great-grandson of Captain Roland Ward Jones, the last wounded Confederate soldier to leave Carnton following his convalescence—and one of the main characters in this novel—for sharing his family's personal history, including the love letters between Roland and Lizzie. This novel is all the richer for our phone conversations and email exchanges, David, and for the many pictures you've shared. *Thank you.*

Finally, to you, dear reader, thank you for entrusting your time to me. It's a gift I treasure and never take for granted. Perhaps we'll cross

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

paths at Carnton one day soon. I hope so. And as you walk the hallowed grounds of the battlefield, as you tour the rooms and hallways of Carnton and view floorboards that still—over a century and a half later—bear the bloodstains from that fateful November night, I trust you'll gain, as I have, a deeper appreciation for the sacrifices made by the men and women who were there—most of whom will remain unknown to us.

But some we do know. And this is their story.

With fresh eternal perspective,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial letter.

# CHAPTER I

NOVEMBER 30, 1864

CARNTON PLANTATION

FRANKLIN, TENNESSEE

21 MILES SOUTH OF NASHVILLE

“And this, children, is a drawing of the Great Pyramids of Giza in Egypt. Which is a very long way from Franklin, Tennessee.” Lizzie read fascination in young Hattie’s eyes, and in those of Sallie, the cousin visiting from Nashville. Yet seven-year-old Winder only stared glumly out the window.

Lizzie lowered her voice. “This pyramid here is where a mighty Egyptian pharaoh, or king, and his queen are buried. And it’s full of secret rooms.”

Winder’s head whipped back around. “Secret rooms?”

She nodded. “Archaeologists recently discovered some new rooms in the upper portion of the pyramid. They’d been hidden for centuries. See this drawing . . .”

As she continued teaching, she glanced at the clock on the side table, expecting Tempy to bring the children’s midmorning refreshment anytime now. A summerlike breeze fluttered the curtains on the open jib window leading to a second-story balcony, and the sunshine and warmth beckoned them outside. Perhaps she would take advantage of the beautiful weather and conduct the afternoon classes under the Osage orange tree out front. After so many weeks of rain and cold, the mild weather was a welcome change. Especially for the end of November.

A few moments later she heard Tempy's footsteps on the staircase. "Thank you for listening so intently, children. And for your excellent questions, girls. And now it's refreshment time!"

Tempy knocked twice on the door, then entered. "Mornin', little ones!"

Winder hopped down from his chair. "What are we havin' today, Tempy?"

Lizzie cleared her throat and gave him a pointed look.

"I mean . . . Thank you, Tempy, for whatever it is you made," he corrected, still trying to peer up and over the side of the tray.

Tossing him a wink, Tempy set the tray on the table. "I made y'all some cinnamon rolls this mornin', Master Winder. You go on now and help yourself. And get a glass of that milk too." She included the girls in her nod, and the children took their snacks and hurried outside to the balcony overlooking the front yard. "Miss Clouston, I brought you one too, ma'am."

Lizzie accepted the roll and took a bite, then sighed and briefly closed her eyes. The bread, still warm from the oven, all but melted in her mouth, the buttery icing slathered on top a concoction of sugary goodness. "Oh, Tempy, these are even better than usual. Thank you."

"My pleasure, ma'am." Tempy eyed the globe on the table and shook her head. "Look at all them places. Hard to believe all that's out there somewhere."

Lizzie heard something akin to yearning in the woman's tone. She'd noticed Tempy gazing at the globe before, but without comment. Mindful of any icing on her fingers, Lizzie turned the globe to show North America, then pointed to Tennessee. "That's where we are right now. And this"—she turned the globe again and pointed to the northeast corner of Africa—"is where these pyramids are located." Lizzie held up the image and gave a condensed version of what she'd taught the children. "It's in a place called Egypt."

Tempy eyed her. “You tellin’ me a fancy king’s buried in that thing?”

Lizzie nodded. “Along with his queen.”

“Mmmph . . . It don’t look so far away on this ball, but I’m guessin’ it’d take us a while to get there.”

“Yes, quite a while. And we’d have to traverse an ocean in the process.” Lizzie drew an invisible line from Tennessee across the Atlantic Ocean to the general region of Giza.

Tempy shook her head. “So much world the good Lord made. Wonder how he ever thought it all up.”

Lizzie moved her finger a little to the right, knowing Tempy would appreciate this. “Do you see this tiny portion of land here?”

Tempy squinted. “Yes, ma’am. But only just.”

“That’s Palestine. The part of the world where the Lord was born and where he dwelt during his life here on earth.”

“Pal-es-tine,” Tempy repeated slowly and said it twice more as though wanting to feel the word on her lips. “I was told he was from a place called Bethlehem.”

Lizzie nodded. “You’re right, he was. Bethlehem is located in this area.”

For the longest time Tempy studied the spot on the globe, then traced an arthritic forefinger over it, her expression holding wonderment. And not for the first time, Lizzie felt a firm tug on her conscience.

By Tempy’s own admission, the older woman had been at Carnton for nigh onto forever, serving as the McGavocks’ cook. Lizzie had often wanted to ask Tempy about her life here. About this war. And about being the only slave left behind when Colonel McGavock sent the other forty-three south three years ago, far from the reach of the Federal Army that would have freed them.

She felt certain that Tempy would have leapt at the chance to learn her letters, but teaching a slave to read and write was against the law. Here in the South, at least. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued by

President Lincoln nearly two years ago, hadn't made much difference in that regard. So Lizzie had never offered. And in the eight years she had lived and worked here at Carnton, she'd never confided in Tempy her opinions on slavery. She'd never had the courage. After all, slavery wasn't a topic a "properly bred" woman deigned to broach. And certainly not with a slave.

And what would stating her differing views have changed? Nothing. Lizzie held back a sigh. She was a governess, not a landowner. She couldn't vote. She wasn't even mistress of her own home—yet, at least. She had no voice. And sharing her opinions would have only driven a wedge between her and the McGavock family, which was a relationship she cherished. Being so forthcoming might well cost her the position here, and that was something she could ill afford, especially now with the war on. Still, even when considering her reasons, she felt a sense of shame.

She wondered sometimes if she shouldn't have gone north all those years ago when she'd first considered it. She could have found a place with a family in Boston or Philadelphia, surely. Yet that would have meant leaving behind her family, her friends, all that was familiar. So she'd stayed, and tried not to dwell on what she couldn't change.

"You teachin' them children 'bout all them places, ma'am?" Tempy glanced at the globe.

"I'm doing my best. Although with so pretty a day, it's difficult to maintain their attention."

"Days like this don't come round too often, 'specially this time of year."

Lizzie dabbed the corners of her mouth, checking for icing. Then she lowered her voice, mindful of the open jib window. "I'm thinking of moving outside for a while so we can enjoy the sunshine."

"If you want, ma'am, I could fix you all a picnic lunch and you could eat out there."

Lizzie nodded. “That’s a wonderful idea! I’ll use that as an enticement for them to remain attentive until then.”

The promise worked like a charm. Following a delightful lunch, the children helped clean up the picnic without complaint. Winder needed a little prompting, rambunctious boy that he was. Still, he pitched right in when asked. Lizzie sat on the blanket beside Sallie watching as Winder and Hattie chased each other beneath the shade of the Osage orange tree. A wave of affection for them swept through her, nearly stealing her breath. She’d known Hattie before the girl had turned two. And Winder she’d known since birth. She loved them as though they were her own.

The warmth within her faded by a degree. Someday, Lord willing, she and Towny would have children of their own. A flicker of guilt accompanied the thought of Towny. But as she always did, Lizzie tried to set it aside. After all, women married for a whole variety of reasons—money, prestige, social standing, security. So was marrying for the hope of having children really so bad?

She studied the bare ring finger on her left hand and thought of what Towny had said in his last letter almost a month ago. The next time he saw her, he’d written, he had something special to give her. She wondered if it was his mother’s ring. Having known his mother, Marlene—God rest her soul—Lizzie found the thought endearing. Then again, having known Towny’s parents and the close relationship they’d shared, she only hoped that *if* Towny planned on giving her that ring, she would prove worthy of it.

It would be wonderful to see him again after all these months. Would he be much changed? Would he consider her so? Had his intent to marry her waned in any way? Did he ever entertain the same questions about their future as she did? A warm breeze rustled the leaves overhead, and Lizzie checked the chatelaine watch pinned to her shirt-waist. It was later than she’d thought. She ushered the children back into the schoolroom upstairs and was closing the door behind her when Tempy caught her attention.

“A letter come for you, ma’am. From your Lieutenant Townsend.” Tempy handed it to her. “I hope he’s all right. He’s such a good man.”

*Your* Lieutenant Townsend. Tempy had taken to calling Towny that in recent months, but the term still struck an odd note within Lizzie. “Thank you for bringing this to me. And yes, he *is* a good man.” She checked the date stamped on the envelope. Only a week ago. Mail delivery had been quick this time. She wondered where he was.

“He’ll make you a good husband too, ma’am.”

“Yes. Yes, he will,” Lizzie answered. She’d told herself the same thing many times.

Tempy tilted her head and studied her in the manner she sometimes did. A manner that always caused Lizzie to ponder whether the woman could read every blessed thought in her head. And, even more, if Tempy questioned whether Lizzie herself was as well acquainted with those thoughts as she should be.

“Well, enjoy your letter.” Tempy dipped her head and took her leave.

Lizzie closed the door and laid the envelope on the table’s edge. It would have to wait for now. The first hour passed swiftly as they reviewed grammar lessons, then transitioned to penmanship. Hattie and Sallie both possessed a beautiful hand. But Winder’s cursive, bless him, looked more like chicken scratch. Lizzie sat with him while he painstakingly practiced each letter, then she whispered, “Well done,” and tousled the hair on his head. She did love a good challenge. Next they moved to arithmetic. Lizzie wrote addition problems on a slate, and each child took a turn solving two or three. Arithmetic was Winder’s favorite subject, and to Lizzie’s joy he excelled in it. Finally she set them to working problems on their own and reached for Towny’s letter.

She opened the envelope. Only one sheet of paper within. Her gaze scanned the page, and her eyes widened. He’d been brief, but not evasive. Quite the contrary. Lizzie felt her face go warm.

WITH THIS PLEDGE

Dearest Lizzie Beth,

I'm counting the days until I see you again and sincerely hope that that number will be a small one. I've taken to dreaming of you in recent days and those dreams are so real I can almost feel you beside me. To say I'm eager to make you my wife would be a dilution of my fierce affections. It would be like saying that Tennessee summers can be a mite warm. Yet as warm as we know those summers to be, they are nothing compared to the fire that burns within me for you, and that seems to grow stronger with each passing day.

Lizzie looked up to see if the children were watching. Then she realized how silly that was. As though in watching her read the letter, they would somehow be made privy to its contents. She fingered the high collar of her shirtwaist and continued.

Tucker's Brigade is being ordered farther south, but I pray we make our way back to Franklin soon. Hopefully by spring. I want us to be married as soon as possible, Lizzie. That is my wish and I hope yours is the same. I apologize for my brevity, but I must see this posted before we move out. Please pass along my kindest regards to the McGavocks and their children. When you see my father, please inform him that his son is well, is fighting for the land he cherishes, but misses home and all the treasures it holds. Namely you, my dearest Lizzie.

Most affectionately yours,  
Towny

Any question about whether he'd changed his mind about their pending nuptials had been erased. And once again Towny had managed to surprise her. She'd last seen him in January, when he'd asked her to marry him. To say she'd been surprised then as well was an understatement. One minute they'd been walking back from town

after a visit with her family—discussing the war and how he'd managed to secure a brief furlough home—and the next thing she knew, he'd turned and grabbed hold of her hands.

"I know this seems sudden, Lizzie, but I've been thinking about it for some time. I think I've loved you since I first laid eyes on you that day at the mercantile. You with your brown hair in pigtailed, eating a peppermint stick. You would hardly look at me, until I did a somersault with no hands." His boyish grin held traces of youth. "Once we're husband and wife, I know we can make a good life together. We already know each other at our best and worst, and that gives us a great advantage over most couples. So please, say you'll be my wife? At least consider it?"

She had agreed and then sought her mother's counsel, only to discover that Towny had already asked her father's permission for her hand, which he had heartily given. Her parents were overjoyed. And looking at it practically, she'd realized Towny was right. They did already know each other very well. And they were both twenty-eight years old. It was well past time for her to wed. No one else had sought her hand in marriage, and she had no reason to think that would change, especially with the war claiming the lives of so many men.

But the real reason she'd agreed to marry Towny—the reason she'd not shared with him—made her feel false inside. She wanted children of her own, and the time for that to happen was swiftly passing her by. She smoothed a hand over her midsection. Soon Hattie and Winder would be grown, and she'd have to move on to another house to raise someone else's children. Either that or become a burden to her parents. So . . . she'd said yes.

And she *was* terribly fond of Towny. She could honestly say she loved him. Not, perhaps, in the way she'd always imagined she would love a husband. But love could grow from friendship. Or so she'd been told. And she and Blake Rupert Townsend—or Towny, the nickname

she'd bestowed upon him as a boy—had been the best of friends since childhood. So she'd given him her pledge. And Towny *would* make a fine husband. She'd thought so for many years. She'd simply never imagined he would be hers.

Lizzie folded the letter and put it away, then checked the time. She'd allow the children another five or ten minutes to complete their tasks. In the meantime, she'd fetch the novel she'd left in Winder's bedroom down the hallway. She intended to start reading it to them tonight before bedtime. She'd saved it specially for this time of year.

"Miss Clouston," Sallie said before Lizzie shut the door.

"Yes, dear?"

"Could you help me with this one before you go?" The girl pointed to her slate.

"*Would* you help me," Lizzie gently prompted. "And yes, I'd be happy to help you. But I want you to try to figure it out first on your own. I'll prompt you if you begin to do it incorrectly. And feel free to work the problem aloud, if that helps you."

She smoothed a hand over Sallie's long blond hair and gave her an encouraging nod, then tugged a strand of the equally long golden hair of Clara, the porcelain doll the child took with her everywhere. Sallie grinned and set to work, whispering faintly to herself. Following a recent buildup of Federal troops in Nashville, Sallie's parents had asked the McGavocks if they could bring Sallie to Carnton for a few days to keep her distanced from the war. It was nice to have an additional student to teach, and since Hattie and Sallie were close cousins, they were enjoying every moment together.

Sallie finished working the problem and peered up.

"Well done!" Lizzie whispered, and the girl's eyes sparkled. "By working it aloud, you were able to do it all by yourself. Now see if you can complete the rest, and I'll be back shortly."

Lizzie closed the door, then waited a few seconds to make certain Winder didn't start jabbering at the girls the way he sometimes

did when she left the room. But blessed quiet reigned, and she sighed. Days like these were what governesses lived for.

She headed for Winder's room across the hall, then remembered she'd left the blanket they'd used for the picnic folded on the front porch. Best get that first. She descended the staircase to the main floor and heard the clock in the family parlor chime. Two o'clock. She might dismiss the children early today and they could all take a walk down to the Saw Mill Creek, or maybe even into town to get penny candy at the mercantile. They could stop by her parents' house for a quick visit too, and—

The front door flung open and Lizzie stopped short, her heart skipping a beat. A soldier strode in. A general, she thought, judging by his uniform. Scarcely pausing, he focused on the staircase and strode in that direction.

"May I help you, sir?" She didn't recognize him, yet he did look familiar to her somehow.

Without a word, without even looking at her, he started up the staircase. Lizzie glanced into the side rooms for Colonel or Mrs. McGavock but didn't see them. So she followed the man upstairs, where he hesitated only briefly before heading into the guest room and stepping through the open jib window onto the second-floor gallery porch that spanned the back of the house. He walked as far as the northwest corner of the porch, then stopped and stared out across the fields.

Lizzie stood just inside the guest bedroom, at odds about what to do. Her main concern was for the children's safety—and clearly they were not at risk. But what was the man doing, simply barging into a home like this without asking permission? Without even a greeting? Perhaps he knew Colonel and Mrs. McGavock, but still . . . common decency should prevail.

Seconds ticked past. She finally went as far as the window and peered out, wanting to see what he was looking at. And her heart thudded a heavy beat.

Scarcely a mile away, Federal troops were gathering en masse around the Carters' house. *Thousands* of them. She'd never seen so many soldiers in one place. She stepped out onto the porch for a better view. Earlier that morning, she and Mrs. McGavock had seen several hundred blue coats headed up Columbia Pike. That wasn't unusual, considering that the US Army had occupied the town of Franklin off and on for nearly the past three years. They'd held the city of Nashville too, almost since the war started. So both she and Carrie McGavock had simply assumed the soldiers were on their way there. Either that or to nearby Fort Granger, a Federal outpost some two miles away. But what Lizzie saw now . . .

Why so many soldiers? And what were they doing? Constructing fortifications of some kind, it looked like. In a crescent shape just south of the Carters' home. She hoped Fountain Carter and his family were all right. Something glinted in the sunlight and she took a few steps closer, then stopped. Even without field glasses, she could see numerous cannons being situated along the crest of the hill.

The general suddenly turned, his features fierce, and retraced his steps. Lizzie followed him downstairs, where he strode through the open front door and down the front steps, and mounted a stallion. She paused in the doorway and stared after him as he rode south across the fields.

"Was that a soldier?" she heard behind her. She turned to see Tempy, folded picnic blanket in her arms.

"Yes. But I don't know who it was. He never gave his name. He simply barged in without even knocking!"

Footsteps sounded, and Colonel McGavock emerged from the farm office.

"What was General Forrest doing here?" he asked.

"General Nathan Bedford Forrest?" Lizzie responded.

At his nod, she looked back outside. No wonder the man had looked familiar. She'd seen his likeness many times in the newspaper.

“I have no idea, Colonel. He simply walked in, went upstairs, looked out over the porch, then walked back out again. He never said a word. But I know what he was looking at. Federal troops are gathering around the Carters’ house. Far more than what Mrs. McGavock and I saw this morning.” She instinctively lowered her voice in case the children were listening from above. “It appears as though they’re putting artillery into place.”

The colonel’s eyes narrowed, and he headed up the stairs. “Please keep the children inside for the remainder of the afternoon, Miss Clouston. And focused on their studies.”

“Of course, sir.” She and Tempy exchanged a look.

Lizzie left the novel she’d planned on getting from Winder’s bedroom for later and returned to the classroom. She instructed the children to open their primers, then turned in her chair to glance out the partially open jib window toward the front of the house. But she saw nothing out of the ordinary.

“Hattie and Sallie, please turn to page seventeen. Winder, please turn to page eight. You may begin reading while I review your arithmetic problems.”

Lizzie was halfway through checking Hattie’s work when she realized she’d been staring at the same problem for the past five minutes. She couldn’t seem to concentrate. What were so many Federal soldiers doing at the Carters’ house?

A knock on the door made her jump. The door opened, and Mrs. McGavock stepped inside. Lizzie rose. Visits from her employer during lesson hours were rare.

“Is everything all right, Mrs. McGavock?”

But she could tell from the woman’s furrowed brow that it wasn’t. Mrs. McGavock quietly greeted the children, then discreetly motioned for Lizzie to join her on the balcony. Lizzie stepped outside and, for the second time that day, a sinking sensation pulled her heart down in her chest. In the distance, no more than two miles away, a massive

sea of butternut and gray moved steadily forward. Like a great crest of an ocean came wave after wave of men, already in their divisions, it appeared, with flags flying. Lizzie's pulse edged up a notch.

She looked in the direction of the Carters' house but couldn't see it from the vantage point the front balcony afforded. "Surely they can see the Federal Army up ahead. Waiting for them."

Mrs. McGavock nodded, her expression grave. "The colonel isn't certain what's happening. But he did hear yesterday that the bridges across the Harpeth are all impassable due to the recent rains."

"So you think the Federals tried to cross but couldn't?"

"I don't know what to think, Lizzie."

Lizzie looked over at her. She considered Carrie McGavock a dear friend, but rarely did her employer use her Christian name. Lizzie checked the watch hanging from her shirtwaist. Half past three.

Mrs. McGavock turned. "I'd like for you to take the children down to the kitchen. Get them settled there with their studies, and perhaps give them something to eat." She offered a faint smile. "A treat will help keep them occupied."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll do that right away."

Wanting to reassure her, Lizzie tried to maintain a smile. Many years ago a matronly aunt had told her mother, *Lizzie's a quiet thing, Sena. Sweet enough, but I declare if that girl can't seem to hold a smile.* Lizzie often wondered if that statement had been a self-fulfilling prophecy. Either way, it was the truth. She returned to the classroom, pressing a forefinger to her lips while Mrs. McGavock made a quiet exit. "Children, I want you to gather your books and slates. We're going to have our afternoon lessons in a special room of the house."

Winder's eyes widened. "Is it a secret room?" he whispered, his chin dropping a smidgen as he peered up at her. "Like in that triangle place you showed us this mornin'?"

"No, it's not a pyramid. Not even a secret room. But it *is* a secret where we're going." She gathered her things and gestured. For effect,

she opened the door slowly and peered out, then motioned for them to follow quietly.

The girls giggled as they moved down the stairs to the entrance hall, then to the dining room. The bi-fold doors separating that room from the farm office were open, and through the window, in the distance, Lizzie spotted the Southern army advancing.

“Hurry along now,” she whispered and encouraged the children to precede her down the short flight of stone steps to the kitchen.

“We’re goin’ to the kitchen?” Winder asked, obviously nonplussed.

Lizzie shook her head. “Follow me!”

Tempy looked up from where she stood at a worktable mixing something in a bowl. She must have caught the look Lizzie sent her because the woman only smiled at the children as they passed, then raised her brows when Lizzie retrieved an oil lamp from the hutch.

“All right, children . . .” Lizzie nodded toward the larder and summoned a conspiratorial tone. “Remember I told you that the rooms in the pyramid have no windows? We’re going to go inside the larder and pretend that we’re in a pyramid!”

Hattie and Sallie looked at each other and grinned. Winder, however, stopped dead in his tracks.

“I got in trouble for goin’ in there last time, Miss Clouston. Mama said I ate too many of Tempy’s tea cakes. And it took forever ’fore I could have ’em again.”

Lizzie’s heart warmed as she remembered that incident. How she loved this boy. “It’s all right, Winder. We have your mother’s permission to go inside, I promise. Come along.”

She opened the door and a bevy of scents reached out to them—fresh ground flours and meals, an array of spices ranging from cinnamon to nutmeg to oregano, and above it all the sweet scent of dried apples, peaches, and pears. Tempy worked tirelessly when it came to storing up summer fruits and vegetables, and was equally skilled at turning those stored goods into culinary treasures.

Lizzie placed the oil lamp on the stone floor. "Have a seat, children." She sat on a barrel of molasses, her mind racing.

Sallie sucked in a breath. "I forgot Clara! May I go back and get her, please?"

Hattie jumped up. "I'll go with her. We'll be like those explorers you told us about!"

Lizzie held up a hand. "I'll go get Clara. Meanwhile, I want you three explorers to discuss what you think it might be like to be inside a pyramid in one of those rooms. Each of you write down three things you might see or feel or smell while in that room. Then when I get back, we'll share our lists with each other."

The children nodded, though Sallie didn't look quite as convinced.

Lizzie reached behind her for a tin. "And of course every explorer needs nourishment." She removed the lid and held out the container.

"Tea cakes!" Winder yelled and grabbed two, then paused and looked up at Lizzie, who gave an approving nod.

After serving the girls and seeing her three charges settled, she slipped from the larder and closed the door behind her. Tempy stood staring out one of the kitchen windows.

"Miss Clouston, you best come see this."

Lizzie joined her and saw two large groups of Confederate soldiers moving their way. Trees lining the serpentine brick walkway out front blocked the rest of the view. "Yes, Mrs. McGavock and I saw them earlier, before I brought the children downstairs. I wanted to say something to you but couldn't. Not in front of them."

"What's goin' on, ma'am? Why's that army marchin' this way?"

"I don't know. But from what I saw earlier, there are just as many Federal soldiers holed up over by the Carters' house."

"Oh great God be with us all," Tempy whispered.

Lizzie said a silent amen. "I need to run upstairs and get Sallie's doll. Would you keep an eye on the children for me until I get back?"

"Yes, ma'am. I surely will."

Lizzie hurried up the steps and through the dining room and started up the staircase.

“Miss Clouston . . .”

She turned to see Mrs. McGavock peering out the front door, which stood slightly ajar. Reading the woman’s expression, Lizzie joined her. “The children are safe, ma’am. They’re in the kitchen with Tempy, and—”

Mrs. McGavock opened the door the rest of the way and Lizzie fell silent. Despite her feelings about this war, the sight spreading out before her was spellbinding. That great sea of butternut and gray they’d seen from a distance earlier advanced toward them in columns that seemed to stretch out forever across the Harpeth Valley, nearly two miles wide. No sound jarred the tranquil afternoon other than that of the soldiers’ rhythmic footfalls and the occasional trill and chatter of a barn swallow. Most of the soldiers looked so young, and they marched with spirits high and rifles at the ready straight across Carnton’s fields and front lawn as the warm Indian summer day drew to a close.

On closer inspection, Lizzie realized that some of them weren’t carrying rifles. While it was common knowledge that the Southern army was less adequately equipped than their Northern counterpart, seeing that fact evidenced so crudely in the weapons some of the soldiers wielded was sobering, to say the least. Pitchforks, knives, pickaxes, even shovels. And it only added to the measure of the almost tangible grit and determination she could feel with each forward step the soldiers took.

“The mighty Army of Tennessee,” Mrs. McGavock said softly, her voice a mixture of pride and dread. “Twenty thousand men, the colonel tells me.”

While Lizzie was stirred by the sight and shared the sense of dread, she couldn’t share the same sense of pride. Because for all the reasons given to support the Confederacy’s cause—states’ rights, economic concerns, protection of home and land, and families’ futures—they all

seemed to lead back to the continuance of slavery. And though she had yet to voice her opinion in this household, she was very much in accord with the North on that count. In the same breath, she only wished it wasn't taking a war to find some semblance of common ground.

Carrie McGavock stepped outside onto the front portico, then descended the steps and followed the brick path to the front gate. Lizzie shadowed her steps.

The neat columns of soldiers briefly broke ranks as they circled around the house, marching in quick time straight toward the mass of entrenched Federal troops waiting for them just south of the Carters' house. Lizzie studied the men's faces as they passed. Fierce determination marked some, weariness and fatigue others. Then she heard it. Music. From somewhere within the throng rose the South's oh-so-beloved "Dixie." She spotted the brass band as they marched past, the fading rays of sunlight reflecting off their instruments. After "Dixie" came "Bonnie Blue Flag," then "The Girl I Left Behind Me." The latter tunes seemed far too rousing and frivolous to accompany an army's charge, yet she heard some of the troops singing along as they—

A stray gunshot sounded from the advancing forces, and she and Mrs. McGavock both turned and hurried back toward the portico. When they reached the steps, they heard someone calling out to them.

"Ladies! Please, I must prevail upon the house!"

Lizzie turned to see a man hurrying up the brick walkway.

Mrs. McGavock took a step forward, squinting. "Reverend Markham? Is that you?"

The man's steps slowed as disbelief clouded his features. "Caroline Elizabeth Winder?" His voice held disbelief. "Could the woman before me be the same young girl I knew back in Louisiana?"

A slow smile curved Mrs. McGavock's mouth. "She would be one and the same, Reverend. Except it's Mrs. John McGavock now. Those closest to me call me Carrie. And it's been several years since I was that young girl. And since our paths have crossed."

“Yes, it has been.” He looked over at the soldiers still pressing forward. “Or several lifetimes, it feels like.”

The tender understanding in Mrs. McGavock’s expression rendered any verbal response unnecessary. Footsteps behind them drew their attention. “Reverend Markham,” Mrs. McGavock continued, “allow me to introduce my husband, Colonel John McGavock.”

Following swift introductions, a pause settled in, and Lizzie detected a subtle change in the reverend’s demeanor.

“Colonel McGavock, Mrs. McGavock, I need to inform you that your home has been designated the division field hospital for the wounded of Loring’s Division. On behalf of General Hood and the great Army of Tennessee, we’re grateful for your devotion to the Confederacy and to your fellow countrymen.” He solemnly extended his hand and Colonel McGavock shook it, and in doing so accepted the selection of his home without hesitation. But what else could he do? Armies never requested. They took. Even when it was *your* army.

“Reverend, our home is yours,” the colonel responded. “We’ll make ready as best we can in the time that we—”

From somewhere behind them, a cannon boomed. Its echo thundered across the valley. A high-pitched whistle set the very air on edge, and just as Lizzie looked west toward the Carters’ house, an explosion rocked the ground beneath her feet. Instinctively, she ducked. Her whole body tensed.

“Ladies—” The colonel took both her and Carrie by the arm. “Back inside the house.”

As though that cannon blast had been a signal, an eruption of artillery fire exploded in the distance behind them. Halfway to the door, Lizzie glanced back at the reverend but found he was already running for the gate. She was nearly inside the house when she heard it . . .

An eerie screech, unearthly and primal, rising like a phantom chorus from the Confederate soldiers. The air trembled with the sound of it. Amid volleys of musketry fire, the squall rose in a fearsome swell

over the valley, and her spine tingled with a prickly chill. The Rebel yell. She'd read about it, had heard men speak of it, but had never heard it herself.

*Hearin' it will strip the courage clean outta your backbone*, a man once told her. And though she'd questioned it then, she believed it now. How could an enemy hear that and not shudder?

Close on Colonel and Mrs. McGavock's heels, she raced to the family parlor to peer out the window to the fields behind the house. Fire and smoke poured from the Federals' entrenchment line as though they'd unleashed hell itself on the Confederate Army advancing across the open field. Men were cut down by the dozens midstride, rifles not yet raised to shoot. Still the Rebels surged forward. But it was too far an expanse to cross. The field was too deep.

Lizzie pressed a hand to the windowpane, unable to breathe. *It's too far. Turn back!* she screamed on the inside. But by some depth of courage and strength of conviction she'd never known, the men pressed forward, stepping over fallen brothers, pitching forward only to struggle to their feet again. Pushing, pushing to make the Federal breastworks. Smoke and fire soon engulfed the valley.

"Carrie! Miss Clouston!"

Lizzie turned to see the colonel pushing furniture up against the wall. His wife ran to help him.

"Where are the children?" he asked.

"In the kitchen with Tempy," Lizzie answered.

He nodded. "We need to make room for as many men as possible. Carrie, you and Miss Clouston work together down here. I'll go upstairs and do what I can there."

Lizzie grabbed hold of one end of an upholstered settee, Mrs. McGavock the other, and they hefted it up against the wall. They moved a marble-top table and wingback chairs to the side of the room, then did the same with the furniture in the best parlor. And all the while, war raged on the other side of the wall.

They hurried to the dining room next, then emptied the table of dishes Tempy had already set for that night's meal and shoved them into the sideboard.

Breath coming hard, they crossed into the farm office. Mrs. McGavock went immediately to the Grecian rocking chair, and Lizzie read her mind. The chair was a gift from the late President Andrew Jackson to the colonel many years earlier and held great sentimental value.

Lizzie grabbed hold of one side. "Why don't we take it down to the kitchen? Then the colonel can decide what to do with it later."

"Very good."

They managed to get the chair down the steps, but maneuvering the last turn into the kitchen presented a problem. Tempy rushed to help, and between the three of them they managed it. Lizzie looked over to see the children standing in the doorway of the larder. Wide-eyed uncertainty etched the girls' expressions, while curiosity painted Winder's.

"Winder says there's fighting outside," Hattie said, looking between her mother and Lizzie.

"I only told her 'cuz it's true!" Winder responded, making a bee-line for a window.

Lizzie caught hold of him. "Children, I need you to stay in the larder awhile longer." She looked to Mrs. McGavock, wondering if she wanted her to stay here or go back upstairs with her.

Mrs. McGavock's gaze shifted to Tempy. "Tempy, I want you to stay with the children until Miss Clouston returns. She and I have a few more things to do upstairs. But I'll send her back soon," she added, her tone growing more maternal, as though she'd intended the last comment for the children's sake as well.

Lizzie gave each of her charges a quick kiss on the head and guided them back inside the larder. Just before closing the door, she pointed to the tin of tea cakes and winked.

Sister Catherine paused in the yard, as did George.

Still on the portico, Lizzie moved slightly to the left for a better view. And when she saw the rosary Lieutenant Conrad clutched in his hand—and heard his whispered, “Hail, Mary, full of praise. The Lord is with me”—she felt a sinking feeling inside her. She wasn’t Catholic either, but one of her best friends growing up was, and she’d heard Christina pray the rosary many times. But never quite like this. If Captain Moore knew the rosary . . .

Sister Catherine laid a gentle hand over Lieutenant Conrad’s, and Lizzie noticed the nun squeeze his hand ever so slightly until he halted midprayer.

“I am merely doing my duty, Captain Moore. I will accompany Lieutenant Conrad to Nashville, as allowed in the guidelines published in 1861. They state, ‘Any prisoner of war who is facing the uncertainty of death, may beseech his captors for a source of spiritual guidance by which his faith shall be instructed to greater—’”

“You’re not going, Sister. This man is not near death. But he might be, if you interfere further.” He motioned to George. “Get him on the wagon. Now.”

With a gentle hand to George’s arm, Sister Catherine belayed the order. “Captain Moore, may I assume you’re familiar with General William Rosecrans?”

A muscle twitched at the corner of the captain’s eye. “Sister, everybody in the Federal Army is familiar with General Rosecrans.”

“And have you had the opportunity to be in his company, Captain?”

Captain Moore eyed her, then shifted his weight. “No, Sister. I have not.”

Sister Catherine smiled. “You may not be aware then, Captain, that General Rosecrans is Catholic. He has great esteem for sisters of the faith. He is himself, in fact, a great advocate of assuring that every man—Federal or Confederate—is granted the opportunity for spiritual guidance and encouragement that—”

“There’s no room for you in the wagon, Sister. And we don’t have any extra horses.”

“I can walk, Captain.”

“It’s over twenty miles to Nashville.”

Sister Catherine briefly bowed her head. “God will provide me the strength.”

Grave-faced, the captain glared at the nun, then looked over at the wagon, then back again, and Lizzie prayed with everything in her that God would somehow provide a way.

“Hanson!” Captain Moore shouted, spittle flying from his lips.

A young soldier stepped forward, boyishly handsome, with an innocence about him that reminded Lizzie of Lieutenant Shuler.

“Yes, sir?” the soldier responded.

“The nun rides with you!”

“Yes, Captain!”

The weight in Lizzie’s chest lifted by half.

The captain and his soldiers headed for their horses, and George strode toward the wagon near which the McGavocks and the other nuns stood. But Sister Catherine hurried back up the portico steps.

She grabbed Lizzie’s hands, her eyes twinkling. “I need you to pray for two things. First, that Captain Moore does not develop a sudden hankering to brush up on his military guidelines.” She leaned in. “I was quoting from a book of service issued by the Holy Sisters of Charity.”

Feeling her mouth slip open, Lizzie shook her head.

“And second, that he does not ask me further about General Rosecrans . . . whom I have never met.”

Lizzie hugged her tight. “Thank you for doing this, Sister. And please take care of yourself.”

A light slipped into Sister Catherine Margaret’s eyes. “Psalm 27, Miss Clouston. Do you know it?”

Lizzie hesitated. “I know I’ve read it before, but—”

“Well, read it again. Soon. And be encouraged! Now . . .” The sister glanced over her shoulder. “The other nuns are going to be so jealous. I get to ride all the way to Nashville with a handsome young soldier! And who knows, he may even be Catholic!”

Lizzie’s smile faded as the wagon rumbled down the long graveled drive. She saw Conrad begin to wave, and she waved in return until the wagon disappeared around the bend at the far end of the road.



“Thank you, Mrs. McGavock. This is a right handsome muffler.” Seated in a chair by the fireplace in Winder’s room—his first attempt at such—Roland draped the knitted scarf around his neck, wishing they all felt more jovial today. Especially since the women had worked so hard to make everything so nice. Though he continued to be on uneasy speaking terms with the Lord, he still thought Christmas Day should be a time to celebrate, not to mourn. “It’s most kind of you and the colonel, ma’am. I hope he helped you knit all of these if he’s taking some of the credit.”

Mrs. McGavock smiled. “He helped by staying out of my way.”

Roland laughed softly. That sounded like something Weet would’ve said. Oh, how he missed her today. Lena too. What was it about Christmas that made the heart turn home? The festive decorations, the comforting food and drink, and, of course, the memories that crowded in. Even the violinist in the corner playing Christmas carols—“Hark! the Herald Angels Sing,” “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” “Joy to the World,” “It Came upon a Midnight Clear”—while expert at his craft and filling the house with music near fit for heaven, only contributed to Roland’s melancholy mood.

The colonel looked him over. “Are you sure you’re faring well after the incident yesterday with the soldier? It appeared as though he got pretty rough with you.”

Roland shrugged off the comment. "I'm fine, sir. He's a young officer. Newly appointed, I'd bet. Seems they always have something to prove."

Mrs. McGavock gestured. "Would you like something else from the buffet, Captain? I'll be happy to get it for you."

Roland put a hand to his belly. "I couldn't eat another bite. Well, except maybe for another one of Tempy's fried pies."

"It would be my pleasure!"

"Thank you, ma'am."

Roland felt honored when the colonel claimed the ladderback chair beside him.

"It would seem, sir, that the artificial limbs are a definite win with the soldiers." He smiled and nodded toward Lieutenant Shuler, who was walking around encouraging people to shake his wooden hand, only to pull it back real quick at the last second. But the men with artificial legs . . . Roland had grown so accustomed to seeing the amputees absent their limbs that now to see them *walking* around normal-like was a tad unnerving. Some wore trousers that hid the makeshift legs, which really played with the mind. Most of the men with artificial legs were getting the hang of them, but some were still holding on to walls or using crutches to navigate their way. Twenty-four men remained at Carnton, and each one of them, Roland included, hoped the Federal Army took their time in coming back.

He'd been continuing his exercises. He did them three times a day. Early in the morning before sunrise, and shortly following lunch when the soldiers in his room either slept or met in other rooms to play cards or checkers. Then he went through the repetition again at night after everyone was asleep. Not that anyone would tattle on him to Dr. Phillips. But the doc had harped on and on to them about the importance of waiting to walk or exercise until they'd healed properly, so Roland wasn't taking any chances. And he was being smart about it. When he grew light-headed, he rested for a minute. When he started

hurting, he stopped. He knew Dr. Phillips still wouldn't approve, but he had to do something to contribute to his healing and regaining his strength. He'd added push-ups as well. And he did it all from his cot, which he now considered a lifeline.

Colonel McGavock fingered his beard, a glass of punch in his hand. "Captain Jake Winston and his wife, Aletta, do a fine job making them."

His thoughts having trailed, Roland backtracked to what they'd been talking about. *Artificial limbs*. "Yes, sir, they do."

"They've taken an old warehouse in downtown Franklin," the colonel continued. "They've done quite a bit of work to it and are helping wounded soldiers to recuperate there. They're an extraordinary couple."

Roland spotted Jake and his wife out in the hallway speaking to Lizzie and Tempy, who was serving. Jake was a fellow sharpshooter, but he'd lost a portion of his vision due to an injury. It was especially troubling to learn, because Jake Winston had been one of the best.

Conversation came easily between Roland and the colonel, and they covered a variety of topics before Colonel McGavock dropped his voice by a degree.

"So, Captain Jones, I see you routinely reading the newspaper from front to back and every page in between. What is your view of what awaits us?"

Roland weighed his response before answering. From what he'd witnessed firsthand, John McGavock was as fine a man as they came, and far more generous with his wealth than most. His wife was cut from the same cloth. Some of the men had taken to calling Carrie McGavock the Angel of Carnton, a title the woman had more than earned through her nurturing compassion and near constant attention to the soldiers. Although, at least for him, another woman already held that rank. The McGavocks lived in a beautiful home with nice furnishings, but nothing ostentatious that he'd seen thus far. A well-grounded

second-generation Scotch-Irish family from Cairn, Ireland. But he wasn't certain where the colonel's thinking was in relation to the Confederacy. Did McGavock consider it a lost cause, as he did? Or was he one of those still clinging to the weary dream?

"Well, Colonel," Roland began, choosing his words carefully. "First, sir, I appreciate you making the newspapers available to us. And second, I don't think we can trust the newspapers much. Especially the ones from Nashville." He gave a soft laugh. "Not that we can't glean information here and there. But the Federal Army currently holds sway over most every publication in that city, so I don't think you'll get much of a fair reading from any of those."

"Hear, hear," the colonel said, downing his punch as he watched his wife from across the room.

Roland had noticed that about the McGavocks before. They still sought each other out in a crowd, which said a lot about them as a couple. He wondered what it said about him that he knew exactly where Lizzie was right now, and had ever since the Christmas celebration had started. She looked especially pretty tonight. She'd done something different with her hair. He liked it. Although he'd prefer to see it loose and down around her shoulders.

"Continue, Captain. Please."

Roland obliged, sensing the colonel desired bluntness. "To cut to the heart of the matter, sir, I believe the future of the Confederacy is bleak." He felt John McGavock's attention turn to him, but kept his gaze on the flames in the hearth. Staring at a fire was comforting; there was something fascinating about watching a force of nature that, when contained, could help keep a man alive, but if unleashed would destroy with merciless ferocity.

"From what I gathered from senior officers in the weeks leading up to the battle here," he went on, "the Confederate Treasury is cranking out millions of dollars in notes unbacked by gold. And the Confederate States as a whole are nearly bankrupt. As we both know, sir, wars are

expensive. Our last army in the field took a severe beating here, both physically and in the morale of the men. Then in Nashville, we were beaten again. But that time we were sent running. And it does something to a man on the inside when he turns his back on his enemy and runs. There's something innately wrong about it. So if General Lee can't find his way out of Virginia past Grant, which, from all reports, seems doubtful . . ." Roland looked over at him. "I believe we're done for, sir."

McGavock's stare turned appraising. "Remind me never to solicit your opinion if I do not earnestly wish to hear it, Captain."

At first Roland thought he might've offended his gracious host. But John McGavock's slow nod, coupled with the sad resignation in his eyes, said he was in full and complete agreement. They sat in a silence Roland might have considered comfortable if not for the shared sense of impending doom and dread of the unknown.

He saw Lizzie out in the hallway again. But this time she was alone. The cheery countenance he'd glimpsed earlier when she was in the company of guests was gone. She looked like he felt on the inside—wary, worried, and uncertain. Which he found interesting since, based on the current tide, she was on the winning side of the war.

They'd originally planned to have the final reading of *A Christmas Carol* last night, but the Federal patrol's unannounced visit changed that. It simply hadn't seemed right, so they'd all voted to wait. That had suited him fine. While he enjoyed listening to Lizzie's voice as she read, the story itself had taken a darker turn with the second ghost's visit. And though he knew it was only a story, he found himself thinking about it at odd moments—like now—and seeing himself through Scrooge's experiences. The similarities were disturbing. So as he did every time this happened, he purposefully turned his thoughts elsewhere.

He hoped the men who'd been taken were holding up well.

Especially Conrad. Knowing Sister Catherine Margaret was with them helped ease his mind. The woman was a force of nature all her own.

Roland shifted in the chair, his back muscles beginning to ache. He'd appreciated the evening, but was ready to put this Christmas and this year—this war—behind him.

"Here you are, Captain Jones." Mrs. McGavock returned, china plate in hand. "There are plenty more where that came from."

"Thank you, ma'am."

The colonel rose and offered his left hand. Roland shook it.

"Captain, it's always a pleasure. I'm sorry you've suffered such wounds, but I'm grateful God saw fit to bring you to our home."

"It's I who am grateful, sir. Your hospitality and generous hearts are helping us all to heal—far more, I might add, than Dr. Phillips's snake oil ministrations."

"Do I hear my name being taken in vain?"

Roland laughed along with the McGavocks, already having spotted the good doctor working his way toward them. After a brief exchange, the couple resumed their circulation among their guests, and Dr. Phillips claimed the now vacant chair.

The doctor exhaled through his teeth. "Captain, I believe I am ready for this Christmas to come to a close."

"Although I'm grateful for everything our host and hostess have done for us, I could not agree more. Do you bring any more news since you last visited?" Roland took a bite of the fried pie.

"None that's good, I'm afraid. The army is still scattered. Regiments in disarray. They're supposed to be making their way toward winter camp in Tupelo, but the army's in ruinous condition. A shell of what it was even six months ago. Also, there's rumor"—the doc's voice lowered—"that Hood is going to resign."

Roland stopped chewing midbite.

"Word is," Phillips continued, his gaze forward, "that he's humiliated, utterly crushed by what happened here and in Nashville."

“And with good reason.”

Phillips nodded but said nothing else.

Roland let the news settle within him. If the rumor proved true, General Hood would take leave of commanding the Army of Tennessee scarcely six months after being appointed to lead it. Roland set aside his plate, no longer hungry.

“So . . . how’re you feeling this week, Captain?”

“All right. Better than all right, actually. Except for my back. I’d really appreciate a lie-down about now.”

When Phillips didn’t respond, Roland glanced over—and found the man looking at him. “What?”

“Anything you want to tell me?”

Hearing a tone in the man’s voice, Roland didn’t know how Phillips had found out about his exercising. He only knew that he had. Roland reached for innocence he’d lost long ago. “No. Nothing I can think of.”

“You’re sure.”

Roland nodded, then Phillips glanced down at the blanket covering Roland’s legs.

“I’m a doctor, Jones. I’m trained to notice things.”

“Trained to notice,” Roland scoffed. “Through a blanket?” He shook his head, letting his smile show. “Who squealed on me?”

“You have to ask?”

He thought for a minute. “Taylor!”

Phillips’s laughter said he’d guessed correctly.

“I give you my word, Doc. I haven’t put any weight on my legs yet. I’m just lifting them up and down. And bending them a little.”

“Even though I told you not to until I gave you the go-ahead.”

“Pretty much.” Roland feigned a grimace.

“How did you get into that chair?”

“George helped me. Sitting in a chair seemed more befitting for a party than lying on the cot the whole time.”

“After everyone leaves, I want to check your legs.”

“Fine by me. You’re the doctor, after all.”

Phillips gave him a droll look.

A minute later, Lizzie happened to glance their way and smile.

Roland returned the gesture.

“Miss Clouston’s a fine young woman.”

Roland nodded. “She is that.”

“Is she still betrothed to that young lieutenant?”

Roland looked over.

Phillips shrugged. “Word travels.”

“Yes. She’s still betrothed.”

“Does she know how you feel about her?”

Roland resisted the urge to look beside him again, not all that surprised that the doctor had noticed. As he’d said, he was an observant man. “I’m pretty sure she has some idea of my feelings.”

“But?”

“As you said, Doc, she’s betrothed. She’s given her pledge, and she’s a woman of her word.”

Phillips seemed content to let it go at that, and Roland was grateful. He wasn’t in the mood to discuss it.

Lizzie had told him she hadn’t heard from Lieutenant Townsend yet following the battle of Nashville. And there had come a moment, late one night, when he’d allowed himself to consider what might happen if Townsend had been killed. If Lizzie were no longer pledged to another man. As soon as the thought had come, he’d banished it, ashamed. Any man who would think such a thing wasn’t worthy of Elizabeth Clouston. He gave a rueful sigh.

Almost an hour later, everyone seemed to have had their fill of both delicacies and conversation, and what guests there were from town took their leave. The nuns began helping the men get ready for bed.

George moved Roland from the chair to the cot, and Roland

was careful not to meet his gaze. As much time as he and George had spent together in their lives, Roland had quickly realized they'd never had much physical contact. Being carried by your manservant was not something any man relished, but there was something about being dependent on George in this way that Roland found especially uncomfortable.

As promised, Phillips returned a few minutes later. Lizzie was with him.

"All right, Captain, let's have a look at those legs." Already the doc's tone held a hint of disapproval.

Roland stretched out on the cot, his feet slightly hanging over. Lizzie held an oil lamp aloft as Phillips examined him. Roland caught her attention, shot a look at the doc, and rolled his eyes. She tried unsuccessfully to curb a smile. Roland realized something then. When he'd first met her, he would've sworn the woman could scarcely hold a smile. Now the reaction seemed to come far more naturally and more often. And it suited her.

"More light, please, Miss Clouston."

Lizzie moved closer to the bed. So close Roland caught the sweetness of whatever scent she was wearing. They'd talked some earlier in the evening, but they had yet to continue their conversation from several nights ago. Part of his eagerness to heal, to be able to at least move again on his own, had to do with her. They were friends. He'd accepted that, for the most part. But he wanted time to talk to her. Alone on occasion. Get to know her better. For whatever time he had left here at Carnton. Yet it was a fine balance, he knew. Because the sooner he walked without aid, the sooner he went to prison.

Dr. Phillips straightened, and Roland could tell by his frustrated expression that he wasn't pleased.

Phillips gave him a look. "The healing in your legs simply isn't coming along as quickly as I'd hoped it would, Captain."

Roland stared. "But that can't be right, Doc. I—"

“And I believe the reason is—”

Frustrated, Roland held his tongue.

“—that you need to get your lazy buttocks off that cot and get to exercising.”

Phillips laughed. But it was Lizzie’s reaction—she grinned and gave his forearm a quick squeeze—that felt like a rush of morphine and coffee shot straight into his veins.

Roland smiled. “As soon as I’m able to kick again, Doc, I’m comin’ for you.”

Phillips gripped his left hand and gave it a firm shake. “I’ve never been more pleased to have been wrong, Captain. Both tonight . . . and that other night.” Phillips glanced beside him at Lizzie, whose features softened with pleasure.

Roland swallowed. “I owe you both a lot.”

Phillips looked over at George, who stood off to the side. “I need to find out what you’re putting into those poultices, George. And how you’re applying them. I think those have greatly accelerated the captain’s healing.”

“I be happy to tell you, sir.”

The silence lengthened, and Roland felt Lizzie looking at him. He clearly read in her eyes what she was thinking. *Aren’t you going to thank George too?*

Feeling that twinge of unease again, Roland shifted his gaze. “And . . . George. Thank you as well.”

George lifted his head and met Roland’s stare. “You welcome, Cap’n Jones.”

BY THE TIME breakfast was served the next morning, Roland was famished. His appetite had definitely increased since he’d started his daily exercise, and Tempy had noticed. She’d begun giving him extra servings of hoecakes, eggs, and bacon. And he ate every bite.

As he finished his second cup of coffee, Dr. Phillips walked into the bedroom.

“Morning, Doc. I thought you’d be long gone by now.”

“You know me. I couldn’t leave without having one more of Tempy’s breakfasts.”

Hands in his pockets, Phillips crossed to the window and stared out. Roland looked over at him, then realized the room had emptied out. Even Shuler, who stuck pretty close to his bed these days, was gone. Roland set his empty coffee cup on the floor beside the cot.

“Whatever you’ve come to say, Doc, I think you need to say it.”

Phillips slowly turned to face him. “You always have been a bottom line sort of man.”

“I thought you were too, Doc. That’s something I’ve always liked about you.” Roland narrowed his eyes. “I think that may be the only thing.”

Phillips smiled, then leveled his gaze. “I want you to know before I tell you this, Jones, that this may not apply to you.”

Roland forced a laugh. “Why am I not reassured by that?”

Phillips closed the door, grabbed a chair from the corner, and sat down across from him. Roland felt a slight shudder.

“Despite the medical advances that have been made in recent years, there are still so many things about the human body we don’t—”

“Just say it, Doc, all right? For both our sakes.”

Time slowed to a crawl, and Phillips’s gaze turned rock steady. Roland felt his pulse kick up a notch.

“For men with extensive injuries such as yours, where the blood supply has been compromised to certain parts of the body for a lengthy period of time, there can be notable increases in the inability of the patient to procreate. This doesn’t mean you cannot still enjoy the act of marriage, and that—”

Roland held up a hand, his attention stuck on one word passed

over far too quickly. He swallowed. “Are you saying I can no longer father a child?”

“I’m saying that due to your injuries, there is a *chance* you may not be able to.”

Roland blinked, and all he could see was the fading image of Lena’s sweet face. “What . . . are the odds?”

“Shooting from the hip? Sixty to seventy percent.”

“That I’ll be able to?”

Phillips’s silence answered before he did. “That you won’t,” he said softly.

Roland’s chest tightened, and he let out a held breath. “I appreciate you telling me, Doc.”

“But just remember, Jones, this may not apply to—”

“I understand. I may be fine or . . . I might not.” His eyes burned. He turned away, eager for Phillips to leave. “You best be on your way, or Loring’s Division may up and move on without you.”

For a moment Phillips didn’t respond. Then he rose, returned the chair to its place, and reached to open the bedroom door.

“Hey, Doc?”

Phillips looked back.

“Why are you telling me this now?” Roland asked, then attempted a cavalier tone. “Is it because of the way you’ve seen me looking at Miss Clouston?”

“No. It’s because of the way I’ve seen her looking at you.”

Roland felt a stab of pleasure mixed with pain. “Last thing, Phillips.” He struggled to keep his voice even. “If I had let you take my leg when you wanted to that night, would that have made any—”

“No. That would have made no difference.”

Roland nodded. “Good to know.”

## CHAPTER 35

Lizzie dressed in the dark, doing her best to be quiet, not wanting to awaken Hattie and Winder. Especially after the night they'd had. She grabbed her Bible from the bedside table and tiptoed softly down to the kitchen, mindful of the worst offenders among the creaky stairs. The kitchen was dark and still, and she walked to a window and stood for a moment in the quiet, staring out the window into the night. The sun, still tucked in slumber, wouldn't rouse for a while yet, and she watched transfixed as grayish tufts of clouds wafted across a thumb-nail moon. *Towny, are you still alive?*

Images of the battlefield at Franklin rose in her mind, but she shut them out, refusing to believe he'd met with that end. During the past week she'd intentionally reached back into her memory, recalling the years they'd grown up together. Towny had always watched out for her, championed her. When they'd shared lunches he'd always given her the best portion of whatever his mother had packed for him. He *was* a good man. Patient and unselfish. And it was growing easier for her to imagine building a life with him. And the catalyst for that, at least in part—which she wasn't proud of—was Roland's reticence in recent days.

Though they'd spoken on several occasions, it felt different between them. He was distant, preoccupied. She knew he was struggling, both with wondering if he'd ever walk again and with what his own future held if he did. She heard the other soldiers conjecturing about what-ifs, but Roland kept his thoughts to himself. As she'd been reading *The Three Musketeers* to James—the book the young man had chosen of those she'd given him—she'd tried to engage Roland as well, but to no