

REVERENCE IN THE
WILDERNESS

FRONTIER HEARTS
BOOK THREE



ANDREA BYRD



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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, Kings James Version.

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*For all the women who have ever experienced a miscarriage
or threatened miscarriage.*

CHAPTER 1



MAY 14, 1782—GREEN COUNTY, KENTUCKY

*K*eturah Elliot's heart seized as the vicious waters swallowed her mother whole.

"Ma!" Her brother Duncan's deep voice echoed in her ears before he ran past her, his dark hair a blur as he dove into the churning river.

Nay! Her mind screamed the word, but her tongue remained as frozen as the rest of her body. Her feet were glued to the rocky bank beneath her as she stood, helpless, as her only sibling was consumed as well. Tears slipped down her cheeks as she watched and waited. But neither her mother nor her brother ever emerged again.

A hand at her elbow pulled Keturah from the

memory. She blinked past her tears to focus on the fresh mound of dirt that marked her father's grave. She swallowed the lump in her throat as his words from that day came back to her. *'Tis all yer fault. We ne'er shoulda crossed.*

After unclenching her jaw, Keturah turned and offered her only friend in the world the barest of smiles. "Thank ye for comin'." Her voice rasped more than she would have liked it to as she included Margaret's husband, Iain, in her nod. Their home was a day and a half's journey from hers on foot, but when she had shown up at their door, they immediately leapt to her aid. If it were not for Iain, she did not know how she would have pulled her father's body from the battered barn or buried him. Dugan Elliot had been an exceedingly large man, as broad as he was tall.

"Ma." A quiet little voice drew Keturah's attention to the dark-headed toddler nestled within Margaret's petticoats. "Me play?" His bright blue eyes petitioned his mother along with his words, drawing a grin from both women.

Iain spoke up. "Why dinnae we go hunt up Miss Blair some more wood for her wood pile?"

"Aye." The boy's face lit up, and he quickly abandoned his post for his father's outstretched hand.

Margaret shot a grateful glance at her husband before she wrapped an arm around Keturah's shoulders and urged her toward the large double-pen cabin that

stood at the edge of the meadow. Much like the now-caved-in barn beside it, it was far too sizeable for only her and her father. But the man had been bent on building up the grandest homestead in Kentucky. Instead, a tornado had claimed both him and the barn.

Keturah frowned at the mangled remnants of the building before Margaret ushered her inside. *Lord, what am I to do now?*

In the mere four days since her father's passing, Keturah had run over scenario after scenario in her mind. Yet she balked at the one solution that kept coming to mind.

While Keturah settled on the bench beside the long dining table, Margaret hung a kettle and stoked the fire in the massive stone fireplace. The fireplace was built of stones that she and her father had collected from the countless nearby streams. It had taken ages to acquire enough for the massive structure, but she had to admit, it had been well worth the effort. Her mother would have loved the natural beauty of the hearth.

"We will have tea directly," Margaret informed her with a gentle smile as she came to settle across from Keturah.

"What am I goin' to do?" The words tumbled out of her before she had a chance to stop them. While she did not wish to appear weak, there was no denying that her situation was precarious.

Margaret's mouth pressed into a line. "I have seen

firsthand how dangerous it can be for a woman alone in this wilderness, an' I think ye should come an' stay with me an' Iain."

Keturah's gaze jerked to the other woman's face. "Nay. I cannae lose this farm." Her heart kicked up a notch, pounding in her chest.

Though she and her father rarely saw eye to eye, they had put too much time and energy into settling the land for her to walk away. Nay, she could not fail. With no one left to help her father, he had counted on her labor in addition to expecting all the normal women's chores to be completed. The land around them had been watered with her blood, sweat, and tears multiple times over, and she would not see it gone in a single storm. Tension coiled in her shoulders.

Margaret's hand covered hers. "I know how hard it would be to leave, but I believe it to be for the best." When Keturah looked up, compassion and concern shone in her friend's eyes. Margaret had her best interests at heart—of that, she was sure. And she spoke from experience, having been the victim of a brutal attack that sent her away from her own home to the safety of a fort for some time. But there had to be another way.

Sensing her hesitation, Margaret amended her statement. "If ye will not leave, we will come an' help ye as we can."

Keturah nodded but closed her eyes, praying for some option she had yet to consider. Again, a nagging

voice within her offered up the same solution she had tamped down countless times. But this time, it seemed to echo within her mind, refusing to be pushed away. She glanced heavenward, where a dark ceiling greeted her. This could not be the Lord's will.

Yet the urging did not waver. Keturah heaved a sigh and released the words that had been rolling around in her mind. "I have to take a husband."

Across from her, Margaret sucked in a breath. "Yer sure?"

Nay, she was not. Unease swirled in her stomach at the thought. What if the man turned out to be as callous and controlling as her father? But, to keep the land, the home she and her father had built with their own hands, it seemed to be the only viable solution. Surely, she could find someone she could tolerate working alongside. She forced her chin to dip in confirmation.

"Do ye have someone in mind?"

Keturah's shoulders sagged. "Nay. But James Skaggs's Station is barely a day's travel from here, an' I suspect there should be some single men around there."

Margaret's eyes widened before she seemed to think through her answer. She gave a nod before she stood and picked up a towel. After moving over to the hearth, she lifted the kettle from its hook and brought it over to prepare their tea. She stood at the end of the table,

hands braced against the sturdy wood as steam wafted from the two cups in front of her, swirling upward in front of her deep-orange dress. “The Lord can bless a marriage of convenience. After all, me an’ Iain are livin’ proof of that. As yer friend, though, it concerns me, ye marryin’ a man ye dinnae know. Me an’ Iain would be more than willin’ to travel with ye to the station.”

Keturah shook her head. “Nay. I have to do this on me own. I traveled to get ye an’ Iain on me own before, an’ this is not near as far. All will be well.” Was she trying to convince Margaret or herself?

Her friend came around the table and clasped a reassuring hand on her arm as she placed a cup of tea before her. “Then we will pray. Pray that God provides ye with a good, lovin’ husband. A man of faith.”

Margaret slid onto the seat next to her and began the prayer. Keturah listened intently but could not seem to commit her heart to the words. If she had to take a husband, it ought to be a man she could come to love and cherish as Margaret did her husband. However, especially under the circumstances, that seemed too much to ask.

She breathed in a deep breath and let out a shaky sigh. *Lord, please just dinnae let me lose the farm.* She would gladly settle for a marriage of mere contentment if only she could make the farm a success.



Daniel sat astride the beautiful chestnut mare he had purchased for his trip west as he surveyed the green waters of Big Brush Creek. It was to be their last water crossing before reaching James Skaggs's Station, which was situated near one of the creek's tributaries. It appeared much more the breadth and depth of a river, rather than a simple creek, though. A muscle rippled in his mare's shoulder, causing him to grip the reins tighter.

While Cinnamon was stunning and sure-footed, the man who had sold her to Daniel had neglected to explain that she was also skittish and high strung. Not exactly the greatest fit for an inexperienced rider whose confidence in his horsemanship skills was still lacking after more than a month of travel. Back east, his family had always had the use of a carriage and driver, so he had never had a reason to gain experience. And unlike his five brothers, he had never taken a personal interest in the activity. While he did hold an affinity for animals, he was more likely to be found in the stables talking to the horses rather than out riding them.

A clatter of rocks drew Daniel's attention from his musings to the family that had approached the water's edge to his right. Worry lines stretched across the middle-aged mother's forehead as she watched the first men crossing. Her husband gripped her shoulder tightly while three small children gathered around them. The youngest, a toddler with white-blond hair

matching that of his parents, crept closer to the water, a hand outstretched. But the woman took hold of his shoulder before his fingertips could reach the liquid. Daniel glanced about. With no horse near and their bodies laden with packs and supplies, it appeared that they were traveling on foot like so many of the impoverished families in their travel party.

“One of the children can ride across with me,” Daniel offered. Though the waters appeared relatively still, he had quickly learned during their crossings that creeks such as this still held a dangerous current that could sweep away an inexperienced swimmer. Like a child.

The mother looked at her husband, who nodded. He stepped forward and lifted the toddler into Daniel’s arms. “Take Charlie here, if you do not mind. He has not yet learned to swim.”

“Of course, I would be glad to.” Daniel smiled down at the man. “He will be quite safe up here on Cinnamon with me.” As Daniel accepted the boy and settled him in front of him in the saddle, the man nodded. But his gaze lingered on his son as though he was not quite convinced.

Still, as it was his turn to cross, Daniel held tightly to the boy and asked Cinnamon to step forward into the creek. The mare had taken only two steps when she dislodged a large flat rock with the edge of her hoof. Her weight flipped the stone upward with a loud splash before it smacked against the side of her hock.

Cinnamon went reeling backward, her head high in the air and nostrils flaring. The black stallion behind her lashed out as she encroached upon his space, nipping her flank with his teeth.

Daniel's heart rate kicked up a notch as the mare surged forward and spun away from the other horse. Suddenly, his perch in the saddle seemed quite precarious. As Cinnamon plunged into the creek, water and muddy debris sprayed all around. Daniel jerked on the reins. In protest of his rough handling, she reared. Time seemed to freeze as her brown mane flew up into Daniel's face and he slipped from the saddle. Frantic, he gripped young Charlie tight to his chest and allowed the reins to slip through his hands. His body slammed into the rock-strewn bank just before Cinnamon's weight crashed atop him and the boy. Blinding pain seared through the back of his skull.

"Char..." The child's name started as a hoarse whisper before it died on his lips, black spots claiming his vision.



Daniel gripped the smooth edge of the rocking chair's arm as his foot bounced against the hardwood floor beneath. Guilt and worry gnawed his insides in turns. Fire crackled in the Skaggs's fireplace a few feet away. And though it had worked to dry his wet breeches at first, the warmth had grown

stifling as he waited for word on Charlie's condition. If it were not for Mary Skaggs's watchful eye as she prepared the evening meal and the fact that dizziness claimed him if he attempted to stand, he would be pacing the room. Still, he chanced a glance in the middle-aged woman's direction.

As though she felt his gaze, Mrs. Skaggs lifted her eyes from the potatoes she was peeling and raised her dark brows as if to inquire if he needed assistance. Daniel forced a tight-lipped smile and lifted his hand to acknowledge all was well. But all was not well.

Upon their arrival at the station, Daniel had been whisked inside so that the stationmaster's wife could tend to the gash on the back of his head. Meanwhile, Charlie had been taken to the nearby home of the acting physician. If any lasting harm came to the boy due to his incompetence...

His chest tightened, and the pounding in his head intensified. Daniel closed his eyes against the pain.

They snapped open a moment later when the cabin door scraped across the floor. Martin Brown, the leader of their expedition, stepped in from the gathering dusk. His mouth was pulled into a grim line as he approached, causing Daniel to sit up straighter.

"Is the boy well?"

"Yes, he is well." Mr. Brown did not elaborate, his gaze on the crackling fire as he sat down on the low stone hearth beside him.

Daniel's pulse picked up as he stared down at the

man. What was the man not telling him? And why did he avoid his gaze?

When Martin finally looked him in his face, his blue gaze held a heavy dose of regret. Daniel's heart plummeted. "The boy suffered a broken arm. It will mend, though, and he is resting now. Children are resilient."

All the breath left Daniel's lungs as he sagged back against the rocker. A chill swept through his body. He opened his mouth to apologize, but Mr. Brown held up a hand to stop him, asking his own question instead. "How is your head?"

Daniel attempted to focus despite his racing thoughts. Did his head even hurt anymore? He gingerly placed a hand near where Mrs. Skaggs had stitched him up. "Um, nothing too terrible." Not when there was a child suffering.

"Good." The other man nodded and took a deep breath. "Even so, 'twill be best for you to stay here and recuperate for a few days. For your horse as well."

Daniel's gaze jerked up. "What happened to Cinnamon?"

Mr. Brown's countenance relaxed slightly. Evidently, the topic of the horse was an easier subject. "Only a strain to the left hind. She will be well in a couple of days. But everyone else will be leaving in the morning to push farther west."

Daniel's heart plummeted. "Without me."

Another thin-mouthed nod from the man before

him. "This will be a good place for you to settle. Here, near the station."

Where Daniel would be safe, looked after. Where there would be people to help him because he was not capable of succeeding on his own. Though Mr. Brown tried to make the situation sound appealing, Daniel knew what he really meant. He had failed too many times and was a hindrance to the group. No longer was he allowed to travel with them. Daniel pushed a smile onto his face despite the lifelong wound that was opening inside his chest. "Yes. You are quite right. This will be a wonderful place to settle. A beautiful land, indeed."

Mr. Brown stood and clasped him on the shoulder. "I am glad you are able to see it that way." Then he strode from the cabin, leaving Daniel to accept his fate alone.

For the millionth time, it seemed, he had been cast aside, unwanted. Just as when his father had hired a nanny to tend to his raising so that he would not have to face the child that had taken his wife from him. When his father had restricted his brothers from consorting with him or purposefully left him behind during family outings. And finally, when his father had pressed money into his hand on his eighteenth birthday and revealed that he had secured Daniel passage west to make a name for himself. Not a tear was shed upon his departure. In fact, no one besides Nanny had bid him farewell.

It was a dream twisted into a nightmare. Daniel had planned to approach his father regarding funding for furthering his education. Though it was foolish, he had spent his life dreaming of becoming a professor. Within the walls of books was the only place he felt at home. Well, his father had given him money—not enough for further education, but enough to start a modest life with. But what was he to do with it?