

A woman with blonde hair styled in an updo, wearing a long, flowing pink dress with white lace trim at the collar, cuffs, and hem. She is standing in a large, ornate greenhouse with a glass and white metal frame. The greenhouse is filled with various plants, including tall green cypresses and colorful flowers. The lighting is bright and natural, suggesting a sunny day.

*A Beauty
So Rare*

A BELMONT MANSION NOVEL

TAMERA
ALEXANDER

Bestselling author of *A LASTING IMPRESSION*

Praise for Tamera's Novels

“To put it simply: This book is a full-on HIT!”

—*USA Today*
about *A Lasting Impression*

“Tamera Alexander has once again written a novel rich in storytelling and history, peopled with living, breathing characters who made me laugh, and cry. Better than sweet tea on a veranda, *A Lasting Impression* is a winner. I want to live at Belmont!”

—Francine Rivers, *New York Times* best-selling author
of *Redeeming Love*, about *A Lasting Impression*

“Tamera Alexander crafts a pleasing and well-written romance that is filled with adventure and intrigue. Subtly weaving in the main character's steadfast faith in God, the book is full of faith and full of life. Readers who enjoy romantic novels but also want to feel inspired will definitely enjoy this satisfying read.”

—*Publishers Weekly* about *Within My Heart*

“Tamera Alexander paints vivid scenes, not with oils on canvas but with words on the page, as she sweeps us away to the cafés of New Orleans and the hills of Tennessee. In Claire Laurent we find a true artist, ever doubting her talents, ever questioning her calling. And in Sutton Monroe we meet a hero whose bright mind is eclipsed only by his tender heart. A lovely story, sure to please anyone who treasures a good romance.”

—Liz Curtis Higgs, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *Mine Is the Night*, about *A Lasting Impression*

“Rich in period details and set in Nashville's historic Belmont Mansion, this historical romance by RITA and Christy Award winner Alexander is a sure bet . . .”

—*Library Journal Review* about *A Lasting Impression*

Books by Tamera Alexander

A BELMONT MANSION NOVEL

A Lasting Impression

A Beauty So Rare

FOUNTAIN CREEK CHRONICLES

Rekindled

Revealed

Remembered

TIMBER RIDGE REFLECTIONS

From a Distance

Beyond This Moment

Within My Heart

WOMEN OF FAITH FICTION

The Inheritance

A BELLE MEADE PLANTATION NOVEL

To Whisper Her Name

A BELMONT MANSION NOVEL • 2

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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For my readers, who not only take these journeys with me,
but who add such joy and beauty to my own.



“It is only with the heart that one can see clearly,
for the most essential things are invisible to the eye.”

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Preface

*M*ost of the novel you're about to read is fictional, though there is plenty of real history and people woven throughout. For instance, there really is a Belmont Mansion in Nashville, built in 1853, that still stands today and that welcomes your visit. And Mrs. Adelia Acklen, a character in the novel, is the dynamic, born-before-her-time woman who lived there.

In addition to Adelia Acklen, many of the other characters in the novel were inspired by real people who lived during that time—people who lived and worked at Belmont. But the characters' personalities and actions as depicted in this story are of my own imagination and should be construed as such.

The first time I stepped across the threshold of Belmont Mansion and learned about Adelia and her extraordinary personality and life, I knew I wanted to write stories that included her, her magnificent Belmont estate, and this crucial time in our nation's history. I invite you to join me as we open the door to history once again and step into another time and place.

Thank you for entrusting your time to me. It's a weighty investment, one I treasure, and that I never take for granted.

Tamera

Prologue

DECEMBER 15, 1864

A CONFEDERATE FIELD HOSPITAL SOME DISTANCE FROM THE
LINE OF BATTLE

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Eleanor Braddock startled when the soldier grabbed her hand, his grip surprisingly strong, his palm slicked with blood, sweat, and war. With eyes clenched tight, he held on to her as though she were the last person on earth. Which for him . . . she was.

From habit, she searched the left pocket of the soldier's uniform for his name, but the material—bloodied gray and soaked clean through—had been ripped to shreds by a cannon blast, much like the rest of him. She was grateful he'd been unconscious moments earlier when the surgeon examined him. He'd been spared the brusque shake of the doctor's head.

“Nurse . . .”

His gaze sought hers, and against the distant barrage of rifle and cannon fire, Eleanor steeled herself for the question she knew was forthcoming. No matter how many times she was forced to answer, it never got any easier to tell a man he was about to die.

And neither did watching it happen.

“Yes?” she said softly, not bothering to correct his misassumption about her medical training, or lack thereof.

“Could you tell me—” He coughed, and his bearded chin shook

from the cold or pain, likely both. A gurgling sound bubbled up inside his throat. “Did we . . . take the hill?”

Surprised that he asked of the battle and not his life, and touched by the strained hope behind his query, a tender knot formed in Eleanor’s throat. “Yes,” she answered without hesitation, having not the least clue which army held the upper hand in the battle. All she knew was that countless men—fathers, sons, husbands . . . *brothers*—were being slaughtered a short distance away. And this man deserved to die with a semblance of peace, believing that his life had counted for something. “Yes . . . you did.” She tried to smile. “And General Lee will be so pleased.”

Traces of pride but mostly relief shone in the soldier’s eyes before they drifted shut. He fought for breath, each one exacting a price, and she prayed that his struggle would soon cease. But she’d seen men with similar wounds linger for hours, drifting in and out of agony.

He was no mere youth—into his thirties, at least—and his feet overhung the cot by several inches. Both boots were worn clean through at the toe. She’d detected the hint of a brogue in his voice, an accent from far away, something she’d always admired.

She studied him, wondering what his life had been like before the war, and how he’d come to be on a bleak battlefield in the middle of Tennessee. His cheekbones were especially prominent, and she wished she had some of the beef tea she’d made for the men last evening, as she did nearly every night. No matter that she watered it down to stretch as far as possible, the men always made quick work of it. “*We ain’t tasted nothin’ this good in months,*” they’d say, draining their cups.

She’d always enjoyed cooking, but seeing her patients eat, even that little bit, did her heart good in ways she couldn’t have imagined before serving injured and dying men.

She shifted her weight, and the soldier’s grip tightened.

He grimaced and clenched his jaw, moaning, as though determined not to cry out like the others.

Empty bottles of laudanum on a nearby table caught her eye. She wished she had something to give him, but the last of the pain medication, including the morphine, chloroform, and ether, had been administered that morning, prior to them learning that the expected shipment of medical supplies wouldn’t be arriving—thanks to the Federal Army.

She could make sense of the interception of ammunition and currency, or even provisions—but medical supplies? Even war should have certain rules.

Cannon fire thundered in the distance, and an icy wind knifed the canvased confines of the hospital tent. The moans and cries of the wounded and dying rent the air, and Eleanor shivered against the chill of it all. Though it was absurd, she was certain she could feel the earth groaning, straining beneath her feet, wondering, as she did, how much longer this insanity could continue. Surely, this was what hell was like. . . .

And yet, as she thought of the dark calamity of madness occurring just over the hill, she knew she'd only seen the outskirts of hell in these tents.

How had she lived for twenty-six years without realizing how precious and fragile life was? And how tenuous its peace. She'd never considered whether she'd squandered her life to that point. But when contrasting the experiences of her whole life with what she'd seen and done in recent months . . . *squandered* seemed a painfully appropriate term.

Her focus moved down the row of soldiers lining both sides of the tent. How many more would die before the two sides determined enough blood had been spilled?

When she'd first read the advertisement in the Murfreesboro newspaper soliciting "plain-looking women between the ages of 35 and 50" to volunteer in field hospitals and surgical tents, she'd wondered whether her age would prevent them from accepting her. But with the need for volunteers so great—and the first requirement met without a doubt—she'd quickly been accepted.

The only other point that had drawn a raised brow from her was the line "no specialized medical training or experience required." But it hadn't taken her long to understand why, and to realize that she'd grossly underestimated the task for which she'd volunteered.

She'd only known that after seeing her brother enlist along with most of her male relatives and friends, she couldn't sit at home and do nothing—especially with their aging father championing the Confederacy as he did.

She briefly closed her eyes, fatigue and worry joining forces. With stinging clarity, she imagined her younger brother lying somewhere on a battlefield, wounded, cold, and alone, the precious lifeblood pouring out of him. And a chill stole through her.

If anything happened to Teddy, she didn't know how she would bear it. Or how their father would hold up beneath the weight of such a loss. Though he possessed the physical strength of a man half his

age and at six foot four—only five inches taller than she—still stood ramrod straight, her father’s mind was slipping. Her mother’s passing, nearly a decade ago—God rest her soul—had been especially difficult for him. He’d endured a long period of grief, mourning her passing. But in the past few months Eleanor had noticed a marked change in his memory and in his ability to recall recent details.

A sudden gust of wind thrashed the tent, and for a second, Eleanor feared the force would uproot it at the stakes.

Above the distant rumble of battle, the stomp of horses’ hooves and the creak of wagon wheels announced the arrival of another ambulance.

The other two volunteers in the tent moved to assist with unloading the wounded men. Eleanor knew she needed to do the same—and would receive a reprimand from Dr. Rankin if he saw her lingering overlong with any one patient. But thinking of Teddy, of the possibility of him being somewhere like this—frightened, wounded, and alone—she couldn’t force herself to leave the soldier’s side.

Even if he were to let go of her hand—which he hadn’t.

“Most of what a person fears never comes to fruition, Eleanor.” Her father’s counsel returned from years past, and she knew if he were there, he would tell her not to be worried about imaginings. *“The mind can be a deceitful thing. You must be sensible, daughter, not given to the worrisome nature that so often befalls your gender. Focus on what you can see, not on what your imagination tells you is there.”*

She knew from experience he was right, but her imaginings were sometimes so powerful they were hard to resist. And knowing a tiny percentage of fears actually *did* come true fed the seed of worry. Surely this makeshift hospital ward bore proof of that.

“The doc . . .” came a gruff whisper.

She looked down to see the soldier watching her again.

“Would you be knowin’ wh—” He gritted his teeth, his already pale complexion growing more so. A moment passed before he spoke. “When will he . . . be comin’ by?”

Despising her helplessness, Eleanor forced a steadiness to her voice. The training she and the other women in her group had received had been brief but clear, especially in regard to the dying. *“Don’t ply a soldier with questions when he’s near the end. You’re there to be a solace. And above all, if he asks about his condition, always tell him the truth.”* Eleanor wholeheartedly agreed with that last principle—in theory.

But theory and practice were two very different things.

“Actually . . .” She tried to frame the truth gently. “The doctor already

has been by.” She squeezed his hand. “I’m so sorry, but . . . nothing can be done.”

Slowly the soldier’s gaze narrowed. Then with effort, and a hint of disbelief, he lifted his head and peered down at his battered body. Reality forced the air from his lungs, and Eleanor gently eased his head back down.

A single tear slipped from the corner of his eye, and his shoulders began to shake. Yet he didn’t make a sound.

She wanted to tell him it was all right if he cried out, that there was no shame in it. But something kept the words from forming, told her that whispering such a thing wouldn’t be a comfort to him. And she wanted to be of comfort.

If only there were something she could give him to ease his passing, something to help cut the—

A pitcher of water and a tin cup on the tray beside the empty medicine bottles caught her eye. And an idea formed.

Swiftly, before reason could dissuade her—or her conscience could offer argument—she removed her hand from his, poured some water into the cup, and tipped an empty bottle of laudanum into it as though mixing the two. She made certain the soldier could see her—hoping no one else did—and swirled the contents of the cup, then held it to his mouth.

“Here,” she whispered, summoning a cautious tone. “But only a little. It’s mighty powerful.”

His effort to gulp the contents tugged at her heart. Gasping, he worked to swallow every drop. Too quickly, though, and he coughed some back up. She wiped the residue from his mouth and beard. The cloth came away bloodied.

“Oh, thank you, lass. Thank you,” he whispered, over and over, as though she’d given him the elixir of life.

For the longest time, he stared overhead, his breathing labored, his body racked with shakes. Eleanor stood close beside him, waiting for a telling flicker in his eyes that would reveal he recognized what she’d done. Or had tried to do.

Then gradually . . . the sharp lines of pain in his features began to relax, and to her amazement and disbelief, the tension in his body eased. How right her father had been—the mind could be a deceitful thing.

The soldier took a breath, holding his chest as he did, and emotion glazed his eyes. “I wish . . . I’d done better,” he ground out. “I w-wish that—” His voice broke, and he reached again for her hand.

“Shhh . . .” Eleanor leaned close. “It’s going to be all right.”

“No . . .” The muscles in his neck corded tight. “I need to be sayin’ this, lass . . . while I still have me breath.”

Giving him the silence he needed, she brushed the hair back from his forehead in a manner that would have felt far too intimate months earlier. But war had a way of rewriting etiquette.

“I . . . I wish . . .” Tears traced his temples. His expression grew more intent, purposeful. “I wish I’d . . . done for you . . . like I said I would, Mary girl. Like I promised . . . ’fore I left.” His sigh held longing. “Every day . . . in my mind, I been—”

He choked on a sob and reached out as though trying to touch her face, but Eleanor knew she wasn’t the woman he was seeing anymore. She cradled his hand between hers, and his tears came afresh.

“What?” she gently coaxed, seeing the pain in his features and thinking that if he stated his regret aloud, it might be lessened.

He fumbled with the hem of his coat, and when she realized his intent, she helped him pull a small bundle from his pocket. Carefully, she unwrapped it.

An embroidered handkerchief, damp with blood. A rose pressed between its folds.

“I been carryin’ this with me, my sweet Mary,” he whispered. “Just like you asked.” His lips trembled. His blue eyes smiled. “I still can’t believe you’re mine, darlin’. That you said yes . . . to the likes of me.”

Eleanor blinked, and only then did she feel the moisture on her lashes. She’d never minded the sight of blood. She’d assisted in the surgical tent, where the large wooden table ran red for days on end, and she’d watched wagon after wagon lumber away, loaded with amputated limbs. But this . . .

Listening to final whispers, to the contents of a man’s heart poured out to a stranger . . . this she couldn’t do without crying. Whoever this woman—this *Mary girl*—was, she prayed the woman knew how well she was loved.

Or . . . had been loved.

Not doubting herself at all now, Eleanor leaned close so he would be sure to hear her. “I’m *proud* to be yours, and always have been,” she said, trying to imagine what it would be like to be so loved by a man. But she couldn’t.

She looked again at the handkerchief, thinking about how brief life truly was and about all the things she hadn’t yet done—she’d never been kissed, much less married or given birth to children. She’d never

traveled outside Tennessee or seen the ocean's tide roll in and out. Growing up, she'd never held a boy's hand, other than Teddy's, and she'd never lain awake all night beneath the stars to watch the sun's journey begin again. Countless other *never had's* flitted through her mind, and yet . . . how distant and unimportant they seemed now, in comparison to the world closing in around them.

"You're proud to be mine," he whispered, as if relishing the thought even while struggling to accept it. "It's too late, I know, Mary girl, but . . ." Deep furrows knit his brow. "If I could, I'd . . ." He grimaced and sucked in a breath.

Her chest aching with the weight of this man's regret, Eleanor pressed the handkerchief into his palm. "What?" she whispered, squeezing his hand, feeling him slipping away. "What would you do?"

He peered into her eyes. "Oh, my precious Mary . . . I'd do like I promised you and—"

A blast of winter shook the canvas walls of the tent. Only, Eleanor felt the ground shake this time too, and she realized it wasn't the wind.

"Miss Braddock!"

She turned to see Dr. Rankin racing toward her, chaos in the tent behind him.

"Quickly!" he shouted. "Get to the ambulances! Federal troops have taken the hill!"

A high-pitched whistle pierced the air overhead, and in the brief second it took her to place the sound . . . the world exploded. Dr. Rankin grabbed her shoulder to steady her. Smoke filled the tent. The acrid burn of gunpowder thickened the air.

"Go, Miss Braddock! All volunteers to the ambulances. Now!"

"But . . . we can't leave the men!"

"We're moving those we can." He turned. "But if we don't leave soon, we'll be dead alongside them!"

Only then did she realize . . . the soldier had let go of her hand.

She looked back at him, saw his slack jaw, the dissonant peace in his expression. . . .

Hearing the volley of gunfire, she hastily touched his cheek, hoping his regret over whatever it was he wished he'd done in this life would somehow be lessened in the next. She turned to go—

And remembered.

Frantic, she checked the soldier's hand for the handkerchief. A volley of gunfire made her flinch. His hand was empty. Wanting to keep the handkerchief made no sense, but knowing how much it had meant

to him, it seemed wrong to simply leave it behind to be trampled and forgotten.

Finally, she spotted the bloodstained cloth on the floor and grabbed it. But the rose was gone. Never partial to flowers, she dismissed it at first, but quickly thought again of the soldier having carried his Mary girl's rose into battle.

Heart racing, and hearing the blast of cannon fire explode outside, she knelt in the dirt, feeling foolish as she searched, telling herself it was useless. She needed to be—

There. Her palm closed around the delicate pressed flower, the petals coming loose in her grip. She positioned the flower carefully into the handkerchief and then into her pocket. As she turned to leave, she saw the remaining wounded in the tent.

So many . . .

She spotted a soldier struggling to stand—a man Dr. Rankin had scheduled for surgery—and with strength she didn't know she had, she pulled him to his feet, draped his arm around her shoulders, and half dragged, half carried him to the ambulance. Someone from behind picked her up and shoved her into the wagon beside him just as a second shrill scream sounded overhead.

Eleanor covered her head and braced for the impact, thinking of Teddy and praying he wasn't dead, and promising herself that if she got through this alive—if this wretched war ever ended—she would get as far away from death and dying as she could, and she would do a better job at living than she'd done before. She would make her life count for something.

And she would find that soldier's widow, his Mary girl, whoever she was, and tell her what he'd said. And ask her what he'd meant.



SEPTEMBER 2, 1868
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Eleanor knew in her heart that what she was doing was right—so why was her heart fighting her on it *now*, when the day had finally arrived.

Seated across from her in the carriage, her father stared out the window, solemn, hands clasped in his lap, so different from moments earlier when they'd first entered the city of Nashville. He'd seemed almost childlike in his enthusiasm as the carriage carried them through the heart of town.

She'd asked the driver to stop by the post office first. It wouldn't take her but a moment inside. She preferred to have the signed contract in hand for her *meeting* later that afternoon, and the building owner with whom she'd corresponded in recent weeks had indicated he would leave it for her there.

"I'm going there to rest," her father said softly, his tone bordering more on question than certainty.

Knowing what he meant, Eleanor nodded. "Yes . . . Papa, that's right. And it's only for a short time." She coerced a smile to reinforce the statement, praying the doctor's expectations were correct.

Exactly when her role as daughter had shifted to that of caretaker, she couldn't say. But as she looked across the carriage at the strapping giant of a man—whom she favored in more ways than was likely best for a daughter to do—a place deep inside her yearned to again be that little girl who, when she looked into her father's warm brown eyes, knew that everything in the world would be right. And safe. And would make sense.

But that little girl was gone. And so was her father.

The carriage slowed, and Eleanor spotted the post office ahead. “Papa, I need to run a quick errand. But I won’t be long.”

He glanced out the window. “Perhaps I should come with you. I could help—”

“That’s not necessary,” she said a little too quickly, and regretted it. She reached for his book. “Why not stay here and continue reading where we left off. Then we’ll discuss the passage once we’re on our way again.”

Not looking convinced, he studied the book in his hands, then finally nodded. “You *will* come back . . . won’t you?”

“Of course I’ll come back, Papa.” She squeezed his hand in affirmation, but the guilt already nipping her heels took a firm bite.

The carriage driver opened the door, and Eleanor hurried into the post office. She paused inside and looked back to see her father reading, his lips moving as he did. She hadn’t wanted to risk him coming with her, not when considering the spells that frequently overcame him these days. His temperament was so unpredictable.

Patronage was heavier than she’d imagined, and the queue reached almost to the door. She glanced at the chatelaine watch affixed to her bodice. She had a few moments to spare before her father’s scheduled appointment, and she *needed* that contract in hand.

The line moved more slowly than she would have liked, and after a couple of moments, she glanced out the front window to the carriage and stilled, not seeing her father anymore.

She craned her neck to one side. Perhaps he’d changed seats. He’d insisted on that twice already on their ride from Murfreesboro that morning, saying it was bad luck to ride in one direction for an entire trip. Then she saw the door.

Ajar.

She raced back outside to find the driver still atop the carriage but the carriage—empty. And her father nowhere in sight.

“Armstead!” she called up, searching the street. “My father. He’s gone.”

The driver appeared at her side, bewildered. “I’m sorry, Miss Braddock. Last thing I knew he was in here.”

“You go that way.” She pointed. “And if you find him first, please . . . try not to upset him. We don’t want to cause a scene.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Eleanor started in the opposite direction, peering inside stores and

businesses as she went, trying not to think about her father's recent antics or what might happen if someone attempted to confront him and he became upset.

The high-pitched laughter drew her attention first. Then she saw him. Across the street. Peering in the window of a dry-goods store.

Dodging a freight wagon and another carriage, she managed to reach the other side, but not before her father had entered the store and taken a spool of ribbon from the shelf, along with a pair of scissors.

He spotted her. "Eleanor! Isn't it pretty? I thought you would enjoy this. You like wearing ribbons in your hair?"

She managed to get the scissors from him, but he stuffed the spool into his pocket.

"Papa, it's lovely but . . . I don't wear ribbons anymore, remember?" Eleanor retrieved the spool and returned it to the shelf. Then she glimpsed a man, presumably the proprietor, headed straight for them. Consternation lined the man's face.

He glared at her father, then her. "May I help you?"

Embarrassed, Eleanor tried not to show it. "We were just looking, sir. And now—" She took her father by the arm. "If you'll excuse us, please."

Feeling the proprietor's attention on her back, Eleanor hurried outside, grateful to see Armstead walking toward them. With his assistance, she managed to get her father back to the carriage without further incident.

"I'll watch him this time, Miss Braddock," the driver insisted. "You go on inside, ma'am, if you want."

Considering what awaited her that afternoon, Eleanor felt she had little choice.



In a hurry, Marcus Geoffrey exhaled, questioning yet again his desire to experience the life of the common man. The queue inside the post office nearly reached the door, and he estimated at least a ten-minute wait. It seemed patience was a virtue he was destined to learn.

The door to the post office opened behind him, and an older woman entered, slightly stooped and tottering. At the same time, the wind gusted and blew the door back. The woman reached for it . . . and stumbled. But Marcus caught her and stopped the door before it slammed back against the wall.

“Oh, thank you, sir.” She covered his hand on her arm, regaining her balance. “I’m not as spry as I used to be.”

“Who among us is, madam?”

She gave him an appreciative look, and Marcus—thinking of his own dear mother, gone long before her time—motioned for the woman to move ahead of him in line. He withdrew a pad of paper and pen from his suit-coat pocket and used the opportunity to sketch an idea for the warehouse his crew was renovating. It had come to him earlier that morning and he hadn’t yet had time to—

“Yes, that’s correct. The gentleman said he would leave it here for me,” a female stated from somewhere in front of him. “Would you mind checking again, please?”

Marcus slowly raised his head, curious about the creature to whom the beguiling voice belonged.

“Yes, sir,” she continued. “At least that was my understanding.”

Marcus looked toward the counter and spotted the woman—or rather, the explosion of *pink* with a woman swathed somewhere beneath—speaking with the mail clerk. Her voice bore the accent customary to the people of Nashville but had a satisfying, almost sultry, quality to it. Like the touch of a breeze on the back of one’s neck on a hot summer day. But the woman’s ensemble . . .

Her jacket and skirt, well tailored, stood out in marked contrast to the hues of black, gray, and dark blues worn by most of the other patrons.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but there’s nothing for you here by that description. Nor do we have record of having sent anything like that to Belmont.”

She sighed, shoulders sagging.

Even viewing her only from behind and without benefit of an introduction, Marcus knew who she was. Personal business took him to her aunt’s estate nearly every day, and he’d overheard Mrs. Adelia Acklen Cheatham speaking of the woman’s arrival, expressing an eagerness for her to make everyone’s acquaintance at Belmont.

But having met more than his fair share of wealthy, well-bred, overly eager, husband-seeking women in his life—despite this one being taller than most and the niece of the richest woman in America—he had no intention of pursuing her acquaintance, nor encouraging it in any way.

If she attempted to gain his attention, he would be kind, he decided, even affable—considering Adelia Acklen Cheatham was his benefactress, of sorts. But beyond that, he would firmly, yet gently, rebuff any flirtations on the young woman’s part.

She turned then and headed straight for him.

He summoned an air of practiced nonchalance, the words replaying in his mind . . . *Firmly, but gently.*

The woman didn't so much as *blink* in his direction as she passed.

Feeling aptly put in his place—and not overly fond of the feeling, Marcus watched her exit the post office. He wasn't accustomed to being ignored. Her attention was clearly focused elsewhere. He studied her as she walked toward a waiting carriage, the driver already standing by the door.

Tall and blond, she bore not the slightest resemblance to her aunt, who was a petite brunette. Even at a mature age, Adelia Cheatham was still a striking dark-haired beauty. This woman, on the other hand, while not *unattractive*, possessed less remarkable features, less delicate, to be sure. Hers held more strength. One might even describe her as handsome. And he suspected she was older than he'd first imagined—

“Sir?”

Marcus turned.

The elderly woman he'd assisted earlier was several feet ahead of him in the queue. She smiled and motioned him forward.

Feeling a little foolish, Marcus moved ahead, then chanced another look back at the window in time to see the woman climb into the waiting carriage.

It had been a long time since he'd noticed a woman who—when in such close proximity—hadn't reciprocated his *noticing*. Of course, he hadn't endeavored to gain her attention. If he had been trying, she would have noticed, he assured himself.

It meant nothing, really. After all, he'd had enough of those kind of women. And the woman he had now, he didn't want. But . . . he blew out a breath. Nothing he did would change that.

Minutes later he reached the counter.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Geoffrey.” The mail clerk greeted him, already rising from his stool. “We have something for you, sir. It arrived this morning.”

Satisfied, Marcus waited. But when he saw an envelope instead of a box or crate, his satisfaction waned. “Nothing else?” he asked.

The clerk shook his head. “That's it. I'm sorry, sir.”

Marcus managed a polite response and stepped to the side, fingering the envelope. The handstamp announced the origin of the envelope even before he read the return address. He tore open the flap and found

another envelope inside. When he saw the royal wax-embossed seal, he quickly concealed it, even as he felt an unseen noose tightening about his neck.

Never had Uncle Franz written to him, and Marcus knew only too well who had put him up to it. He started to tuck the letter away to read later but thought of his father's tenuous health, and reconsidered. Moving to a quieter section of the busy post office, he opened the letter.

His gaze fell upon the salutation and first lines of the missive, and he swiftly realized his father's health was not the issue. The letter was about something else.

To the Archduke Gerhard Marcus Gottfried von Habsburg . . .

His uncle's use of his formal name and title didn't bode well for the letter's purpose, and Marcus's gratitude for the ocean separating him from what he'd left behind—at least for a little while longer—grew one hundredfold.

His gaze edged downward, past the formal opening.

Come next June, Gerhard, the reprieve granted to you shall have expired. At that time, you shall return home according to our agreement, in order to fulfill your duties to crown and country. Those born to privilege must bear its responsibilities with integrity and honor, despite one's personal feelings and regardless of their . . .

Marcus folded the letter and slipped it back into the envelope, wishing he could dismiss a decree from his uncle—the emperor of Austria—so easily in person. He knew his uncle's speech by heart. It was one he'd heard countless times as a boy when he was third in line to the Austrian throne, behind his father and older brother.

But he'd heard it even more often in the weeks prior to leaving for America when the Austrian newspapers had reported he'd become second in line "through extenuating circumstances."

He'd never sought the throne, nor ever considered that it might someday come to him. He still didn't believe it would happen. Not with his uncle healthy and strong, and still trying for that first son. Marcus hoped—even prayed, on occasion—that the Almighty would make fruitful that royal endeavor.

He could scarcely believe close to a year had passed since he'd left his homeland. He was still somewhat surprised his uncle and father

had agreed to his coming to America. But after Rutger's death . . . everything had changed.

He had changed.

Both his uncle and father agreed that time away would be good for him, and good for the House of Habsburg, considering the rumors that were circulating around Rutger's death. "Best you not be seen in public for a while, Gerhard," Uncle Franz had counseled. "Let the scandal calm to a simmer, then slowly dissipate to nothing, as these situations almost always do—given time and something else on which the public can chew. And by all means, if you must sow any last wild oats, do it discreetly. The last thing we need is an *American* scandal on top of this one."

His father's last letter had confirmed that Uncle Franz's prediction had held true. The rumors were subsiding. People were forgetting what had happened.

But forgetting was something Marcus could never do.

If there had been any significant political unrest in the country, his uncle and father would never have allowed him to step foot outside Europe. But with the volatile years of war behind them, and the previous year's compromise of dual monarchy with Hungary accepted, the empire was at peace. The ship was sailing smoothly, as his uncle had stated upon his departure.

Still—Marcus looked at the envelope—apparently Uncle Franz felt the need to remind him of his obligation. As if he could ever forget. He loved his country, and his family, rife with greed and ambition though its members were. It wasn't for lack of affection or honor that he eschewed the crown.

He simply didn't desire to ever rule his country. He'd seen that side of life. Now he wanted to see another.

Out on the street, Marcus breathed in the fresh air, catching a hint of fall on the breeze. He searched the thoroughfare for the carriage—and Mrs. Cheatham's niece—reliving her *snub* and feeling a tug of humor. Perhaps he *was* losing his touch with women.

Or more likely, Adelia's niece bore more resemblance to her aunt than first met the eye. He smiled. Adelia Cheatham was her own woman in every way. He'd seen her when in town before. She held her head high, looking neither to the right nor the left. She seemed impervious to social pressure.

After an appointment, he was headed to Belmont to check on his

plants in the conservatory. Perhaps while there, he would have opportunity to make the acquaintance of Adelia's niece. Purely for social reasons, of course. International relations, some might say.

He made a quick stop by his room at the boardinghouse and stowed the letter from his uncle in the cedar trunk at the foot of the bed. As he closed the lid, his hand lingered on the artfully carved woodwork. He hadn't brought much in the way of furniture when he left Austria, understandably. But leaving the trunk behind hadn't been an option.

His maternal grandfather—a humble, unassuming man—had possessed remarkable skill with a blade, a gift Marcus hadn't inherited. He ran a hand along the edges of the trunk, easily distinguishing the artistic work from the lesser-crafted attempts of a nine-year-old boy, treasuring the memory of the man who had prized spending time with his grandson above perfection.

Marcus rose, glad again that he'd brought the trunk with him. It fit well in this setting.

He'd grown accustomed to, even appreciative of, the sparse surroundings of his current living quarters, which were a far cry from the palace and his family's private residence. He could have leased or even purchased a house upon his arrival in Nashville. But that would have gone contrary to the decision he'd made before coming to this country. . . .

He intended to experience how ordinary people lived, and was learning a lot about himself in the process—not all of which he liked.

His uncle had warned him against causing a scandal in this country, but that was the last thing his uncle needed to worry about. Marcus was done with that part of his life. No more pursuing women and no more liquor—at least not in excess. No more wasting his life, as he'd come to realize he'd been doing.

Cordoning off that vein of thought, he strode in the direction of the city's courthouse, mindful of a distant pounding at the back of his head. Too much work perhaps. He was hopeful his crew renovating the textile warehouse across town would maintain their progress. They were a week ahead of schedule, and he wanted to maintain that lead.

As he walked, he searched the endless wash of cloudless blue overhead, then let his gaze trail the lush rolling hills surrounding this city, even while—in his mind's eye—he saw the snowcapped Alps of home.

Looking back over his life, he realized how much time had slipped past him, and how much of his life had been lived by another's dictate. His had been a privileged upbringing, no question, with ample

opportunities to study and learn. But also with obligations. Always, always obligations.

America's South was far more devastated from the war and its aftermath than he'd imagined, but his skills were being utilized. It was so different and *freeing* that, in rare moments, he could almost forget the life he'd left behind. He'd wanted to come to America since he was a boy, since first learning about the "thirteen brave little colonies" from his tutor. But it was only when a trusted mentor had introduced him to Luther Burbank's publications and then Marcus had met the botanist in person—and later visited his Boston nursery full of thousands of plants—that his dream had been set in motion.

However short-lived that dream might prove to be.

*Y*ou know, Eleanor—”

Eleanor watched her father as he leaned forward in the carriage, her frustration with him having faded. But not her frustration over having no contract. She hoped the lack of follow-through on the part of the man who owned the building didn't bode ill for their agreement.

“I think this is a good decision,” her father continued. “As you said, it will give me an opportunity to rest and”—a faint smile hinted beneath his silvered-white beard she'd trimmed that morning—“it will allow you the opportunities a young woman such as yourself . . .”

Eleanor was tempted to laugh. “*A young woman such as yourself . . .*”

She was twenty-nine and could count on one hand the number of months until her thirtieth birthday. One could hardly describe her as young anymore. Nor did she feel as such.

Her father's comment reminded her of what Mrs. Hodges, the seamstress, had the gall to say to her only days earlier. Eleanor fingered the sleeve of her new jacket, then ran a hand over her skirt, still a little embarrassed by it, and more than a little perturbed at the outcome of her exchange with the woman—and at Mrs. Hodges's meddling.

“That was a delicious dinner you prepared for us earlier this week,” her father continued. “Though I still don't like the idea of your being forced to cook.” He grimaced. “Bernice shouldn't have left us for that position with another family. I'm more than a little disappointed in her. The least she could have done is to have given us more notice.”

Eleanor regretted her father's resentment toward their former housekeeper and cook, especially since she herself was responsible for Bernice's departure. But to tell him the real reason Bernice had left their employ would wound him too deeply.

So she reached for a brightness she didn't feel and redirected the conversation, a skill she'd finely honed in recent months. "Don't feel badly about me cooking, Father. As I've told you . . . I enjoy it. And besides, you're eating better these days. Your appetite has improved."

His brows shot up. "How could it not with that . . . what do you call it? That fancy egg dish you prepared?"

"A savory custard. I think I finally came upon the right combination of ingredients this time."

"I heartily agree. I hope you kept close account of what you added. I'd like to have that again."

"I did." She kept close account of all her recipes, both those passed down from her precious mother and those she'd devised on her own—and with good reason, considering their present circumstances.

Most of her recipes leaned toward the savory variety, but she shared an affinity for the sweets too.

As they'd traveled on through Nashville, she'd seen a bakery claiming to have the *Best doughnuts in town*. She looked forward to seeing if the message on the sign held true, and also to scouting out her potential "competition."

But that little bakery would only be competition if her plans actually came to pass.

Then it registered with her. . . . How coherent her father sounded, how much like his old self. She looked over at him, questioning yet again if she was doing the right thing. Or if, perhaps, she was acting prematurely.

Usually her father couldn't remember what he'd eaten five minutes ago, much less days earlier. Yet he recalled events from his childhood or early marriage with stunning clarity.

"My only regret"—his expression grew thoughtful—"is that Teddy wasn't there to enjoy the meal with us."

Eleanor felt a twinge at the mention of her brother's name, and at the wistfulness in her father's features.

"He'll enjoy that savory custard, Eleanor. I hope you saved him some." Eyebrows raised, his expression turned conspiratorial. "And those little muffins with the jam. He always likes the sweets, you know."

It was all Eleanor could do to maintain his gaze as down deep another chunk of her heart broke. "Yes," she whispered. "I know."

"Have I shared his latest letter with you?" Her father patted the left breast pocket of his coat, then the other. "He's doing so well, Eleanor. Which I always knew he would."

Feeling a sickening affirmation of the choice she'd made, she looked out the window as he searched for the letter that wasn't there.

Though still a good distance away, the expansive four-story brick building came into view, and the carriage driver slowed the horses' pace to negotiate the turn onto the long narrow drive. It shamed her to admit it, but Eleanor was relieved no other carriages were in sight.

When she'd first inquired months ago, the institution had been full, with a waiting list. And the only reason they had an opening now, she knew, was due to her aunt's influence, or more specifically, her aunt's husband. Recently retired, he had been director of the institution for years.

Eleanor had been assured of confidentiality, and she was certain they took great care, but if anyone discovered that her father—Garrison Theodore Braddock, once one of the most revered attorneys in the state of Tennessee—was *here*, what thin veneer of honor and respect that still clung to the Braddock family name would be stripped away in a blink.

She motioned out the opposite window, not wanting her father to see the sign marking the entrance of the institution. He only knew he was “going to a nice place to get much needed rest,” as the doctor had instructed her to say.

“Look there, Papa.” She pointed out the window overlooking a field. “You’ve always loved cardinals.”

The brilliant red bird with its distinctive black markings sat perched on a branch as though heaven itself had willed the diversion. If only she could believe that was true. But heaven and its Maker had never felt so distant. Nor so silent.

The finely appointed carriage they traveled in—far nicer than anything her family could ever have afforded—jostled over the dirt-packed drive, and Eleanor's grip tightened on her reticule as the nerves in her stomach twisted another half turn.

In recent days, she'd managed to sell their family home, the house she'd lived in all her life and where her father had been raised, along with most of the furniture, keeping only a few pieces that would be delivered within the week either here, for her father, or to her “new home”—if she could call it that. She didn't plan to be there long.

Their home's condition had declined over the years, and the meager funds from its sale had gone toward paying off a loan her father had secured years earlier, and for which he'd used the home as collateral. The rest had mostly gone toward her father's treatment. The institution

demanded six months' payment in advance, with promise of reimbursement should the patient require less time. She trusted her father would fall into that category, but in any case, she was determined to spend what little money remained as frugally as possible.

Bernice, their cook and housekeeper for twelve years, had been most understanding about the quiet dismissal from service—they simply hadn't been able to pay her any longer. Not since the law firm—a practice her father had built and managed for over twenty-five years—had been forced to close its doors after the war.

She couldn't bring herself to admit the financial devastation to her father. If he knew how far they'd fallen, it would surely push him over the edge.

"Perhaps you could pen a response to Teddy this evening, Eleanor." Her father nodded as though considering the prospect an excellent one. "We could compose it together, following dinner. Likely he's wondering why we haven't written. But . . ." He turned to the satchel on the seat beside him. "Where *is* that letter?" He rummaged through the contents, growing increasingly earnest. "It must be in here somewhere."

Sensing his frustration mount, Eleanor knew better than to disagree with him. Almost four years had passed since Teddy had died in the war, and still there were moments when the ache of loss felt as though they'd gotten the news only yesterday. And that was especially true whenever her father spoke of him in the present tense.

Those occasions, growing more frequent, laid siege to the hope that indeed the doctors were correct about his mental faculties returning.

She'd ceased trying to correct her father's slips in memory some time ago. He became emotional, even agitated when she did. On several occasions his behavior had bordered on violent, and she'd actually begun to fear he might do her harm, however unintentionally. Though she was tall and strong—or *stout*, as her grandmother had once described her as a girl, patting her leg firmly—she was no match for him.

Suddenly, he stilled. He looked over at her.

His eyes narrowed as though he were reading her thoughts, and Eleanor braced herself for what was coming.

"Theodore," he whispered. "Oh, my dear son . . ." His eyes grew moist. His chin shook. "Why, Eleanor? Why did they kill my boy? They—" His voice broke. "They shouldn't have killed my only boy."

Eleanor gave a slow nod, her breath quickening. "I know, Papa. I know . . ." With each tear that disappeared into her father's beard, she sensed his control—and *him*—slipping away again.

This is for his own good, she repeated to herself over and over. *And at the doctor's recommendation*. Yet she couldn't deny the guilt pressing at her from all sides.

The carriage slowed.

She checked the chatelaine watch hooked to her bodice. One o'clock. Precisely when she'd told the director to expect them.

She looked out the window and saw a woman and two men descending the steps of the building ahead. From their manner of clothing—the woman in a dark dress and starched white apron, the men in dark slacks and white vests—she assumed they were employees of the institution.

Her father looked out the window too, then back at her. Slowly, his expression changed from pained to fearful. "Where are we? What is this place?"

She reached out to calm him, but already suspicion darkened his gaze.

"Father, it's going to be all right. Remember what the doctor said about going someplace where you could get some rest. This is—"

"No . . ." He pulled back, shaking his head. "I don't want to be here. I want to go home."

"Papa," she said softly, using a firm but gentle tone. "Listen to me."

His expression hardened. "You *must* take me home, Eleanor!"

"We spoke about this earlier," she continued. "And you said you thought it was a good—"

"Driver!" He pounded on the side of the carriage. "I insist you return us home. This moment!"

He reached for the door handle, the carriage still moving. But Eleanor beat him to it. His hand tightened over hers in a painful grip.

"Take . . . me . . . home," he said low, drawing himself up as he stared down.

His grip excruciating, Eleanor felt her eyes begin to water, as much from grief as from the physical pain.

The carriage stopped, and the two men approached. Though quite short, they were strong, broad shouldered. Their presence communicated anything but welcome. Or comfort.

They had been joined by Dr. Crawford, the director with whom she'd interviewed weeks earlier when she'd toured the facility—what portions of it a family member was permitted to visit.

She looked at them and shook her head, trying to keep them at bay, the pain in her hand nearly unbearable. If only they would give her a few moments, she could calm her father down. She didn't want their first impression of him to be like this.

“Papa . . . the people here are going to help you.” She tried to pull her hand from beneath his on the door latch but couldn’t. “*Please* let go. You’re hurting me!”

“You don’t care about me, Eleanor.” Accusation weighted each word, his face flush with anger. “If you did, you wouldn’t be doing this.”

With one last torturous squeeze, he released her hand, flung open the door, and bolted from the carriage.

Powerless to intervene, Eleanor watched as her father—though a foot taller than the men—proved no match for their combined strength. As they forced his arms behind his back and wrestled him into submission, her father’s angry screams, then his cries, tore at her heart. And her conscience.

Armstead climbed down from his perch atop the carriage and stood wide-eyed by the door, obviously uncertain what to do next.

Her hand still throbbing, Eleanor climbed out of the carriage, only to be met by Dr. Crawford.

“My apologies, Miss Braddock.” He lifted a hand in warning. “Under the circumstances, you won’t be able to accompany your father inside today.”

“But . . .” Eleanor glanced beyond him to see the men leading—almost dragging—her father up the front steps to the imposing double doors. Each step of the way, he fought them, calling out her name. She forced herself to look away and addressed the doctor. “You said I would be welcome anytime, Dr. Crawford.”

“And you will be,” he assured, glancing at a young woman standing behind him. “But your presence today”—he shook his head—“would only increase your father’s agitation. We’ll administer a mild sedative straightaway and—”

“A sedative?”

He nodded. “For his anxiousness.”

“Is that necessary? He usually calms down within a few moments.”

Dr. Crawford gave her a look, and she remembered the details she’d disclosed during her previous visit. She glanced away and saw Armstead had moved to check on the horses. “Sometimes it *does* take an hour,” she admitted softly. “Or more.”

“Miss Braddock . . .” Dr. Crawford’s voice held compassion. “It’s noble, what you’ve done . . . taking care of your father as you have. And yes,” he added quickly, “there are times when he seems almost normal, I know. But as you said yourself, those times are becoming less and less frequent.

“As I stated during our initial meeting, it is imperative that we immerse your father in a carefully controlled environment, one that minimizes confrontation and friction. From what you’ve told me and . . . frankly, from what I just observed, I believe it would be best for you both if you allow us to proceed as I’ve recommended.”

Eleanor looked from him to the imposing double doors, then back again, not at all inclined to agree, not really knowing what was best.

“If we are to help your father,” he continued, “*if* he is capable of being helped”—his pause felt like it went on forever—“then now is the time, Miss Braddock, before his memory loss advances further. And . . . it would be best if you would give us a few days before returning. I’ll send word as soon as he’s ready to see you.”

Everything within her fought the idea of leaving her father alone, and in such a frantic state, much less for days before she returned. But try as she might, she couldn’t think of a single argument to refute the doctor’s prescription. Her father blamed her for bringing him here and would be upset with her for who knew how long.

Following the incident where he’d lit an oil lamp, then proceeded to set the still-lit match atop a newspaper, she’d confiscated every matchstick in the house. And he hadn’t spoken to her for a week. And that had only been over matchsticks.

Finally she gave a small nod.

“Very good,” Dr. Crawford said, a touch of relief in his voice. “I assure you, Miss Braddock, this is the best course.”

Eleanor glanced back at the building. She’d thought it so stately and regal upon first view. Now it seemed sterile and lonely, almost foreboding. Not so much a place of healing as one of . . . confinement.

“Before you go, Miss Braddock . . .” The doctor gestured to the woman behind him. “Please allow me to present you to the nurse who will be caring for your father while he’s with us.” The nurse stepped forward, and Dr. Crawford continued the introductions. “Miss Smith is newly arrived to our fair city but comes with sterling credentials.”

The young woman’s demeanor could best be described as curious. But her eyes, blue as a robin’s egg, seemed kind and open. “It’s indeed a *great* honor to make your acquaintance, Miss Braddock.” Miss Smith

offered a poised and proper curtsy, her crisp British accent suiting her perfectly.

Eleanor lifted a brow, grateful for the generous greeting but more than a little surprised by it. “That’s very kind of you, Miss Smith. But the pleasure is mine.” She returned the curtsy. “Let me retrieve my father’s satchel. It’s on the seat inside the—”

“Oh no, ma’am!” Miss Smith practically lunged for the carriage door. “I’ll happily retrieve it for you.” She did just that and climbed back down, giving the carriage an overlong awe-filled look.

Only then did it occur to Eleanor. . . . Did the woman think *she* owned a carriage so fine? That she was so wealthy, so high and mighty? The thought was laughable, but Eleanor didn’t laugh. She gestured to the book in the side pocket of the satchel. “I marked where we left off reading in each of my father’s books. I read to him every night before he goes to bed. And sometimes during the afternoon. It calms him.”

“Then I shall do the very same, Miss Braddock.” With a parting curtsy, Miss Smith turned and disappeared inside the building.

Eleanor thought of the one book she hadn’t included in her father’s satchel. It was her book, but one they both loved and read from frequently. She would often quiz him about its contents, hoping the ritual would help sharpen his mind. She didn’t think he would miss the little volume but knew she would have if she’d left it with him.

She accepted Dr. Crawford’s assistance into the carriage, fighting the recurring sense of guilt.

“Miss Braddock . . .”

She looked back, surprised to find him smiling, something she couldn’t recall having seen him do before. The gesture erased years from his face. He seemed reluctant to release her hand.

“Once again, ma’am, please allow me to thank you for your trust. I assure you that I, along with my colleagues, will do everything we can for your father. So please”—he gave her hand a gentle squeeze—“try not to worry.”

With a doctorly, almost fatherly, nod, he relinquished his hold.

“Thank you, Doctor. While I can’t promise I won’t worry about my father, I can tell you that I trust your judgment. And I’ll do my best to think positively about the outcome of my father’s treatment.”

“Well spoken, Miss Braddock. Honest and straightforward too.” Dr. Crawford nodded and took a step back. “Much like your esteemed aunt, I dare say.”

Eleanor felt a twinge of annoyance at his parting comment, but the

hint of amusement in his eyes told her he'd intended it as a compliment. She managed a smile and sat back as Armstead climbed atop the carriage and gave the horses a command, but she couldn't help reflecting on her years at the Nashville Female Academy and how that same comparison by professors had plagued her there. "*Your aunt also earned exemplary marks in arithmetic, Miss Braddock, as well as French and German, as have you. Your skills in recitation aren't quite on par with hers, but there's time. She was, however, exceptionally gifted.*"

As Armstead maneuvered the carriage about the turnaround, Eleanor sighed and closed her eyes, pushing that memory away, and choosing instead to concentrate on gathering her scattered wits and mentally preparing for the next hurdle—her *esteemed* aunt.

She hadn't seen Adelia Acklen—Cheatham now, she reminded herself, her aunt having remarried the previous year—since the fall of 1860. Before the war and all it had brought, and taken. Before Joseph, Aunt Adelia's second husband and Papa's closest cousin, had died.

Eleanor glanced down, hoping again that what she was wearing—her finest ensemble, albeit in her *least* favorite color, pink—would be nice enough. She hadn't purchased anything but day dresses since the war. She hadn't needed to, until now.

Frowning at the gaudy brightness of the material, she recalled her exchange with the seamstress back home. . . .

"A woman such as yourself, Miss Braddock, needs to wear more color. It helps"—the older woman had fluttered her hands—"enhance one's features. And dear, if I might say . . . you could do with a little enhancing."

Mrs. Hodges . . . always honest. But that was all right. Eleanor was too. "While that may be, Mrs. Hodges, I've never been fond of pink. I much prefer sienna, or perhaps a rich brown. Those colors are far more practical. And suitable, considering so many of our friends and family are still in mourning clothes."

"Yes, yes . . ." Mrs. Hodges heaved a sigh, her lips pinching. "We all lost someone in the war. Or several someones," she said softly, looking away. "I've sewn enough black dresses to last me a lifetime, Miss Braddock. But it's been *three years*, and part of moving on with our lives, and in our hearts"—she inhaled deeply—"lies in choosing how we dress. And as I've always said, the plainer-looking the woman, the more color she should—"

Eleanor held up a hand. "Sienna, *please*, Mrs. Hodges. Or a rich brown."

Mrs. Hodges, a longtime family friend, simply stared, tight-lipped, then whispered something beneath her breath. Eleanor paid no mind at the time, but when she'd returned to the dressmaker's days ago for the fitting of the skirt and jacket, she wished she had.

"I didn't have enough of the sienna or brown, Miss Braddock. So I'm only charging you half the quoted price. And see now," Mrs. Hodges had said, once Eleanor stepped from behind the dressing curtain, "doesn't that look *pretty*! And it makes you look years younger, my dear. Just as I knew it would! Surely you'll attract *some* man's attention."

The rumble of the carriage jostled Eleanor back to the moment, and she glanced again at her skirt and jacket. Feeling like strawberry icing splashed atop a cake, she knew she had a better chance of the carriage sprouting wings and *flying* the five miles back to town than she did of attracting a man's interest.

But she had to admit . . . though she was still irritated over Mrs. Hodges's intrusion, the discounted price had helped to compensate, given her precarious finances.

But what bothered her even more, at the moment, was that she was worrying over such a thing as clothing. How frivolous so many of the niceties had seemed in the years following the war.

And yet . . .

She needed her aunt's assistance and, therefore, her approval—which, if past experience still held true, wouldn't be easily garnered. How a person dressed mattered greatly to her aunt, so it mattered greatly to her too. *Today*.

Her jitters getting the best of her, Eleanor shifted on the seat as Armstead urged the horses to a faster clip down the drive. Her thoughts turned to the business proposal she'd devised that would surely win Aunt Adelia over. The plan had *nothing* to do with the war, or death and dying. It would enable her and her father to live independently again, once he was well.

Thinking about the agreement she'd made with the building owner, she hoped her strong convictions hadn't prompted her to make a costly misstep she would regret.

Eleanor leaned her head back on the cushioned velvet seat. So much had happened since she'd last seen her aunt. She felt like a different person on the inside. Yet outwardly . . .

She was still much the same. Plain and tall. No, *taller*.

And she expected Aunt Adelia was still stunning, still incredibly wealthy, and still the ever-gracious hostess of Belmont, the most

exquisite estate in Tennessee—perhaps even in America, if a newspaper article Eleanor had recently read held true.

But one term the journalist had used to describe her aunt—American royalty—felt like too much.

She scoffed. She was grateful for her aunt's kind generosity, but *royalty*? Hardly. But what if her aunt *had* become like one of those spoiled, puffed-up European dukes and duchesses she'd read about in *Harper's Weekly*? The ones who considered themselves to be so much above and better than the rest of the common . . . *ordinary* people.

Eleanor shook her head. Heaven forbid. . . .

As the carriage bounced along the long, narrow drive, Eleanor stared at the empty bench opposite her and could almost hear guilt's silent scolding. How long had it been since she'd left her father for any length of time, much less in the manner she just had? A part of her still couldn't believe she'd done it.

Almost without thinking, she slipped a hand into her skirt pocket and pulled out the handkerchief, the one she'd carried all these years. The material was silky soft between her thumb and forefinger, its familiarity—and history—an inexplicable comfort.

She traced a finger over the embroidered flowers now faded with time and from repeated washings. Despite her best attempts at the outset to remove the bloodstain, a ghost of it remained. She'd tried to find her. The soldier's *Mary girl*.

For two years after the war, she had searched. But her efforts had been like trying to drain the ocean one thimble at a time. Everywhere she looked another wave rose in an endless sea of widows and fatherless children awash in grief. Why she'd ever thought she would find the woman, she couldn't imagine.

No, that wasn't true. She knew from where her hope had issued.

At one time, she'd thought it had been God's design for her to find the woman, to tell her that her husband hadn't died alone, that he'd loved her to the end. Then to tell her what he'd said, and maybe learn what he'd meant. But what a silly, romantic notion that had proven to be.

There was wisdom in knowing when to let go of a dream, and even more, in knowing when it had let go of you.

It was strange, maybe even wrong in a way—Eleanor wasn't sure—but she still carried within her a seed of the love that had poured from the soldier's lips before he died. It lived inside her, its heart still beating. Faintly at times. More steadily at others.

But it wasn't a comforting thing. Quite the contrary. It made her

grateful she'd never had opportunity to give her heart to a man. She was one of the fortunate ones, she'd concluded. She'd been spared the grief of loving and losing. After speaking to widow after widow, hearing their all-too-familiar and heart-wrenching stories, she'd decided that, contrary to Tennyson's requiem—a favorite of her father's to quote—it *was* truly better to have never loved at all.

As the carriage neared the main road, she leaned closer to the window for a breath of fresh air and spotted the sign at the entrance. *Tennessee Asylum for the Insane*. She flinched. The letters were carved so grandly into a slab of native limestone, the rock edifice upon which it rested, so proud looking. The irony wasn't lost on her. Neither was the fact that the wisest, wittiest, kindest, and most *practical* man she'd ever known was now at home within the asylum's walls.

A sinking feeling started somewhere around the center of her chest, threatening to pull her under. She sat up straighter, reminding herself of what she'd told Dr. Crawford about determining to think positively about the outcome of her father's treatment.

Hoping for any sign at all, she looked out the window and searched the branches, hoping to see the cardinal again.

But the leafless branches were empty.



Marcus met the man's timid stare with challenge, sensing he was hiding something. No doubt, at the instruction of the employee's superior, the illustrious mayor of Nashville, Augustus E. Adler—a man Marcus was loath to depend upon, much less give answer to someday.

Mr. Barrett, the mayor's nervous little assistant, leaned forward, his hands tightly knotted atop the secretary's desk—a Napoleon-style replica, and a poor one at that. "If you'll allow me to explain, H-Herr . . . Geoffrey?"

Barrett stumbled over the title, his Southern way of speech stretching the word into two oddly paired syllables instead of one, and Marcus's already-tried patience further thinned. Whenever certain people—like Mr. Barrett—heard the "European" in his voice, as they called it, it seemed to bring out their "Southern German."

"Mr. Geoffrey will suffice, Mr. Barrett," Marcus said, his tone managing a hint of cordial. "Please continue."

"Oh . . . thank you, *Mr. Geoffrey*. That is most generous of you, sir."

The pounding at the back of Marcus's head ratcheted up another notch at the man's gushing smile.

“May I say, Mr. Geoffrey”—again, that smile—“your English is superb. I wonder, sir, how you manage to speak our language with such a—”

“Mr. Barrett . . .” Marcus leaned forward in his chair and, at the same time, heard the inaudible echo of a warning he’d received often in his childhood—“*The English language isn’t spoken with the same guttural force of our language, Your Excellency. Your manner could be . . . misconstrued, if you do. Now, again, please. And this time, with a measure of gentility.*” Marcus breathed in, then out. “All I require from you, Mr. Barrett, is that you tell me whether or not Mayor Adler has reached a decision on this project. Last week he gave his word—to me and the other three contractors—that he would decide by today.”

For a few seconds, Barrett’s mouth moved but no words came. “I . . . I can explain, sir.” His face flushed. “It *was* the mayor’s intent to award the contract for the project today. But, unfortunately . . .” Barrett took a breath, as though desperately needing one. “Mayor Adler is still reviewing the various designs, including”—he winced—“a *fifth* bid that was submitted to his office at the last moment.”

“A fifth bid?” Marcus frowned, and even from four feet away, he heard Barrett swallow. “Submitted by whom?”

“A . . . local company, sir.”

Marcus leveled his gaze, the throb in his head kicking to a steady thrum. If this man only knew to whom he was speaking. “And does this *local company* possess a name, Mr. Barrett?”

“It does, I’m sure.” Barrett looked anywhere but across the desk. “But I’m not privy to that information, sir. I give you my word, Mr. Geoffrey.”

The silence lengthened, and Marcus let it.

He hadn’t trusted Mayor Adler since he’d caught the man in a bare-faced lie on their first meeting. He’d called him on it and had been paying the price ever since. Adler had made it clear he “didn’t much care for Europeans.” Which Marcus found humorous, given the origin of most of America’s citizens.

Marcus glanced at the side door leading to the mayor’s office, wondering if Adler truly was out of town. He was tempted to barge in and prove the statement false—or true—but taking such action would bring him no closer to building the finest opera house that Nashville, or possibly all of America, had ever seen. Nor would it bring him closer to making a name for himself—a name that didn’t rest on a family dynasty, or his father’s or uncle’s accomplishments, but rather on his own hard work and ingenuity. He could never have achieved

that in Europe. But with time and circumstance working against him as they were, it was appearing less and less likely he would achieve success in Nashville either.

A knock on the door drew their attention, and a woman entered.

“Mr. Barrett, I have tea for you,” she said, a coyness in her tone. The diminutive brunette shot Marcus a look that lingered. Then she glanced at Barrett and quickly added, “For both of you.”

“Thank you, Miss Thornton.” Barrett gestured, seeming somewhat relieved by the interruption.

The young woman set the tea service on the desk corner closest to Marcus and poured slowly. Too slowly in Marcus’s estimation. But her continued stare in his direction let him know that swiftness wasn’t her intention.

She was petite. And pretty. And most of all, she knew it.

He doubted—with his having inherited his parents’ tall stature—whether the young woman would reach him midchest, even standing on tiptoe. She was fragile and delicate-looking, much like the fine china she held out to him. And much too much like Baroness Maria Elizabeth Albrecht von Haas.

His mood darkened at the accompanying memory of the baroness and their . . . relationship, if one could call it that, and at the fate awaiting him upon his return to Austria. Extending an empire through marriage had been a long-standing Habsburg family tradition, and he could already hear his uncle redrawing the boundary lines.

Marcus lifted the cup and drank, wishing it were something much stronger than tea—even stout coffee would do.

From a young age, he’d grown accustomed to this kind of attention from women. At first, it had fascinated him, the way they flocked to him. And with little to no effort on his part. As he grew older, that fascination turned into an amusement, even a sport. “The challenge of the quest,” as one of his friends used to say.

But after what happened with Rutger—

Marcus saw his brother’s face so clearly in his mind, and he swallowed hard, strong-arming emotions to keep them at bay. The way he’d lived his life before *the incident* seemed almost foreign to him now. Yet he couldn’t forget. And God help him—if God was still listening, if God gave second chances to men like him. . . .

Keeping his gaze to himself, he did nothing to encourage the attention of the young woman beside him.

Finally she crossed to the door and closed it quietly behind her.

"I feel certain," Barrett continued, "that the mayor will announce his decision no later than this time next week."

"I wish I shared your certainty, Mr. Barrett."

Marcus returned his empty cup to the tray and stood, frustrated with the mayor's delay and eager to be on his way. "When is Mayor Adler scheduled to return?"

"Monday at the latest, sir." A flicker of relief sparked Barrett's expression as he gained his feet. "I'll tell him you stopped by the moment he disembarks the train. And I'll relay your inquiry regarding the status of your company's bid as well."

Marcus crossed to the door. "If you'd also be so kind as to inform the mayor that I, along with the other three firms who placed bids on time and in proper order, will be expecting confirmation that this . . . *anonymous* fifth bidder did the same."

Barrett blinked. "Yes, sir, of course. I'll relay that request to Mayor Adler as well. And may I say with utmost sincerity, Mr. Geoffrey, the mayor would want me to assure you that his office desires to be of assistance in any—"

"Good day to you, Mr. Barrett."

Marcus closed the office door behind him, not caring to hear Barrett's parting insincerities.

Minutes later, as he passed the post office on his way out to Belmont, he wished again that his colleague from Boston, Luther Burbank, would mail the package as promised. He didn't think Burbank was holding out on him.

But given the subject of their collaboration, there was always that possibility.



"Is you sure you want me to drop you off *here*, Miss Braddock? Long way up to the main house, ma'am. And most of it be uphill."

"Yes, I'm certain, Armstead. Thank you."

Eleanor accepted his assistance from the carriage. Having already checked her watch, she knew she was early, despite the tour of the city and countryside Armstead had given her. She'd intended to stay at the asylum to help her father get settled, but since those plans hadn't come to fruition . . . "Mrs. Cheatham isn't expecting me for a while yet. And after all the riding today, I welcome the chance to walk."

She wasn't about to arrive so early for an appointment with her

aunt, especially her first in years. She knew how important punctuality was to Adelia Acklen Cheatham, even if Armstead wasn't aware. Although, seeing Armstead's thoughtful look, she got the inkling he might fully understand.

"Walkin', it's good for a body," he said, a smile lingering in the depths of his voice.

On a playful whim, she glanced from side to side as though worried someone might overhear. "Though I haven't been here in years, I haven't been gone so long that I've forgotten my aunt's *high* regard for punctuality. I no more want to arrive an hour early at Belmont than I would a minute late."

"Yes, ma'am." A knowing grin creased his face. "The Lady likes ever'thing runnin' on time. That's for sure. She got her schedule, and we best keep to it."

Eleanor smiled, feeling an unexpected kinship with the man, especially considering what he'd witnessed earlier today. "I'll explore the conservatory for a while, then make my way on to the house."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And, Armstead . . ."

He turned back.

"Thank you for understanding about what happened with my father. And for your . . . discretion."

He nodded, taking his time to answer. "We all got our roads to walk, ma'am. Ain't none of 'em pretty all the time."

"No, they're not."

He tipped his hat to leave, then hesitated again. "How 'bout I wait 'til you come up to the house 'fore I tote your luggage in. Make it all proper like."

"That would be much appreciated, Armstead." She smiled in gratitude.

As the carriage pulled away, Eleanor let her focus wander the vast grounds and gardens of the estate, until it finally came to rest on the mansion atop the hill.

The afternoon sun bathed the enormous Italianate-style villa in a warm glow, giving it a ruddy pinkish hue from this distance. Her aunt had appropriately named it Belmont, *Belle Monte* in French. *Beautiful mountain* . . .

Moving her gaze downhill, Eleanor studied the lavish formal gardens in front of the mansion. The gardens were circular in formation—the largest of the three situated nearest the home, its counterparts descending downhill, diminishing in size.

Marble statuary spaced at random intervals—sometimes beside a cast-iron gazebo, other times set apart—stood like silent sentinels watchful over their domain. Flowers bordered endless beds, the fading summer palette of crimsons and saffrons, purples and pinks clinging to their petals—the pink looking far better on them than it did on her.

She scanned the rows of shrubbery, looking for a certain plant, one they'd had in their garden back home. But it was nowhere to be seen. Its flowers, being more common in appearance, were probably not elegant enough for Belmont, but she enjoyed their fragrance.

In the distance, to the west of the mansion, lay an empty plot of ground where she would've sworn another building had stood years earlier. An art gallery, if she remembered correctly. But for whatever reason, it was gone now.

On the east side of the mansion, a new building was being erected—the brick building twice as long as it was wide, and every bit as stunning as the rest of Belmont.

The estate was more impressive than she remembered.

Feeling very small—and out of place—she sighed and turned to look behind her. The glass-walled conservatory, complete with domed cupola, that housed Aunt Adelia's prized collections of flowers and trees, shrubs and herbs, appeared to be at least twice the size of the family home Eleanor had recently sold. There was no telling the variety of plants contained within, or their cost.

She followed the walkway leading to the main door of the conservatory but, before entering, paused and lifted her gaze to the nearby water tower.

The brick structure, well over one hundred feet tall, she estimated, reached skyward to the ethereal blue. Her focus trailed to the top, where a windmill turned in the breeze.

As beautiful as Belmont was, she hoped her stay would be brief.

Thinking of the proposal she had for her aunt—the acceptance of which would enable her to make a way, however humble a one, for herself and her father—spawned a thread of anxiousness that worked a stranglehold around her confidence. An odd emotion, since ordinarily she wasn't easily intimidated.

But there was nothing *ordinary* about Adelia Acklen Cheatham. Or about Belmont.

When visiting in the past, Eleanor had never felt at home. But considering the surroundings, who would? The place was like make-believe—at least in comparison to the world in which she lived.

She opened the door to the conservatory, and a warm *whoosh* of air greeted her. Not surprising in view of the glass ceiling and a full September sun overhead. Within seconds, the heady scent of roses enveloped her and—unprepared for what she saw—she let the door close behind her with a soft thud.

Roses. Pots and pots of roses. Table after table, row after row. Some of them quite tall, obstructing her view to the next aisle, and blossoms in every shade imaginable—from deepest crimson to snowiest white, from golden yellow to palest pink. Some varieties, lower growing and shrubby, huddled together like friendly neighbors over a fence. While others seemed to raise lofty heads in unabashed pride, as if believing themselves more regal.

Hundreds of blooms, perhaps thousands, filled this section of the conservatory. Surely this collection rivaled the very storehouses of heaven.

And yet . . . while she appreciated nature and enjoyed the outdoors, and had even helped her father tend a vegetable garden years earlier, she'd never cared much for flowers. They were beautiful, to be sure, but also frivolous and extravagant. What use had they other than to just look pretty?

She breathed the perfumed air. As much as she hated to admit it, however, the scent was nothing less than enchanting.

Reaching the end of the first aisle, she turned the corner to start down the next when she heard voices and stilled. She cocked her head to listen, but . . . nothing.

Certain she'd heard something, she took a step back and looked down the aisle from whence she'd come.

But again . . . no one.

She made a quick tour of the remaining rose collection, finally skipping the last two aisles, and moved through an open doorway into another section of the greenhouse. This section was filled with tropical plants, but a small grouping of plants in a corner, on a table all their own, immediately caught her attention.

They were some of the ugliest plants she'd ever seen.

Of the cacti family, if her guess was correct, they were tubular and gangly, without a single bloom. She saw a card tacked to the side of the table and leaned down. *Selenicereus grandiflorus*.

Her limited study of Latin combined with her almost nonexistent use of the language since leaving school enabled her to easily pronounce the words, but that was all. She had no idea of their translation, or of the plant's common name.

She did, however, remember her Latin professor. Quite well.
Dr. Carlton Adessa.

Oh, how the girls in school had fawned over him. They'd called him Dr. Adonis behind his back, after the mortal god of beauty in Greek mythology. It still seemed unfair that a man could be so . . . beautiful. Dark-eyed and swarthy, with an air of confidence that both preceded him and followed in his wake. Everything about the man had been attractive. At first.

With painful clarity, she remembered the day Dr. Adessa had passed her in the hallway. She'd just returned from a windy walk and stopped at a mirror to fix her hair. He smiled as he approached, and she nervously wondered if he would remember her name, since she'd earned the highest mark on the last exam.

Eagerly showing wayward strands of hair into place, she managed a smile. And as he passed, he said, "One cannot make a silk purse from a sow's ear, Miss Braddock. Hurry now, class is beginning."

Eleanor exhaled a humorless laugh at the memory, and recalled how his attractiveness had changed in her eyes. And how the incident had framed how she saw herself too.

Growing up, she'd been called strong, sturdy, even handsome on one occasion. But *pretty* was a word that had never been used to describe her. Taken individually, her features weren't completely without merit. Her eyes were a deeper brown than most. Her blond hair was long but thin, so she braided it into a bun at the base of her neck. Her nose was probably her best feature—similar to that of the *Venus de Milo*, she'd been told.

Of course, she was nearly as tall as the statue of Venus, which more than offset whatever positive there was in the comparison.

She sighed. She hadn't possessed the courage to offer Dr. Adessa a swift rebuttal back then. As a young woman, she'd been far too eager to please others, to earn affirmation. But somewhere through the years, that had changed. Perhaps because she'd finally learned how impossible a goal it was to earn everyone's approval, especially when the world's criteria for judging stood so widely separate from her own.

She turned her attention back to the cacti and considered the reasons her aunt would have such plants in her collection.

Knowing better but unable to resist, she gently touched a spine on the cactus, then drew her hand back, frowning. It was sharper than she'd imagined. Bringing the tip of her forefinger to her mouth, she soothed the sting, her admiration for the plant edging up a notch.

What it lacked in beauty, it made up for in strength, and in its ability to protect itself.

She checked the time again. There was still plenty of time before she was due at the house, so she turned her attention to the tropical plants. Trees that would take many men to move, if they could be moved, stood directly beneath the cupola. As she continued, she passed a cast-iron fountain topped with an equally cast-iron cobra coiled and ready to strike.

A doorway to her left with stairs leading down intrigued her. But it was dark, so she continued on. While the prospect of exploring underground was appealing, the possibility of appearing before Aunt Adelia with six inches of mud on her hem was not.

Gazing ahead, she glimpsed yet another room and sighed, shaking her head. The conservatory went on *forever*, much like the mansion did, as she remembered. Such lavishness . . .

By comparison, she pictured her father's former vegetable garden. He'd found such enjoyment and relaxation in tending that small patch of land. She fingered the waxy leaf of a shrub, contemplating. Perhaps the asylum would let him plant some tomato and squash plants. And maybe green beans. He loved those.

She checked the watch hooked to her bodice. A few minutes, and she would need to make her way up to the mansion.

Catching the hint of a familiar scent, she paused. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, and was carried back to warm summer nights as a little girl, when her bedroom window was open and the heady perfume of lilacs enveloped her room—and her dreams.

A simpler time. One she missed.

When she opened her eyes, the memory faded. Left in its place was a loneliness, keen and sharp-edged, and not at all unfamiliar. Whenever she thought about her father, about what his future—their future—might hold, she questioned if this sense of being adrift, orphaned, in a sense, would ever leave.

Knowing what her father would say if he were there, she instinctively straightened, squaring her shoulders. “Be practical,” she whispered. “Sensible. Focus on what is before you, Eleanor. Not on what your imagination attempts to convince you is there.”

Working like a talisman, the spoken words helped to push the emptiness away. Not banished forever, she knew, but cordoned off . . . for now.

She turned to leave, but her focus fell on a doorway—or more rightly, on something through the doorway.

She stepped closer, listening for movement beyond the threshold, and then knocked. The glass door squeaked open an inch or two more.

“Hello?” Her voice sounded overloud in the silence, her gaze fixed on what appeared to be a surgeon’s scalpel on the edge of the table.

She waited. . . .

No answer.

Concerned, but mostly curious, she nudged the door open farther and stepped inside. And quickly wondered whether Aunt Adelia’s gardeners were practicing horticulture . . . or medicine.

Plants that appeared to be . . . bandaged, their roots wrapped in gauzy strips, lined a series of tables on the far wall. Pots of dirt sat behind them, as though someone had left recently and would return soon. Likewise, rows of corked glass bottles, each filled with liquid and labeled in Latin, stood shoulder to shoulder on shelves. Shiny scalpels, even syringes, lay neatly arranged on a cloth.

She frowned. What kind of *gardener* needed all of—

“I asked you to moisten the root base *if* it was required, not *drown* them!”

Eleanor nearly jumped out of her skin at the voice. Turning, she glimpsed two men striding down the aisle toward her. Her first instinct was to hide. But where? She wasn’t about to hide in this . . . infirmary. And if she crossed directly in front of them, they would see her.

“The plants will be fine, Mr. Geoffrey, I’m certain. I did as I thought best. After all, I am the head—”

The taller man, still several yards away, stopped abruptly and turned, his back to her. “I know who you are, Mr. Gray. And I’m well aware of your position here.” He blew out a breath.

Feeling like a naughty child in danger of being caught, Eleanor did her best to blend in with the greenery, wishing she’d worn anything but pink. She didn’t dare move lest the rustle of her skirts give her away.

“Next time,” the taller man continued, a foreign accent giving the words an even harsher edge, “do as I instruct, not as you think best. And try it without the bottle. That will help.” The man uttered something unintelligible. “Never mind. There won’t be a next time. I don’t want you touching any of the plants in the—”

The man facing her suddenly raised his hand. And with a shudder Eleanor realized he was looking directly at her.