

ZONDERVAN

To Whisper Her Name

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Prologue

August 17, 1863

In the hills surrounding the Union-occupied city of Nashville ...

First Lieutenant Ridley Adam Cooper peered through the stand of bristled pines, his presence cloaked by dusk, his Winchester cocked and ready. Beads of sweat trailed his forehead and the curve of his eye, but he didn't bother wiping them away. His focus was trained on the Negro hunched over the fire and what he was certain—if his last hour of observation proved true—the slave had hidden just over the ridge.

Best he could tell, the man hadn't spied him, else he wouldn't be going about making supper like he was. Beans and pork with biscuits and coffee, if Ridley's sense of smell proved right. *Real* coffee. Not that foul-tasting brew the Rebs scalded over an open flame until it was sludge, then drank by the gallons.

Rebs. His brothers, in a way, every last one of them. Two of them the blood kind. And yet, the enemy. He hoped Petey and Alfred were all right, wherever they were.

A northerly breeze marked evening's descent, but the air's movement did little to ease the sweltering heat and humidity. Someone raised in the thickness of South Carolina summers should be accustomed to this by now, but the wool of the Federal uniform wore heavy, more so these days than when he'd first enlisted.

Yet he knew he'd done the right thing in choosing the side he had. No matter what others said or did. Or accused him of.

Ridley felt a pang. Not from hunger so much, though he could eat if

food was set before him. This pang went much deeper and hurt worse than anything he could remember. *God, if you're listening, if you're still watching us from where you are . . . I hate this war.* Hated what this “brief conflict”—as President Lincoln had called it at the outset—was doing to him and everyone else over two bloody years later.

And especially what it called for him to do tonight. “At any cost,” his commander had said, his instruction leaving no question.

Jaw rigid, Ridley reached into his pocket and pulled out the seashell, the one he'd picked up on his last walk along the beach near home before he'd left to join the 167th Pennsylvania Regiment to fight for the Federal Army. The scallop shell was a tiny thing, hardly bigger than a coin, and the inside fit smoothly against his thumb. With his forefinger, he traced the familiar ridges along the back and glanced skyward where a vast sea of purple slowly ebbed to black.

It was so peaceful, the night canopy, the stars popping out one by one like a million fireflies flitting right in place. Looking up, a man wouldn't even know a war was being waged.

When his commanding officer had called for a volunteer for the scouting mission, the man hadn't waited for hands to go up but had looked directly at Ridley, his expression daring argument. Ridley had given none. He'd simply listened to the orders and set out at first light, nearly three days ago now. Ridley knew the commander held nothing personal against him. The man had been supportive in every way.

It was Ridley's own temper and his “friendly” disagreement with a fellow officer—a loud-mouthed lieutenant from Philadelphia who hated “every one of them good for nothin', ignorant Southerners”—that had landed him where he was tonight. The fool had all but accused him of spying for the Confederacy. Their commander had quashed the rumor, but the seed of doubt had been sown. And this was the commander's way of allowing Ridley to earn back his fellow officers' trust again, which was imperative.

Ridley wiped his brow with the sleeve of his coat, careful not to make a noise. He'd tethered his horse a good ways back and had come in on foot.

He didn't know the hills surrounding Nashville any better than the rest of his unit, but he did know this kind of terrain, how to hunt and move about in the woods. And how to stay hidden. The woods were so dense in places, the pines grown so thick together, a man could get lost out here if he didn't know how to tell his way.

They'd gotten wind of Rebels patrolling the outlying areas—rogue sentries who considered themselves the law of the land—and his bet was they were searching for what he'd just found. So far, he hadn't seen hide nor hair of them. But he could imagine well enough what they'd do to a Union soldier found on his lonesome—especially an officer and “one of their own kind” to boot—so he was eager to get this thing done.

Gripping his Winchester, Ridley stepped from the tree cover, still some thirty feet from the Negro. He closed the distance—*twenty-five feet, twenty*—the cushion of pine needles muffling his approach. *Fifteen, ten* . . . But the man just kept puttering away, stirring the coffee, then the beans, then—

Ridley paused mid-step. Either the Negro was deaf . . . or was already wise to his presence. Wagering the latter, Ridley brought his rifle up and scanned his surroundings, looking for anyone hidden in the trees or for a gun barrel conveniently trained at the center of his chest. It was too late to retreat, but withdrawal of any kind had never been in his nature, as that cocksure, pretentious little—he caught himself—*lieutenant* from Philadelphia had found out well enough.

He tried for a casual yet not too pleasant tone. “Evening, friend . . .”

The man's head came up. Then, slowly, he straightened to his full height, which was still a good foot shorter than Ridley. He was thicker about the middle, older than Ridley too. In his thirties maybe, or closer to forty, it was hard to tell. The Negro was broad shouldered, and judging by the thickness of his hands and forearms, Ridley guessed that years of hard labor had layered a strap of muscle beneath that slight paunch. He hoped it wouldn't give the slave a false sense of courage.

“Evenin’,” the man answered, glancing at the stripes on Ridley's shoulder. “Lieutenant, sir.”

Not a trace of surprise registered in his voice, which went a ways in confirming Ridley's silent wager. The man's knowledge of military rank was also telling.

The Negro's focus shifted decidedly to the Winchester, then back again, and Ridley couldn't decide if it was resignation he read in the man's eyes or disappointment. Or maybe both.

Ridley surveyed the camp. Neat, orderly. Everything packed. Everything but the food. Like the man was getting ready to move out. Only—Ridley looked closer—not one cup but two resting on a rock by the fire. He focused on the slave and read awareness in the man's eyes. “How long have you known I was watching?”

The Negro bit his lower lip, causing the fullness of his graying beard to bunch on his chin. " 'Bout the time the coffee came back to boilin', sir."

"You heard me?" Ridley asked, knowing that was impossible. He hadn't made a sound. He was sure of it.

The man shook his head, looking at him with eyes so deep and dark a brown they appeared almost liquid. "More like . . . I *felt* you, sir."

A prickle skittered up Ridley's spine. Part of him wanted to question the man, see if he had what some called "second sight," like Ridley's great-grandmother'd had, but the wiser part of him knew better than to inquire. He had a job to do, one he couldn't afford to fail at. Not with his loyalty to the Union being called into question by some. "I take it you know what I'm here for."

There it was again, that look. Definitely one of resignation this time.

"I reckon I do, sir. It's what all them others been lookin' for too." The slave shook his head. "How'd you find me?"

Only then did Ridley allow a hint of a smile. "I don't know that I can say exactly. We got rumor of horses being hidden in these hills. I *volunteered*, you might say, and then just started out. I followed where my senses told me to go. Where I would've gone if I was hiding horses."

The man's eyebrows arched, then he nodded, gradually, as if working to figure something out. He motioned to the fire. "Dinner's all ready, Lieutenant. Think you could see fit to eat a mite?"

Ridley looked at the pot of beans and meat bubbling over the flame, then at the tin of biscuits set off to the side, his stomach already answering. The man was offering to feed him? All whilst knowing what he was here to do? Ridley eyed him again, not trusting him by any stretch. Yet he had a long journey back to camp, and the dried jerky in his rations didn't begin to compare. "I'd be much obliged. Thank you."

They ate in silence, the night sounds edging up a notch as the darkness grew more pronounced. The food tasted good and Ridley was hungrier than he'd thought. He'd covered at least seventy-five, maybe a hundred miles since leaving camp in Nashville.

Just four days earlier, Union headquarters had received rumor of a slave out in these hills, reportedly hiding prized blood horses for his owner. Word had it the horses were bred for racing and were worth a fortune. Ridley would've sworn they'd confiscated every horse there

was in Nashville when they first took the city. But he'd bet his life that the man across from him right now was the slave they'd heard about.

He lifted his cup. "You make mighty good coffee. Best I've had in a while. And this is some fine venison too."

"Thank you, sir. My master, he got the finest deer park in all o' Dixie. Least he did 'fore them no-good, thievin' —" The Negro paused, frowning, then seemed to put some effort into smoothing his brow, though with little success. "I's sorry, sir. I 'preciate all your side's tryin' to do in this war, but there just ain't no cause for what was done at Belle Meade last year. 'Specially with Missus Harding bein' delicate o' health, and Master Harding packed off to prison like he was. Them Union troops —" He gripped his upper thigh, his eyes going hot. "They shot me! Right in the leg. I's just tryin' to do what I's been told, and they shot me straight on. Laughed about it too. And here we's thinkin' they come to help."

Reminded again of another reason he hated this war and why the South no longer felt like home and never would again, Ridley held the man's gaze, trying to think of something to say. Something that would make up for what had been done to him. But he couldn't.

Ridley laid aside his tin and, on impulse, reached out a hand. "First Lieutenant Ridley Adam Cooper . . . sir."

He knew a little about the slave's owner—General William Giles Harding—from what his commanding officer had told him. To date, General Harding still hadn't signed the Oath of Allegiance to the Union, despite the general's incarceration up north last year at Fort Mackinac—a place reportedly more like a resort than a prison—and the lack of compliance wasn't sitting well with those in authority. Not with Harding being so wealthy a man and holding such influence among his peers. It set the wrong precedent. Union superiors hoped the outcome of this scouting mission would provide General Harding with the proper motivation he needed to comply with the Union—or suffer further consequences.

The Negro regarded Ridley—the crackle of the fire eating up the silence—then finally accepted, his own grip iron-firm. "Robert Green, sir. Head hostler, Belle Meade Plantation."

"You been at Belle Meade long, Mr. Green?"

"Since I's about two years old, sir. My folks and me, we was a present to the first Missus Harding on her and my master's weddin' day. Been at Belle Meade ever since."

Ridley nodded, then stared into the fire as the man's comment settled within him. *We was a present . . .* It didn't settle well. According to a proclamation from the president eight months earlier, most of the slaves had been freed. But words on paper didn't always match the reality of a situation. Especially when newly freed slaves attempting to exercise their freedom ended up shot in the back or hanging by a rope.

"You must'a met with some of them Rebs, Lieutenant."

Ridley looked up to see Robert Green gesturing toward him.

"Seein' them bruises, sir, looks like somebody got a piece of you 'fore you took 'em down."

Ridley fingered his cheek and chin, his jaw still tender and now roughly bearded with several days' growth. "Actually this was from a fellow officer. He and I had a . . . difference of opinion, you might say."

Green chuckled. His laughter had a comforting sound about it. "From the size of you, Lieutenant, I be guessin' that man looks way worse off than you do."

Ridley shook his head. "He got a few good punches in before he went down."

"That may be, sir. But with one good lick from you, I'm bettin' he done stayed down. For a week!"

Ridley allowed the trace of a grin, then felt the need for sleep creeping up on him and sat straighter to keep his wits about him.

"Lawd . . ." Robert Green sighed and stretched. "I used to love me a good fight. I used to could hold my own too. Don't you think I couldn't just 'cause I's built low to the ground."

"No, sir . . ." Ridley shook his head, humored at the way Green described himself. "I wouldn't begin to think that."

Robert Green locked eyes with him then, and the man's smile faded. Green blinked, as if just now seeing Ridley in his uniform again and remembering why he was here.

The brief ease of conversation between them left as quickly as it had come.

Feeling precious time slip past, Ridley rose, bringing his Winchester with him. "I thank you for dinner, Mr. Green. And now . . . I need to ask you to show me the horses."

Robert Green rose as well, reaching for a knobby cane to steady himself. He grabbed a nearby lantern and lit it, then picked a path through the darkness. Ridley followed, still wary and more than a little watchful.

Slivers of moonlight fingered their way through the trees, lending the night a silvery glow. When they reached the top of the ridge, Ridley peered over and counted three—no, four—horses. His gaze narrowed in the pale moonlight. Their size and stature. Their build . . . Though he wasn't an expert on horse flesh, he knew enough to realize everything his commander had said was true. *Magnificent* was the foremost word that came to mind.

If these horses were worth a dollar, they were worth a thousand. Each. Easy. And they flocked to Robert Green like newborn pups to their mama. All of them. The man whispered low and stroked their necks, scratched them behind their ears. The gentleness of the animals in contrast to their brute strength was something to behold.

"You open to me askin' you somethin', Lieutenant Cooper?" Robert Green turned back, and as if on cue, the horses lifted their heads. All seemed to look directly at Ridley.

Ridley got a spooked sort of feeling. A little like . . . if Robert Green were to give the word, those thoroughbreds would charge that hill and stomp the life right out of him. All because Robert Green wished it so.

Hearing in his mind the question Mr. Green had asked, Ridley pulled his thoughts taut again. "Yes, sir. Go ahead."

"Where you from, Lieutenant? I know by your speakin' you ain't from nowhere north."

"No, sir. I'm not. I'm from South Carolina."

Robert Green whistled low. "I's guessin' what you done ain't gone over too well with your kin."

Ridley pushed aside the painful images of his father and younger brothers. "No, sir. It hasn't." He turned his thoughts to figuring how he was going to get these thoroughbreds back to camp. He was a fair rider, but he'd never been especially good with horses. Not a fact he'd been eager to share with his commanding officer. He'd handled this many horses before, but not spirited blood horses, and he certainly lacked the knack for it this man possessed.

"But still . . . you's fightin' for what you think is right, Lieutenant. Speaks high of a man to do that, sir. 'Specially when it costs him dear." Robert Green paused. "Anythin' I can do to change your mind on this, Lieutenant Cooper? These here are the general's favorites. And he trusted 'em to me special, sir. To keep 'em safe."

Ridley leveled a stare. "I appreciate that, Mr. Green. But no. There's nothing to be done. I've got my orders."

The older man bowed his head, nodding. "Mind if I water 'em up 'fore you take 'em?"

"No. Long as you don't mind if I come along."

Robert Green took hold of the leads of two of the thoroughbreds and led them to the stream. The other two horses trailed behind. Ridley followed, rifle in hand.

The largest of the thoroughbreds, a black stallion, nudged up beside Green similar to how Ridley remembered Winston—his hunting dog as a boy—doing. He hadn't thought of that ol' dog in years, buried on the hill behind the house back home.

But it was how Robert Green leaned into the stallion that caused Ridley to study the scene. He'd never witnessed anything like it. Animal like that reacting toward a man this way. And he felt a disquiet inside himself, one he tried to dismiss. But couldn't. He had a direct order. He had no choice but to do this. He couldn't return without these thoroughbreds. And wouldn't.

He followed Green back to where the horses had been.

Green turned to him. "You know anything 'bout horses, Lieutenant?"

"'Course I do." Ridley heard the defensiveness in his own voice, for some unknown reason eager to prove himself to this man. He gathered the reins of two of the thoroughbreds, noting they were none too eager to follow him over the ridge. But finally, with firm insistence, they did.

"Blood horses like these," Green said, coming down the hill behind him. "You gotta take special care with 'em, Lieutenant. They got high spirits, and they can—"

"I *know* about horses, Mr. Green."

Green didn't say anything, but his silence did.

"Lieutenant Cooper?"

His patience thinning, Ridley paused and looked back.

"If you got a mind to let me, sir, I go with you, a ways anyhow." The man looked at the horses with fondness akin to what Ridley had felt for old Winston. "I go as far as the road runnin' north of here, then I turn back. That rebel patrol . . . they catch me out in these woods—" He shook his head. "I be better off bein' trampled by Olympus there." He thumbed toward the black stallion. "Either way, I be dead."

"If the Rebs catch either of us, Mr. Green, we'll likely both be dead."

Surprisingly, Green chuckled. "That's God's honest truth, sir. I's thinkin' they might just take to killin' you 'fore they kill me."

Ridley considered that possibility and found no comfort in it. But having Green along to help with these horses did have advantages. Finally, he nodded, and Green packed up the camp.

They were on their way inside of fifteen minutes.

Ridley was grateful—and also not—for the full moon. It gave them light, but did the same to anyone else in the woods. He led the way, reins to a dark bay stallion and a handsome chestnut in his grip. He glanced back at Robert Green every so often. "We'll head north about a quarter mile to where I left my horse, then we'll take the path over the next ridge. There's a deer trail running through there that I followed a day or so back. Unless you know of a better way?"

"No, sir. That's the best way. And fastest."

The thoroughbreds were surefooted and grew easier to lead as they went, which Ridley knew better than to attribute to his own skill. "When I came into camp, Mr. Green, you looked about packed up, ready to move out. Where were you headed?"

"I got me some good hidin' spots in these hills. I move around some. Mainly at night. Ain't seen nobody for a while."

Almost back to where Ridley had tethered his gelding, he heard the horse whinny, then felt a touch of relief when he found the mount as he'd left him. The gelding was a mite high-strung. Temperamental at times too, even obstinate, and Ridley wasn't overly fond of the animal.

The thoroughbreds tossed their heads, as though hesitant to welcome the newcomer to their ranks, but Green quieted them with soothing whispers and a touch.

"May I, sir?"

Ridley glanced up to see Robert Green gesture to the gelding. Gathering what he was asking, Ridley granted permission with a nod.

Robert Green walked to within three feet of the gelding then stopped and stared. Just stared. The gelding stared back, its withers rippling. Then with an outstretched hand, Green closed the distance between them, moving slowly, patient as sunrise in winter, never breaking the stare. The horse suddenly blew out a breath and stomped. Green halted and lowered his arm.

Ridley watched, not knowing what the man was doing but about to tell him in no uncertain terms that they didn't have time for this foolish—

"You's a good boy," Green said, his voice low and soft. "Little scared sometimes, I'm guessin'. But we all is. We all got somethin' we afraid of . . . You ever talk to him?"

Ridley blinked. It took him a second to realize Green was speaking to *him* now and not the horse. "Beg pardon?"

"You ever talk to this horse, sir? Tell him what a fine boy he is? How grateful you are for what he done for you?"

Ridley stared at Robert Green, wondering now if the man was a mite touched in the head. And knowing he was wasting his time with the gelding.

"Horses are like women, Lieutenant. You gotta talk to 'em, let 'em see what's inside you 'fore they can start to trust. You kin to that understandin'?"

Ridley started to admit he wasn't, then decided his personal experience was none of this man's business. "Mr. Green, I'm sure you mean well, sir, but we don't have time for—"

The gelding took a decided step toward Green. And another. Then lowered his head as if giving Green permission to touch him.

Ridley exhaled. "Well, would you look at—"

High-pitched laughter cut through the darkness and Ridley instinctively brought his rifle up. He put a finger to his lips. Robert Green nodded. The stallions tossed their heads as though sensing the tension around them, and the gelding edged closer to Green.

Ridley motioned to Green to gather the reins of the thoroughbreds, but the slave already had them in hand, as well as the gelding's.

More cackling laughter and occasional whoops annoyed the night's silence, the telling sound of liquored-up Confederate soldiers. Ridley crept through the trees to get a better look, betting they weren't as drunk as they sounded. It occurred to him again that, with one hearty shout, Robert Green could use this chance to turn him in. The slave might try to work a bargain—the Rebs would get the thoroughbreds, the gelding, and one Federal lieutenant, and Robert Green might go free.

But Ridley knew the chances of Green going free were close to nil. He only hoped Robert Green knew that.

Watching through the trees, he could see the patrol passing by on horseback not twenty feet from where he stood. The rhythmic plod of their own mounts provided coverage, but if the thoroughbreds—or the gelding—spooked . . .

One of the Reb's horses snorted and pulled up short, no doubt smelling—or at least sensing—the thoroughbreds. Ridley tensed.

The soldier swore and dug his heels mercilessly into the mount's flanks, spewing a curse-laden tirade about “the worthless piece of horseflesh” beneath him.

Ridley didn't dare look away but wondered how on earth Robert Green was managing to keep their horses so quiet. Then a thought occurred. He jerked his head back to make sure Green hadn't—

The slave and the horses were just where he'd left them.

Not realizing he'd been holding his breath, Ridley slowly let it out and then filled his lungs again, willing his pulse to slow. He waited. The patrol passed. As did a full minute. Then another. But he knew better than to let relief come quite yet.

These Rebs . . . they were sly, some of them. This could be a trick.

Ridley allowed a full five minutes to pass—silently counting and glancing back on occasion to check on Green.

“I think they's gone, sir,” Green finally said, his voice a feather on the wind.

“I think they are too,” Ridley whispered back. “But we can't go the way I was planning.” Not when that way meant trailing the patrol party.

“What you gonna do, Lieutenant . . . with the general's horses?”

“I'm taking them back to camp, near the capitol building.”

“Aw, no, sir. Please, sir. These is too fine'a horses to be cavalry mounts, Lieutenant.”

Ridley sighed, admiring the man's stab at persuasion. “They're not meant for cavalry mounts. They're to be presented to officers as gifts.” At least that's what he'd been told, but he wondered again, as he had at the outset. His commander had said they wanted to make an example of General Harding. How far his superiors would go to do that, he didn't know.

But looking at the thoroughbreds now—at what fine animals they were—he questioned those lengths.

One thing beyond question was the trust this slave had earned with these animals. Looking at the black stallion—Olympus, Green had called him—Ridley would've sworn the animal was thinking something intelligible. What, he didn't know. But the disquiet he'd felt earlier that night returned a hundredfold.

He couldn't define it. He only knew he couldn't set it aside. Not

without a cost. And for reasons he couldn't explain—and knew were a far cry short of sane—he walked over and reached out to touch the stallion.

The animal flinched and took a backward step, the whites of its eyes visibly stark against black pupils. Then Green's voice came, hushed and gentle, whispering whatever it was he said to calm them.

Green looked over. "You ain't earned his trust yet, Lieutenant Cooper. That's all. Trust takes time and lots of doin'. You got to prove yourself worthy of it, sir."

Feeling rebuked by this man, yet appropriately so, Ridley said nothing at first. "You didn't try to bargain with the patrol, Mr. Green. Or turn me in."

"Oh, I thought about it." Green's smile was briefly lived. "But I knowed me too many white men who's thirsty for blood. I reckon I best take my chances with one who don't seem so eager to spill it ... sir."

There it was again. That sense of unease. Ridley looked at the thoroughbreds and felt a deliberation inside him, warring against his judgment, against what he knew he should do as a Federal officer. "Has it always been this way for you, Mr. Green? With horses?"

Green didn't answer immediately, his focus on the thoroughbreds. "'Fore I could walk, I knew how to ride a horse. That's what my papa said anyway. I was right about three years along when my mama woke in the night. Couldn't find me nowhere. She and Papa went lookin'." Green's smile was full of memory. "Say they found me sleepin' in the barn. Hunkered down with a stallion, right between his hooves."

Ridley studied him. If anyone else had told him that story, he'd have discounted it without a second thought. But he couldn't. Not with it coming from this man.

"God made a wondrous thing when he made these creatures, Lieutenant Cooper. In some ways, they's smarter than we is. They know things. They remember things too."

Ridley stared, his decision made. He just didn't know how to go about explaining it to this man. Or what he would tell his commander.

The sky to the east showed a pearly gray slowly giving way to dawn. "It'll be light soon, Mr. Green. If you aim to keep these horses in your possession, I suggest you find another good hidin' spot." He phrased it much as Green had earlier. "And find it right quick."

Green stilled. And stared. "Are you sayin' that—" The question in his features melted into cautious gratitude. "Why you doin' this, sir?"

Ridley laughed and took the reins of the gelding. "I have no idea. I only know I can't be responsible for destroying so—" How had Green put it? "So wondrous a creature as these animals are." Ridley briefly looked away, the tightness in his throat betraying his weariness, both in body and soul. "Not when there's so little wondrous left in this world."

Weary and eager to be gone, Ridley mounted the gelding, aware of Green closing the distance between them.

"I thank you, Lieutenant Cooper. And I promise you, sir, as sure as God is listenin' to me right this minute, I be prayin' he pays you back for your kindness. And that he keeps you safe, sir." Green extended his hand.

But Ridley only stared at it. "Thank you, Mr. Green . . . But I don't believe God hears our prayers anymore. Or if he does, he sure doesn't seem to be heeding them."

Sensing Green's argument, Ridley urged the gelding in the opposite direction of the patrol and didn't look back.



Two hours later, he stopped by a stream to water the horse, still thinking of Robert Green. Part of him wished he'd seen the man safely back into the hills. But then . . . the slave had seemed to be doing all right on his own, he guessed.

As he refilled his canteen, the tug of a tattered dream returned. One that had taken root deep inside him awhile back and that he'd acted on earlier that spring. But foolishly so, now it would seem. The past months of brutal bloodshed had shown him that. Yet, here he was, still coddling it like a stillborn child. Odd, how death could sometimes feed a dream.

If he got through this God-forsaken war alive, he vowed again to get as far away from these blood-drenched hollows and hills as he could. He'd head west, far beyond the banks of the Mississippi, past the borders of Missouri, to a place he'd seen a painting of once. A place called the Rockies where the mountains were so high, they disappeared into the clouds. He'd never seen the shade of blue the artist had used to paint the sky, but a man standing next to him that

day, who'd been to the Colorado Territory—or so he'd said—told him that God himself had chosen that color special, just to go with those mountains.

The memory of the painting acted like a blade to his hope and slit its throat clean through. Ridley was certain that if he looked down, which he didn't, he'd see his dream pooling in a puddle of blood around his worn leather boots.

A snap of a twig drew his gaze up and his rifle with it. He listened, still as an iced pond in winter. One silent minute stretched into two, and he finally decided the longing inside him was making him edgy. Shrugging off feelings best left alone, he rode on for the better part of the morning, circling wide to avoid meeting up with the patrol.

The sun rose high in the sky, hot and relentless.

He reached back into his saddlebag and fished out a piece of jerky. It felt good to chew on something besides what was gnawing at him on the inside. First, how was he going to explain to his commander about returning without the thoroughbreds? And second—he felt a traitorous twinge of a smile, the next thought was so ludicrous—he was actually jealous of Robert Green. A Negro. A *slave*. But he couldn't deny it.

In a different time and place, worlds away from this one, he would've appreciated a chance to learn from that man. To study his ways. Because Robert Green knew more about—

An explosion rent the air, and the gelding beneath him stumbled.

A second blast . . . and pain ripped through Ridley's right shoulder and across his chest. The gelding buckled forward and the ground came rushing up with a force that knocked what little air remained from Ridley's lungs. He fought for breath as another rifle blast sounded. The gelding convulsed beside him and let out a mournful cry Ridley knew he'd carry to his dying day.

Ridley struggled to stand, but a blow to his back rendered him prostrate. Dirt coated his tongue and he heard laughter floating somewhere above him, along with taunts in thick Southern drawls.

"Look'a here! We got us a lieutenant, Cap'n!" More laughter.

Ridley gasped, the simple effort excruciating. He managed to lift his head and saw the gelding looking straight at him, a flow of blood pulsing from a hole in its side. And with a certainty that knifed his gut, he sensed the animal's confusion, its struggle to understand. Its silent, numbing question of why.

Heat shot through Ridley's veins, filling him with a fire and strength that surprised him. Somehow, he gained his footing and—fists clenched tight—plowed into the corporal closest to him, managing to take him down. As well as the officer next to him.

Movement flashed on his left, but Ridley couldn't react quickly enough. The butt of the rifle connected with a *crack* and pain exploded across his skull. His eyes felt like they were coming out of his head. He was falling again, except this time, the momentum pulled him under. Hard and deep. He struggled to form one last conscious thought, Robert Green's promise returning to mind. He wished he could believe it, but he knew Green's prayers for him would be wasted. God was deaf to them. Deaf to it all.

God had given up on them a long time ago.

Chapter ONE

May 10, 1866

Nashville, Tennessee

Olivia Aberdeen bowed her head as she hurried to the waiting carriage. Stares from people on the street bored into her like rusty nails, but she averted her gaze, certain if her eyes met theirs, the passersby would glimpse traces of guilt and would rush to heap further blame on her for what had happened.

Clutching an envelope in one hand, she accepted the servant's assistance into the carriage. Despite what her late husband had done to the people of Nashville—and to *her*—she couldn't bring herself to spit in the face of propriety. So while her heart was far from grieving the untimely passing of Charles Winthrop Aberdeen, she was properly adorned in the widow's garb befitting a woman of her station in life.

Or what used to be her life.

Settled on the carriage seat, Olivia drew in a deep breath, the first in what felt like five years. She knew it was wrong, what she was feeling. Because a widow of only a week shouldn't wish to dance a jig. But God help her, that's precisely what part of her wanted to do. Not on the grave of her recently deceased husband, of course—that would be considered rude. Just off to the side would suffice.

A swift stab of remorse accompanied the disparaging thought, and she bowed her head again, feeling the hot prick of tears. Merely imagining someone might guess her true feelings scathed her conscience. The duplicity of her circumstances wore on her already-frayed emotions, as did the knowledge that those watching her were also judging her.

But one thing she knew they would agree with her about—including the men who had successfully plotted to kill her husband—Charles Aberdeen had been among the basest of men, lacking in morals and ethics and loyalty to the Confederacy.

She'd never wished Charles dead. But she *had* wished to be severed from their marriage almost from the moment they'd become man and wife in God's eyes. The marriage had been arranged by her father in one of the final decisions of his life—an *irrevocable partnership*, as he'd explained—and Olivia had determined from the outset that what God had joined together, even without her consent, she had no right to put asunder.

Yet it would seem God himself had finally undertaken that task and had performed it with exacting precision and finality. So much so that, despite lingering doubt, she'd begun to wonder in recent days if he really did hear everything, even the silent desperate whisperings of a disillusioned soul.

The possibility brought a measure of comfort, but a greater feeling of unease when considering how little she really knew about his nature. She'd tried to be the very best wife she could be to her late husband, and *this* is how God repaid her.

"I got one trunk already loaded for you, Missus Aberdeen. But where are all the others, ma'am?"

Olivia sat straighter on the carriage seat, struggling to remember the servant's name. He'd only been sent to collect her. "I'm only taking the one trunk . . . Jedediah. I have everything I need in there." And nothing her brother-in-law had forbidden her to take. He'd been named the sole beneficiary of her husband's estate—every last cent of which Charles had gained by cheating, lying, and swindling nearly everyone they knew. Even their friends, as it turned out. Those friends who—thanks to Charles's elder brother, the last of the Aberdeen family—now believed she'd known all along about the far-reaching extent of her husband's shady dealings.

Which she hadn't.

But one thing could be said for Charles Aberdeen . . . he'd not been a respecter of persons when it came to taking advantage of someone. In that regard, he was no better than one of those Union sympathizers or fortune-seeking Northerners. And she wanted nothing that his greed and hypocrisy had garnered. Not even the wedding band—a family heirloom—Charles's brother had demanded she relinquish.

Jedediah peered up at her, his dark brow knitting tight, and she wondered if he understood what was happening to her, if he'd read the newspapers, if he could read at all. She wasn't about to try to explain it to him.

"Everything is fine," she assured, glancing down at the letter in her grip. Or soon would be. Surely Aunt Elizabeth would know what to do to help her navigate these unknown waters.

The carriage leaned to one side as Jedediah climbed to the driver's perch, and Olivia took one last glance at the handsome red-brick two-story house that had never been a home. Something went rigid inside her, and although it was ludicrous, she could've sworn she heard the scrape of mortar being spread on brick. Another layer being added to the wall she'd erected within herself. A wall that distanced her from every shed and unshed tear. Every unmet need. Every harsh word, look, and blow her strikingly handsome husband had bestowed upon her. And as much as she hated how the protective wall had changed her, hardened her, the wall also kept her safe, guarded her from being hurt again and from the sting of betrayal. She'd vowed to never place herself in a position where that could happen again.

And in the somber reflection of the moment, she silently pledged it for a second time.

She looked away, but recklessly so, for her gaze collided with that of a woman standing not ten feet away. The woman, older in years, draped in black, her pale skin sallow, her eyes sunken deep, stared at Olivia, unblinking. The woman's lips moved and Olivia braced herself for whatever she might say. Or scream. But it wasn't words that came from the woman's mouth.

The carriage started forward with a jolt, and Olivia tore her gaze away. But not before she saw the woman wipe the spittle from her chin.

Rigid as stone on the outside, Olivia trained her gaze straight forward as the carriage bumped and jarred over the rain-rutted road, purposefully not looking to the left or the right. A recent newspaper article had reported in detail about the entailment of Charles's estate onto his brother, so no doubt people were aware of her circumstances. Likewise, judging from their reactions, many of them were savoring her comeuppance.

Down Elm Street first, then Pine and Poplar, until, finally, the number of gawking pedestrians mercifully thinned.

Charles.

A traitorous tear edged the corner of her eye, but she put a swift end to it, unwilling to shed one more drop of grief over that man. She didn't miss him, so what was this . . . emptiness she felt inside?

Realization gradually dawned, and with difficulty, she acknowledged what she was feeling. Though she hadn't loved Charles, a part of her did miss what they might have had together if he'd been a different kind of man.

The carriage passed a school, one she'd walked by often and always with a yearning. Though not for what most women might have wanted. Oh, early in their marriage, she had asked God repeatedly for children, truly wanting a child and believing it would help her and Charles's relationship. But God had not granted that request and wisely so, looking back. Charles had blamed the lack of conceiving on her, as he had with everything. And though she still hoped for children someday, *if* she was able, what she wished for now—what she'd wished for growing up—was a chance to nurture in another way.

But even that, Charles had taken from her. Along with everything else. She watched the school disappear from view.

Street traffic was light, so stops and starts were few. But recent summer downpours followed by days of oven-like heat had left the roads deeply scarred and ill-fit for travel. The carriage lurched to one side as a rear wheel slipped into a rut, and Olivia grabbed hold of the door, her stomach knotting. The walls of the carriage seemed to close in, and the horses' struggle to gain footing didn't help her already taut nerves.

If it wasn't so far a distance, she'd get out and walk. As it was, she tried to focus on something else, turning her gaze outward.

The war-torn city was gradually coming back to life again, though the number of boarded-up buildings stood as testament to how far a stretch remained on that journey.

A line of pedestrians trailed out the door of a bakery and that of a telegraph office, while a woman draped in black, like so many others, cradled a squalling infant in one arm and pulled two more children along behind. Men clad in tattered clothes—some still wearing their Confederate coats, now turned a dingy, defeated gray—stood clustered together on street corners, their shoulders thin and stooped beneath invisible burdens.

Olivia swallowed, tasting a bitterness, hating what the war had

done. And to think her husband—and her, by association—had profited from the less fortunate, by helping others to “invest” what little money they had left. No surprise people looked at her with such disdain.

The last image she had of Charles rose in her mind, and she squeezed her eyes tight, wishing she could erase it from memory. The way they’d killed him . . . His body so brutalized and—

Swallowing hard, she pressed back against the cushioned seat and focused on the buildings passing in a foggy blur. She steered her thoughts toward her destination, all while fingering the letter in her lap.

Aunt Elizabeth.

Her mother could not have had a finer friend in this life, nor could her mother have chosen a finer woman to help fill the gaping hole her own passing left. Elizabeth Harding, “aunt” by friendship, was the closest thing to family Olivia had left. She clutched the envelope as if it were her ticket to a new life. *Thank God for you, Elizabeth.*

Where would she be right now if not for this kind and generous invitation?

One might think that going from the wife of Charles Winthrop Aberdeen to being the Harding family’s head housekeeper was a far fall. But managing the day-to-day household activities sounded like a haven to her. She would cook and clean too, if it came to that, and do whatever else was required to repay the Hardings for their kindness in taking her in.

Well, almost anything else . . . The only part of the arrangement that didn’t sit well was having to live in close proximity to General Harding’s spirited thoroughbreds.

She ran a hand over the sleeve of her left arm, still able to feel a slight bump, even through her suit jacket, where the bone had mended thirteen years earlier. She’d been only ten at the time, but the events from that afternoon remained vivid. The pain of the break was memorable enough, as was the unsightly scar. But the excruciating *snap* when the doctor reset the bone had haunted her for years. She hadn’t ridden a horse since. Not until Charles had insisted a year ago.

“Get on the horse, Olivia!” Teeth clenched, he’d gripped her arm tightly.

“Charles, *please* . . . I don’t want to do this. You don’t understand what—”

“You’re embarrassing me. And yourself! Now get on the—”

Her cheeks burned as she recalled his harsh words. A queasiness clenched her mid-section. She'd told him the stallion was too much horse for her. He hadn't listened. Or cared. The horse had thrown her for no apparent reason, then turned and almost trampled her in the process. It had taken weeks for the bruises on her hip and thigh to heal.

She hadn't been on a horse since.

She managed riding in a carriage well enough but didn't like it. And a wagon too, though the nearness the open conveyance afforded to the four-legged beasts was much less preferred. She wished no ill will on the breed as a whole, she simply wished them to be kept far away from her. Which shouldn't be an issue, even at a stud farm like Belle Meade. Not with her serving as head housekeeper to the Hardings.

The terrain outside the carriage window gradually included fewer and fewer buildings until only rolling countryside filled the frame. The air inside the carriage grew overly warm, and Olivia leaned closer to the door, letting the breeze blow across her face. She longed for fall and cooler temperatures, the crisp air and crunch of leaves underfoot. Something about summer giving way to autumn always made her think of new beginnings. Odd really, when nature was going dormant for a season. But she loved the fall and desperately needed a new beginning in her life.

Despite everything that had transpired with Charles and his death, Nashville was the only home she'd ever known. And as certain as fall passed into winter and spring gave way to summer, she knew she would live and die here.

The South was a part of her, and—for better or worse—she would always be a part of it.

The carriage slowed, and Jedediah negotiated a path onto a washboard road leading to the Harding plantation. Within seconds, Olivia was certain her teeth would be jarred completely out of her head. Wealthy as General Harding was, he couldn't dictate the weather or control its aftereffects. Aunt Elizabeth had written to her more than once about the general's determination to pave this road with macadam, and right now Olivia would've wholeheartedly seconded the plan.

After a mile, then another, the ruts seemed to lessen.

She'd been out here only once in the past five years since she and Charles had married, and once with Charles and General Harding in the same room had been more than enough. She remembered

General Harding's exact words: "A man so keenly tied to the Union's interests in both action and opinion smacks of betrayal to the Confederacy and to his fellow countrymen. I'll extend no welcome to him in my home, nor will I claim association with him in any public forum."

Aunt Elizabeth—though she too disdained Unionists—had been more understanding and had written faithfully, even suggesting they meet in town. But Charles had swiftly squelched that idea. Olivia touched the side of her temple, remembering their . . . "discussion."

The letters between her and Elizabeth had been a lifeline, and she cherished them. But she'd been less than honest with her about the intimate details of her marriage. After all, it wasn't proper for a woman to speak of such things. Once, in a letter to Elizabeth, she'd penned the truth of her relationship with Charles. But the very thought of him laying claim to that letter had sent her to the hearth posthaste, and she'd watched the fire devour the engraved stationery, the flames licking up the truth still locked tightly inside her.

She leaned forward on the seat, her anticipation growing at the thought of seeing Elizabeth again. "We'll be waiting for you with open arms, Livvy," Elizabeth had written. "You are like a daughter to me. As much as my own Selene or Mary is." Olivia took a deep breath and held it, smiling on the inside for the first time in she didn't know how long and awaiting that first glimpse of the Belle Meade mansion and its beautiful—

Something caught her eye. *Someone*. A man. Walking up the road a ways. And something about him drew her in.

He carried a ragged-looking pack, like that of a soldier, slung across his back. His gait was measured and unhurried, a fluid confidence accentuating each step. And he was tall, at least as tall as Charles had been.

His hair, dark, with a touch of unruly curl, reached past his collar in a manner more suited to that of a vagrant than a gentleman. Yet his clothes didn't look threadbare like those of the other men she'd seen in town. Still, his trousers were caked in dried mud six inches deep, like he'd been walking for weeks—if not months—on end.

She wondered if he knew where he was going and that this road led to the Hardings' plantation, then on down south through much of nothing, all the way to Natchez, Mississippi. And that, only after traversing the fifty-three hundred acres of wooded meadows and hills that comprised the Belle Meade Plantation.

As the carriage drew closer, Olivia leaned back into the shadows of her protective confines, not wanting the man to see her watching as they passed. But at that very moment he turned and looked back, and their eyes locked.

The distinguishing features of his face were hidden behind a thick beard, one that hadn't seen a trim in weeks, if ever. And although she couldn't pinpoint exactly why, she sensed a determination in him, in the resilient set of his shoulders perhaps or the steady gait of his stride—maybe in the way he carried himself. But he had a wildness about him too, like something caged, recently set free. And that untamed quality made her glad she was in the carriage and he was not.

As the carriage drew closer, she told herself to look away. Too late.

A flash of acknowledgement registered in his eyes. He waved to Jedediah—a short, succinct gesture—then looked back at her. One side of his bearded cheek edged up as though he found her attention amusing, and his teeth showed white in a slow-coming smile. He brought his hand to his forehead—just as the carriage passed him—and snapped a smart salute, then he—

Olivia felt her mouth slip open. He'd *winked* at her? Her face heated. She focused forward, gripping the cushioned velvet beneath her as the carriage bumped and jostled down the road.

For a moment, she wondered if she'd imagined it, yet knew she hadn't. The audacity. The nerve of that—

As Jedediah guided the carriage around a narrow bend, she half turned on the seat, wanting to peer back out the window. But she resisted the urge, somehow knowing he would still be watching. And smiling! She sighed. The war had taken so much from them, not the least of which, it seemed, was chivalry.

But General Harding, who held honor in the highest regard, would send that scoundrel packing soon enough. Belle Meade had more workers than they could use. Elizabeth had said as much in a recent letter, and the general was particular about who he hired.

Another mile passed before it occurred to her . . .

She looked out the window and exhaled. Her view to the right was now blocked by a hillside creviced with Tennessee limestone. Watching him had caused her to miss the first glimpse of Belle Meade. Now she'd have to wait another mile or so before seeing the—

Without warning, a thundering crack exploded somewhere behind her and the carriage swerved hard to the right. Thrown from

her seat, Olivia grappled for a hold as the conveyance seemed to drop out from beneath her. Wood groaning, shuddering in protest, the carriage jerked, and she fell hard against the door—and felt it give way.

She scrambled to grab onto something, *anything*, as the ground rushed up to meet her. But it was the feral scream coming from somewhere in front of the carriage that sent a chill straight through her bones.

Chapter TWO

After what felt like a lifetime, the carriage slammed to a halt, and the deafening crunch of wood siphoned the air from Olivia's lungs. Eyes clenched tight, she waited, still as stone, to make sure it was over.

No matter how she tried, she couldn't get that scream out of her mind. It had come from one of the horses, she felt certain.

She wanted to move but was afraid whatever part of her body she commanded to obey wouldn't. An erratic *thump-thump-thump* came from somewhere nearby, and it took her several breaths to realize it was her own heartbeat.

"Missus Aberdeen . . . Can you hear me, ma'am?"

Recognizing Jedediah's voice—far away though it sounded—Olivia blinked her eyes, but her *yes* came out a strangled whisper as she found herself staring at the carriage ceiling. The conveyance was tilted back, hulked to one side as if squatting on its wounded right haunch. The window to her left framed a swath of blue sky, but the view to her right, more ground level, was obstructed by a slab of limestone cratering in the side of the carriage—just where she'd been sitting.

Feeling the walls close in around her, she was reaching for the door when her world suddenly lurched again. The carriage shifted and one of the horses let out a high-pitched whinny. Olivia braced for another onslaught but the rock wall refused to relinquish hold.

"Whoa there, girls. Steady now, steady . . . I just need to cut you loose . . ." Jedediah's voice carried over the horse's complaints.

Olivia prayed he would hurry, wanting nothing more than to be untethered from the wild beasts.

Her skirts—and emotions—in disarray, she pushed herself up and gave the left door handle a quick yank. It held fast. Determined and fighting a closed-in feeling, she put more weight behind the effort, not easily done with gravity working against her. Pain shot through her shoulder, cutting the attempt short.

A familiar panic, one she loathed, began to thrum deep within. She debated on gathering her hoop skirt and trying to climb out the window, but that would hardly be proper. And she doubted she'd fit anyway, not with her bustle. Pulling in a calming breath, she took quick mental inventory.

Other than the ache in her shoulder where she'd hit the door, she didn't think she was injured. Not seriously anyway. Certainly nothing was broken.

A hasty tread of footsteps, and Jedediah appeared in the window. "Missus Aberdeen!" With the carriage tilted as it was, he could barely see over the edge. "Is you hurt, ma'am? Cuz if you is . . . oh, Lawd—" He mopped the sheen of sweat from his brow with a wadded bandanna. "Missus Harding ain't never gonna forgive me."

Olivia summoned calm she didn't feel. "I'm not hurt, Jedediah. A little sore, perhaps, and bruised. What happened?"

"It's that confounded wheel, ma'am." He gestured. "It done cracked and gave way. 'Bout scared the mares to death, and me too. One of 'em done run off." He motioned. "The other's hurt pretty bad. Got a busted up foreleg. Tried to take a chunk outta my arm when I cut her reins loose. She can be downright mean when she puts her mind to it. Won't let me come near her. I'm guessin' we might have to put her down." He shook his head. "General gonna be none too happy 'bout that. But here . . ." He stuffed the bandanna back in his pocket. "Let's get you outta there, ma'am. I hate to say it, but we be havin' to walk the rest of the way. But it ain't too terrible far. And I heard Missus Harding say they'd be waitin' to greet you."

Jedediah gripped the door latch, but it didn't open. He tried again. Nothing. Olivia could've sworn the cramped space inside the carriage shrank by half.

"Can't you get it open?" she asked, smoothing the angst from her voice.

He worked the latch repeatedly. "This door's good and stuck, ma'am. It just ain't wantin' to give."

Feeling more corralled by the second, Olivia pushed her shoulder

hard against the door, more for want of control than thinking anything might come from the effort.

"It ain't budgin', ma'am. But I'm bettin' that if I had me some tools, I could spring it."

"And do you have these tools with you, Jedediah?"

"Not the ones I need, ma'am. They's back at Belle Meade."

"Well . . ." She let out a breath, not relishing the prospect of being stuck inside here for an hour or more. But then . . . perhaps—she eyed the width of the window again, wondering—she might not have to wait after all. "Jedediah." She smiled. "I suggest you go ahead and be on your way, then you can retrieve the necessary tools and return for me."

His forehead crinkled. "I can't be leavin' you on your lonesome, ma'am. Why . . . the general, he'd—"

"I'll be fine, I assure you." She put on her most polite yet insistent smile. "And—" She glanced down the road toward Belle Meade. "The sooner you go, the sooner I'll be freed."

Not looking at all convinced, Jedediah shook his head. "It just ain't right, me leavin' you here, Missus Aberdeen. I don't fancy the—"

"I'm a grown woman, Jedediah, and am perfectly capable of taking care of myself in your brief absence." She held back a smile this time and could tell by the deep furrows bridging his nose that she was getting her point across. "And what's more, I hate the thought of Mrs. Harding standing there on the porch, waiting and watching. You said yourself she'd be looking for me."

"Yes'um, I did say that." He rubbed his jaw then sighed. "Got a crate of apples up top, if you want one 'fore I go. If you's hungry."

"Thank you, Jedediah. But I'm *not* hungry. I just want out of here."

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded. "I be runnin' the whole way, Missus Aberdeen. So you just sit tight." He set off down the road at a hasty clip.

Olivia waited for a couple of moments, making certain he was gone, then took several deep breaths, sizing up the window. And then herself. She'd never taken part in tree-climbing, a tomboyish pastime that her mother, God rest her soul, had frowned upon. And with good reason, Olivia knew. But right now, she wished she'd at least attempted to scale the lowest limbs of a friendly dogwood. The experience would have proven helpful.

She peered through the window to the ground below. It was farther

than she'd anticipated, but the thought of being prisoner inside this carriage bolstered her courage. She could do this. She'd never done anything like it before, of course. But she could do it.

She gained her footing and hitched up her hoop skirt, gathering the yards of black fabric and lace around her waist. Holding on to the side of the window, she eased her leg through, but quickly discovered that the bottom of the window was higher than she'd thought. The lace on her pantalets caught on the window's edge. She tugged the fabric, but it held fast.

She pulled harder, determined, and felt the material rip just as she felt herself falling backward. Frantic, she grabbed the side of the door to steady herself. Then laughed, thinking how foolish she must look.

With renewed courage, she stretched her leg as far as she could down alongside the carriage until she felt the rim of the step beneath her boot tip. She tapped it with her toes, testing its strength. Then took another breath and put her full weight on it. She scrunched her upper body and had just managed to get her head through the window when—

She heard whistling. And looked up.

It was *him*. The man they'd passed on the road earlier. He'd rounded the corner but was looking down and, judging by his lack of reaction, hadn't seen her—yet.

Faster than she would have imagined possible, Olivia dragged herself back into the carriage, snagging her hair, her pantalets, her petticoat, and nearly everything else in the process. She backed away from the window, but her heel caught in her hem and she fell, nothing but air behind her. She went down hard, landing on the cushioned seat and whacking the back of her head on the wooden paneling.

Lying on her back, her head throbbing, nearly drowning in a sea of whale bone, crinoline, and lace, she gritted her teeth and recalled a word Charles had used all too frequently when frustrated. Knowing he would have used it helped her not to.

Footsteps refocused her attention just as a somewhat-familiar face appeared in the window. But instead of the slow-coming smile he'd worn earlier, concern lined his expression. "You're still in here!" He was winded from running and his gaze moved over her in an appraising fashion. "Are you all right?"

Aware of her state, Olivia tugged the folds of fabric down over her underskirts and pantalets, grateful he had the decency to look away,

albeit not long enough. "I'm fine," she said, smoothing the front of her dress. "For the most part anyway."

"I looked up and saw the carriage, and—what happened?"

"It was the wheel." She gestured behind her. "We hit one too many ruts, I'm guessing."

"And your driver? Where is he?"

"He went for help."

"And left you here? Alone?"

His query gave her pause, as did his forthrightness. Both made her aware of just how alone she was. Correction. How alone *they* were. And she began to question the wisdom of having sent Jedediah ahead. Yet she knew better than to show uncertainty. Or fear. Revealing weakness to a man gave him power. Power she would never give a man again.

She straightened and made herself look him in the eyes, grateful for the barrier between them. "It was at my insistence he took his leave, sir. The door is jammed and he went to get help. But I'm certain he'll be returning posthaste!" She glanced beyond him as if expecting to see Jedediah any second, knowing full well there was no way the servant would be back this soon. But *he* didn't know that.

Piercing eyes of hazel—or were they blue? She couldn't quite tell—met hers, and she found herself wanting to avoid the gaze of this man who seemed far less like a vagrant upon closer inspection—and yet somehow, even more *untamed*.

He tried the door handle—*once, twice*—to no avail. And somewhat to her relief. "It's stuck all right."

"As I said."

There it was again, that slow-coming roguish smile. "I'm glad you're all right, ma'am. The horses . . . what happened to them?"

"Jedediah cut them loose. He said they ran off."

He eyed the carriage. "I've seen my share of these fancy rigs turn over on roads not nearly as torn up as this one. And you're lucky too, seeing which wheel snapped, that you didn't go sailing right out that door."

She trailed his gaze, saw the carnage of crushed wood and bent metal again, and frowned. She clearly remembered that door coming open and the sensation of falling. So . . . how then had she *not* fallen out?

"I need to offer you an apology, ma'am."

That brought her attention back around.

His gaze swept her dress, then lifted. “A few minutes ago . . . back on the road, I—I winked at you, ma’am.” His grip tightened on his pack. “I didn’t realize you were in mourning. The inside of the carriage was dark and all I saw was how you were staring at me and—”

“I was not *staring* at you, sir.” The words were out before she could catch them, and Olivia did her best to appear appropriately affronted. “I was merely looking at you as the carriage passed.” But she had to glance away as she said it, knowing it wasn’t the full truth. Or even a partial one.

“Of course, ma’am. I didn’t mean to insinuate anything on your part. I’m sorry.” His mouth didn’t turn but she’d have sworn he was smiling on the inside. “But even if you *had* been staring, which you weren’t, I realize,” he added quickly, “I shouldn’t have winked. It was—”

“Improper,” she supplied, daring herself not to blink.

“Yes, ma’am. And therefore—” He tilted his head, a ghost of a smile showing. “My offered apology.”

Sensing his sincerity only made her feel more guilty about the lie, which in turn made her more eager for him to leave. “And your apology is kindly accepted. But now . . .” She looked beyond him, hoping he’d take the genteel hint. “Understanding that help is already on the way, you needn’t feel any obligation to stay with me. I’m quite capable on my own.”

“I have no doubt about that, ma’am.” He stepped back and studied the window. “But if you’re game, I’d be happy to help you climb through there.”

Not about to admit she’d already tried—and still intended—to do that very thing, Olivia drew herself up. “Climbing through a window is hardly behavior suitable for a lady.”

He laughed and rubbed his bearded jaw. “Perhaps not . . . *m’lady*.” He said it with a touch of haughtiness, bowing at the waist like some English lord. “But you’d be out of there and on your way again. Which is your objective, is it not, Mrs. . . . ?”

Olivia leveled a disapproving stare, something she’d done once with Charles but never again, having paid for that mistake dearly. But this man wasn’t Charles, and she didn’t appreciate his taking the liberty of asking for her name instead of waiting until they’d been properly introduced. She had the feeling he’d done it intentionally too, knowing it would rile her.

She wasn't taking the bait. "I thank you, sir, for stopping to ascertain my well-being. But I believe it would be best to wait until help arrives. And—if you will allow me—I also believe your assistance would be best lent in going for help as well."

Laugh lines crinkled the corners of his eyes. "You want me to leave."

"I didn't say that."

"No, ma'am, you didn't. Not outright. But you said it well enough just the same."

Olivia didn't know how to respond. He was so direct. So free with his opinions—and his apologies, but she swept the latter point aside. There were proper rules of etiquette to be followed between a man and woman, especially when they were strangers, and this man seemed bent on plowing through them all. "What I'm attempting to say to you, sir—"

"I know what you're saying, ma'am. So I'm only going to ask you this once more. Do you want me to help you climb out of there or not?"

She drew herself up. "I do not."

"No one's going to see."

"I don't care who sees, it's the—"

"Suit yourself then." He took a step back. "After all, this seems like a safe enough road, and you *are* locked inside a carriage. By my calculation, we can't be more than a couple of miles from Belle Meade, so it shouldn't be long before your driver returns."

Olivia eyed him. "So . . . you *know* where you're going then?"

He looked at her as though she were daft. "Generally I try to make that the case, yes, ma'am. Don't you?"

She suppressed a sigh. "What I meant was . . . you're aware that this road leads to the Belle Meade Plantation?"

"I am."

"Well." Feeling as though she had the upper hand and enjoying it, Olivia smoothed her skirt. "If it saves you any trouble, I can tell you that General Harding isn't hiring right now. He has all the help he needs."

"Is that right? So you're privy to General Harding's business, are you? You must be close to the family."

Olivia read bemusement, rather than disappointment, in his expression and found it irritating. Same as she found him. Yet she hesitated, not wanting to overstate her relationship with the Harding

family, especially considering the conditions of her coming to live with them. "I'm acquainted with the general, sir. But I enjoy a much closer friendship with his wife. It's through her knowledge of her husband's dealings that I'm privy to this fact."

He nodded, obviously weighing the information. "I thank you for your counsel, ma'am. But with all due respect, I've come a long way to get here. I think I'll take my chances."

Olivia bristled at her advice being so summarily dismissed. And by someone like him. "I was simply trying to spare you further wasted effort. It seems such a shame" —she peered over the window's edge and down at his mud-covered trousers— "considering how far you've apparently traveled."

He smiled even as the bluish hazel of his eyes darkened. "Your *kindness* is duly noted. And while I may not get what I've come for, ma'am, I won't consider my effort in getting here wasted." He looked up the road toward Belle Meade, then back again. "If I'd never tried to get here . . . now *that* would have been the real waste."

Reaching up, he tipped an imaginary hat and strode on without a backward glance. She followed him with her gaze as he rounded the bend and disappeared from sight. But his words resonated inside her.

I may not get what I've come for . . .

She hadn't wanted him to stay with her. She preferred him gone. So why this unexpected interest in knowing what had brought the man to Belle Meade? She couldn't account for it, but one thing she knew. She wasn't waiting for Jedediah to return. She wanted out of this carriage.

Spotting Aunt Elizabeth's letter below her on the seat, she retrieved it, stuffed it in her skirt pocket, then hiked up her skirts. Gripping the door, she maneuvered her leg through the window, more smoothly this time than before. She smiled. This wasn't going to be as hard as she'd thought. But the trick was . . . how did she get the rest of her through without falling?

The mounds of fabric only served to slow her progress, bunching around her waist and making it hard to get a good hold. Taking a deep breath and letting it out, she tucked her chin against her chest and tried to make herself as small as she could. Then she forced her head through the narrow space and was almost through when her shoulder caught.

She tugged and pulled, but it was no use. The opening was too

small. She groaned, the muscles in the back of her neck burning. She was loathe to admit it, but her plan of escape was ill-concocted.

Tucking her chin again, she ducked her head to push it back through—but her hair caught. She huffed a breath, wishing she'd never started this. She managed to free her hair only to discover she was hung on something else from behind. She reached around, feeling for where she was snagged when she caught movement from the corner of her eye.

One of the horses.

It broke through the pine trees lining the opposite side of the road and limped toward her. Blood ran down its leg from a gash, ugly and deep, and another line trickled down the side of its neck. The horse paused near the middle of the road, lowered its head, and exhaled a blast of air that sent dust and dirt flying. Olivia went weak inside. Scarcely able to breathe, she made herself go perfectly still. If she didn't move, maybe the animal wouldn't see her.

As if reading her thoughts, the horse raised its head and looked directly at her, then snorted and pawed the ground. All Olivia could think about was that stallion nearly trampling her. And though the thought was absurd, she knew, she sensed accusation in the mare's actions and recalled what Jedediah had said about the horse. . . *Tried to take a chunk outta my arm when I cut her reins loose. She can be downright mean when she puts her mind to it.*

It started toward her again, limping, and Olivia fought to free herself. With every step the horse took, Olivia's efforts grew more frantic. "It's just a horse, Olivia. Just a horse," she repeated, words her father had said to her years ago, the day following the accident, her tiny arm throbbing and bandaged. "It won't hurt you if you treat it right," he'd said.

But her father had been wrong. She had treated that horse right, and it had thrown her. She'd treated Charles as best she could too. And he'd hurt her. Over and over and over again. And no amount of bandages or salve was going to heal the wounds he'd left behind.

Not wanting to, Olivia forced herself to look back, and the painful knot at the base of her throat twisted tighter. The horse was close now—too close—and was sniffing the air, chomping at the bit. No doubt wanting to chomp into her, just like Jedediah had said.

Tears burning, the scar on her arm aching, Olivia tossed pride and propriety to the wind and screamed for all she was worth.