

CHRISTMAS
at CARNTON



TAMERA ALEXANDER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

CHAPTER I



NOVEMBER 13, 1863
FRANKLIN, TENNESSEE
21 MILES SOUTH OF NASHVILLE

“Very nice stitching, Mrs. Prescott.”

Aletta looked up, not having heard her employer’s approach. Focused on her task, she was determined to leave the factory on time that afternoon. It was a special day, after all, and Andrew would be excited. Her son needed this encouragement. They both did. “Thank you, Mr. Bodeen, for your kind words.”

“You always do excellent work, Mrs. Prescott. Every stitch so straight and even, perfectly matching the one before.”

She smiled her thanks despite perceiving a negative quality in his voice. Not that Mr. Bodeen ever sounded jovial. Unmarried, not much older than she was, he always seemed a sad sort. A discontented, melancholy man. But then, how could any able-bodied, healthy man maintain a sense of self-worth,

much less pride, when he'd chosen to stay behind and work in a factory instead of joining the rest of the men who'd left home and loved ones to fight in the war?

Like her beloved Warren had done.

Her throat tightened with emotion. Would it always hurt this much? She swallowed. Nearly one month to the day since she'd received the letter from the War Department, yet she still had trouble believing he was gone. Perhaps if she could see his body one last time, she'd be better able to accept that—

“Would you join me in my office, Mrs. Prescott?”

“In your office, sir?” Aletta paused mid-stitch and looked across the rows of seamstresses to the clock on the factory wall. A quarter past four. Almost another hour before her shift was over. Then she felt the stares.

She looked around only to see the other women quickly bowing their heads and turning curious gazes back to their work. Except for one woman. On the opposite side of the factory. Aletta recognized her. Marian, she thought her name was. They'd begun working at Chilton Textile Mills about the same time. Marian was gathering her coat and reticule—and wiping tears from her eyes.

“Mrs. Prescott.” Mr. Bodeen gestured. “My office, please.”

Aletta laid aside the garment she'd been sewing, bothered by having to set it aside unfinished, while the greater part of her sensed that unfinished stitches should be the least of her concerns.

She followed him down the aisle, then past rows of co-workers, the click of her heeled boots marking off the seconds as the tension in the room swiftly registered.

Mr. Bodeen's office proved to be considerably more insulated

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from winter's chill than the factory, and she rubbed her hands together, welcoming the warmth while also trying to control her nerves. Her knuckles were stiff and swollen from long hours of stitching. But she had only to think of what Warren had endured to silence that frivolous complaint.

He'd always been careful not to reveal too many details about the war in his letters. But one night during his furlough home in April—the last time she'd seen him—after he'd banished any doubt she might have had about his continued desire for her, he'd lain beside her in the darkness and talked into the wee hours of morning. He talked all about the battles, life in the encampments, and the countless friends he'd made—and lost—during the war. “Friends as close as any brothers I might've had,” he'd whispered, his strong arms tightening around her, his breath warm on her skin. “There's one fellow from right here in Franklin. Emmett Zachary. You'd like him, Lettie. Maybe you and his wife, Kate, could meet up sometime.”

She'd never heard him go on like that. So unfettered, as though the weight of his soul had grown too heavy for him to bear alone. His words had painted indelible pictures in her mind. Images she'd have wished to erase, but for Warren's fingerprint on them.

Anything from him was something she wanted to hold on to.

She'd made a point to look up Kate Zachary, and they'd even had tea on two occasions. But the hours in each day seemed to fly, as did the weeks, and she hadn't seen Kate since the afternoon she'd visited her to tell her about the letter she'd received from the War Department. “. . . *slain on the battlefield, having given the ultimate sacrifice for love of home and defense of country*” is how the letter had been worded.

The notice had arrived only two days after she'd received a hastily written letter from Warren telling her he was faring well enough and that he'd penned two more letters to her that he would send shortly. The letters never arrived.

What she wouldn't give to have them now. To have him back.

"Please have a seat, Mrs. Prescott."

Aletta did as Mr. Bodeen asked, her gaze falling to a handwritten list atop his desk. Was it a list of names? She attempted a closer look as she sat. It was hard to read the writing upside down, and yet—

She was fairly certain she saw Marian's name, the coworker she'd seen crying moments earlier. Aletta swallowed, panic clawing its way up her chest.

"Mrs. Prescott, you know how much we appreciate your work. How you—"

"Please don't take away my job, Mr. Bodeen. Reduce my hours if you need to, but—"

"Mrs. Prescott, I—"

"I'm behind on the mortgage, Mr. Bodeen. And keeping food in the pantry is already a challenge. Mr. Stewart at the mercantile has extended my credit as far as he can, and I don't know what I'll—"

"I wish there were something else I could do, ma'am, but—"

"I have a son, sir. Andrew. He's six years old. Today, in fact." She tried to smile and failed. "He's waiting for me even now because we're supposed to—"

"Mrs. Prescott!" His voice was sharp. "Please do not make this more difficult on me than it already is. You are an exceptional worker, and I've written you an outstanding reference. Which is more than I'm doing for the others." He pushed a piece of paper across the desk.

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Numb, Aletta could only stare at it, the words on the page blurring in her vision.

“With the war, customers aren’t buying clothing like they used to. And there’s simply not enough work for the seamstresses we’ve employed. I’m sorry. You were one of the last women we hired, so it only seemed fitting.”

“But you complimented me a moment ago. You said I always do excellent work.”

“I know what I said, Mrs. Prescott.” He averted his gaze. “I was hoping to . . . soften the blow.”

She blinked and moved a hand to her midsection, feeling as though she’d been gut-punched, as Warren might’ve said. It had taken her weeks to find this job, and that had been almost a year ago—after she’d lost her job at the bakery. The town of Franklin was in far worse shape economically now than then. Up until a couple of months ago, the Federal Army’s occupation of the town had made for a tenuous existence for Franklin residents. Especially considering the garrisons of soldiers encamped in and around Fort Granger while thousands of Confederate troops were entrenched only miles away.

But according to recent reports in the newspaper, the Federal Army had moved farther south, leaving only a small garrison behind in the fort. The absence of Federal soldiers in town seemed to substantiate those reports.

Mr. Bodeen rose, so she did likewise, her mind in a fog.

“Mrs. Prescott, today being Friday, you may collect this week’s wages from the accounting office as you leave.”

She struggled to think of other arguments to offer on her behalf, but none came. And even if they had, she didn’t think he would listen. His mind was decided. She retrieved the letter

of recommendation, folded it, and stuffed it into her skirt pocket.

Moments later, she exited the factory and walked to the corner, numb, not knowing what to do, where to go. So she started walking. And with each footfall, snatches of the conversation from Mr. Bodeen's office returned on a wave of disbelief. And anger. *"Please do not make this more difficult on me than it already is."*

Difficult on *him*?

She had half a mind to turn around, march right back into his office, and tell him what difficult truly looked like. Yet such a decision would undoubtedly mean she'd forfeit her letter of reference. Which she sorely needed to help distinguish herself from the flood of other women seeking employment.

Already, evergreen wreaths dotted the occasional storefront, some wreaths adorned with various shades of ribbon, others with sprigs of holly, the red berries festive with holiday color. One bold shopkeeper had even hung a bouquet of mistletoe in the entryway. But despite the hints of Christmas, Aletta couldn't bring herself to feel the least bit festive. Not this year.

Approaching the train station, she saw a man seated on the corner of the street. He was holding a tin cup. Beggars were commonplace these days, and she hated that she didn't have much to give him. As she grew closer, though, she realized he wasn't seated. He was an amputee. The man had lost both of his legs. He turned and met her gaze, and the haunting quality in his expression wouldn't let her look away.

He was blond with ruddy skin and didn't look like Warren at all. Yet all she could see was her husband. How had Warren died? On the battlefield, yes, but had he suffered? Oh, she prayed he hadn't. She prayed his death had been swift. That he'd been

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surging forward in one breath and then drinking in the breath of heaven in the next.

She reached into her reticule and withdrew a coin—one of precious few remaining even counting this week’s wages—and dropped it in the cup, the *clink* of metal on metal severing the moment.

“God bless you, ma’am.”

“And you, sir,” she whispered, then continued on even as a familiar sinking feeling pressed down inside her. President Lincoln had recently issued a proclamation to set apart and observe the last Thursday of this month as a day of thanksgiving and praise to the Almighty. But, God forgive her, she didn’t feel very grateful right now. And it hurt to even think about celebrating Christmas without Warren.

She hiccupped a breath, the freezing temperature gradually registering as her body cooled from the exertion of walking. She slowed her steps and wrapped her arms around herself as a shiver started deep inside. She tugged her coat tighter around her abdomen, no longer able to fasten the buttons.

Seven months and one week. By her calculations, that’s how far along she was.

She knew because that was how long it had been since Warren’s furlough. They’d been so careful when they’d been together, or had tried to be. *Oh dear God* . . . How had she let this happen? What was she going to do? She tried not to let her thoughts go to the dark places again, as she thought of them. She was a woman of faith, after all. She believed in God’s loving care.

Yet there were times, like this, when her faith seemed far too fragile for the burdens of life. She wished she could hide her

thoughts from him. Wished the Lord couldn't see the doubts she courted even in the midst of struggling to believe. But he saw everything. Heard every unuttered thought. And right now, that truth wasn't the least comforting.

Guilt befriending her worry, she continued down the thoroughfare.

When she reached Baker Street, she turned right. Ten minutes later, she paused at the corner of Fifth and Vine and looked at the house two doors down. Their home. A modest residence Warren had purchased for them four years earlier with the aid of a loan from the Franklin Bank. A loan the bank was threatening to call in.

And now she'd lost her only means of support. And stood to lose all their equity in the home as well if she couldn't convince the bank to give her more time. She'd considered selling, but no one was buying. Yet when—or if—the economy finally improved and houses did start selling again, she couldn't sell if she'd been evicted. She continued past her home and toward her friend's house a short distance away.

She'd waited until late August to write Warren about the baby, wanting to be as certain as she could be—following two miscarriages in the last two years—that the pregnancy was going to be sustained. Yet he hadn't mentioned anything about their coming child in his last letter. Had he even known about the baby before his death? The Federal Army had recently blockaded certain southern ports, seizing all correspondence belonging to the Confederate Postal System. So perhaps he'd never received her letter. Or maybe that explained why his last two letters had gone—

“Mama!”

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Nearing MaryNell's house, Aletta looked up to see Andrew racing toward her from down the street, his thin legs pumping. She hurried to meet him.

"What are you doing outside, honey?" She hugged him tight, his little ears like ice. "And without your coat and scarf?"

"It's okay. I'm not cold. Me and Seth, we're playin' outside while his mother visits with the bank man."

Aletta frowned, aware of Seth watching them from the front yard. MaryNell Goodall knew how susceptible Andrew was to illness and that he needed to bundle up in this bitter weather. Born three weeks early, he'd always been on the smaller side. And despite having a healthy appetite—the boy would eat all day if she could afford to let him—he'd never caught up in size to boys his own age.

What was going to happen to him now that she'd lost her job? How would she provide for him? And, in scarcely two months, the baby?

It occurred to her then that her lack of employment would also affect MaryNell. When MaryNell lost her own job a few months earlier, she'd offered to watch Andrew—and teach him at home like she was already teaching Seth. MaryNell claimed that keeping two boys was easier than keeping one, and Aletta knew there was some truth to that statement. And since dear Mrs. Crawford, the woman who had kept Andrew up until then, had moved to North Carolina to live with one of her children, MaryNell's offer had been a perfectly timed blessing. Only four streets away from theirs, too, and with Seth and Andrew already such good friends.

Aletta insisted on paying MaryNell a small wage each week. Still, she didn't know how the woman made ends meet, having

no job and being behind on her mortgage as well. Not to mention not having heard from her husband, Richard, in over three months. His silence didn't bode well. But there was still hope. And MaryNell, as soft-spoken as she was and uncommonly pretty, had never once complained.

Despite the worry settling in her chest, Aletta glimpsed the excitement in Andrew's eyes and attempted a lightness to her voice. "Let's collect your coat so we can go home and start celebrating your birthday!"

"You're still gonna make my favorite pie?"

"Of course I am." She'd saved for weeks to buy the ingredients for the chocolate cream pie—sugar, vanilla, and cocoa being so expensive and hard to come by. Now all she could think about was how much further she could've stretched that money. But it was Andrew's birthday, and she was determined to make it special. She climbed the steps to the porch and knocked on the door.

MaryNell answered a moment later, her expression revealing surprise. "Aletta! You're early. But . . . good for you. I'm always saying you work far too hard as it is." Hesitating briefly, she finally stepped to one side. "Come in. I let the boys go outside to play for a bit."

"Yes, I saw them," Aletta said softly, then spotted a man seated on the settee.

He stood as she entered and looked between her and MaryNell, and Aletta got the feeling she'd interrupted something.

"Mr. Cornwall," MaryNell finally said, her voice tight. "Allow me to introduce Mrs. Warren Prescott. Aletta, this is Mr. Cornwall. He's . . . an acquaintance. From Franklin Bank."

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Tall and barrel chested, Cornwall was heavy around his middle and a good deal older. He had a commanding air about him, but not one that inspired. And although MaryNell had called him an acquaintance, Aletta found it odd that her friend couldn't seem to look the man in the eye. And since when did *acquaintances* from the bank make house calls?

"Mrs. Prescott." He glanced at her. "Pleasure to meet you, I'm sure."

Aletta nodded, but he'd already looked away. "Likewise, sir."

He turned then, and, whether by intention or not, he angled himself in MaryNell's direction, making it impossible for Aletta to see his face.

"Mrs. Goodall, I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon, and I look forward to hearing from you soon."

MaryNell's gaze flitted to his. "Yes. I'll . . . be in touch."

He strode out the door and closed it behind him.

Aletta watched him through the window as he continued past the boys, who were playing cowboys and Indians. As her gaze followed him down the street, a sickening suspicion brewed inside her that she didn't want to imagine, much less acknowledge. But when she looked back at MaryNell and glimpsed the dread and guilt in her friend's expression, she was all but certain her suspicions were true.

CHAPTER 2



“Well”—MaryNell quickly turned away—“let me fetch Andrew’s coat for you. I know you must be eager to get home. Today being his birthday and all.”

“MaryNell . . .” Aletta attempted to gain her attention, but to no avail. How did she even begin to broach such a subject? And what if her suspicions proved wrong? It could mean the end of their friendship. On the other hand . . . if Mr. Cornwall’s visit *was* of a sordid nature as Aletta suspected—he hailing from the bank and MaryNell being behind on her mortgage—how could she stand by and say nothing?

MaryNell handed her Andrew’s coat and scarf, avoiding her gaze. “Here you go. I hope you two have a pleasant evening.”

“MaryNell . . . I realize you may think this is none of my business and you may well be right, but I—”

“Andrew tells me you’re making your famous chocolate cream pie tonight. He’s only mentioned it six or seven times today.”

Neither the abrupt change in topic nor the forced brightness in MaryNell’s tone could mask the hint of unshed tears—and

fear—in her eyes. But they did all but answer the question in Aletta’s mind. And she felt sick inside.

She knew that fear, knew how swiftly life could change. So many widows, so many fatherless children. Life was so precarious. She’d asked Warren before he’d left if he was certain he could take another man’s life. “Aletta, I think every man is capable of killing another man . . . given the right circumstances.” Did that same thinking apply to a woman too? Could a woman commit acts she’d usually never dream of?

“Yes, I’m making that pie,” she said softly. “It’s his favorite.” Then a thought occurred. “Why don’t you and Seth come over for a slice this evening? And we’ll celebrate together.”

The knowing look in MaryNell’s expression said she was wise to the motivation behind the invitation. “Thank you, Aletta. But . . . not tonight.” She walked to the door.

Aletta followed, then paused beside her, realizing she hadn’t told her the news yet. The words didn’t come easily. “I . . . lost my job at the factory today. Several of us did, in fact.”

“Oh, Aletta. I’m so sorry. Truly.”

Aletta nodded. “Thank you.”

The silence stretched and MaryNell started to open the door, but Aletta covered her friend’s hand on the knob.

“If there’s anything you need, MaryNell, I’m here. I’ll do anything I can to help you. You’re not alone, please know that.”

MaryNell looked at her, the false brightness in her expression faltering only for a second. Then she looked away, taking a quick breath. “Seth will miss seeing Andrew every day. But we’ll be sure to get the boys together again soon.”

MaryNell opened the door and Aletta stepped outside, the bitter cold wind all but blowing straight through her.

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CONFEDERATE CAMP
OUTSKIRTS OF NASHVILLE

“Hold still for me, Captain Winston.”

The steel scalpel cold against his temple, Jake obliged as the doctor cut the bandages from around his eyes. “I take it you’ve done this before, Doc.”

The army surgeon laughed beneath his breath. “Nope. You’re the first.”

Hearing the teasing in the older man’s voice, Jake smiled to mask the tightness in his chest, trying his best not to let his thoughts go where the deliberately imposed darkness of the past seven days had threatened to take them.

“I consulted with another surgeon, Captain, who agreed with my diagnosis. Allowing your eyes to rest for the past few days, especially with that salve on them, should have advanced the healing process. Once I remove the bandages, I want you to keep your eyes closed.”

With the cloths removed, the coolness of the air intensified around Jake’s eyes. Even with them still shut, he sensed the brightness inside the hospital tent, which wasn’t a surprise. He wasn’t blind, after all. The whack on his head he’d suffered after being shot had simply blurred his vision a little.

“I’m handing you a warm compress, Captain . . .”

Jake opened his hands.

“Press it gently to your eyes. It will help dissolve whatever salve remains.”

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Jake complied, the warmth and moisture feeling good. He rubbed carefully, the ointment's once-pungent scent, smelling a little like bitterroot and rosemary, all but gone.

"Now, still holding the cloth up to your eyes, I want you to open them a little at a time. Let your eyes adjust to the light."

Jake squinted, then winced. Even the dimness of the tent seemed overbright. Finally, after a moment or so, he managed to open his eyes fully. He blinked as his immediate world came into view.

"How do things look, Captain Winston?"

Jake held his hand out in front of him. "So far, so good, Doc."

The physician handed him a book. "Try reading for me."

Jake opened the cover and flipped over a few pages—and felt that unwelcome tug on his thoughts returning again. He squinted. "I can read the words. But they're a mite fuzzy."

"That could be due to some lingering salve."

Jake nodded, but he didn't think so. He'd wiped the ointment clean.

"Try your rifle sight next."

The doctor crossed to the entry of the tent and pulled back the flap. The cold followed quickly on the heels of a dull November sun as Jake pulled the sight from his pocket and peered through. His pulse edged up a notch. He closed his right eye, then opened it again, trying to focus. But couldn't. He swallowed hard.

"Don't be discouraged, Captain. Similar to the wound in your shoulder, your eyesight needs time to heal. At this point, we still have every reason to believe your full sight will return."

Again Jake nodded. But the apprehension in the surgeon's

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expression, and the way the man looked away when he spoke, told him a different story.

A story no sharpshooter ever wanted to hear.



"I'm here to see Mr. Tanner, please." Aletta attempted to appear composed while Andrew tugged on her hand, doing his best to pull away. But she noticed other patrons in the bank beginning to stare.

The young woman behind the desk glanced down at an open ledger. "And do you have an appointment, Mrs. . . . ?"

"Prescott. And yes, I do, of a nature." Aletta shot her son a last look of warning. "I came by on Monday, three days ago, and spoke with Mr. Tanner. He told me he needed to meet with the board about my situation. Then he asked me to stop back by today for their response."

The young woman nodded, but Aletta didn't find her frown particularly comforting.

"Wait here, please, Mrs. Prescott."

The secretary disappeared into Mr. Tanner's office and closed the door behind her.

Andrew tugged harder. "This isn't any fun!"

"Not everything can be fun, Andrew. Now hold still. This won't take long."

Or at least she hoped it wouldn't. Mr. Tanner had given her strong reason to believe that the board would, under the circumstances, extend her more time to pay the mortgage. She prayed he was right.

"Mrs. Prescott . . ."

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Aletta turned. "Oh, Mr. Tanner! Thank you, sir, for seeing me."

"Most certainly." He gestured. "Why don't we meet in my office? That will allow us more privacy."

She felt a twinge of uncertainty at his suggestion but worked to maintain her optimism, while also working to keep hold of Andrew. The boy couldn't seem to stay still. His unruliness reminded her of the first weeks after Warren had left to fight over two years ago. Andrew had constantly challenged her. Much as he'd done in recent days while she'd scoured the town of Franklin looking for work—with no success. He'd been obstinate and resentful. Not that she could blame him. His world had been upended yet again. He needed the loving influence and firm hand of his father.

A father who was never coming home.

She claimed one of two chairs opposite Mr. Tanner's side of the desk, and Andrew took the other while eyeing a candy dish on the bank officer's desk. In a blink, Andrew hopped down, grabbed a piece of peppermint, and popped it into his mouth before she could react.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Tanner," Aletta whispered, assisting Andrew back into his chair with a scolding glance. "Andrew, we must ask permission first." She placed a restraining hand on her son's leg before turning back. "Candy is a rarity these days, sir."

"It's not a bother, Mrs. Prescott. Tell me, have you had success with securing employment?"

"No, sir, not yet. But I won't give up," she added quickly, her smile feeling brittle. "I'm hoping to find something soon."

"I share that same hope, ma'am." He cleared his throat. "Allow me to come directly to the point, Mrs. Prescott."

He hesitated, and her heart fell.

“The board of officers met,” Mr. Tanner continued, “and . . . unfortunately, given your present situation and lack of employment, they do not believe that granting you more time to bring your loan current would be prudent. Nor practical. I’m so sorry.”

The sincerity in his voice worked to undermine her already tenuous emotions.

“Therefore, the board voted to proceed with the foreclosure. But I *was* able to persuade them to allow you and your son more time before you must vacate the home.”

Vacate their home. She took a deep breath, the ache of missing Warren in that moment nearly unbearable. “Thank you, Mr. Tanner. That’s something, at least.”

“They granted you until the first of December to find somewhere else to live.”

“*Two weeks?*” The scant relief she’d felt evaporated, and a rush of anger that had been building in recent days erupted. “That’s *all*? We have to leave the home we’ve lived in—and have faithfully made payments on for almost four years—in only two weeks? And my late husband so recently—” She caught herself. “—having sacrificed everything for his country, and this is the decision you make? This is the step the board would take if it involved one of their wives? Their children? You would push them from their home and into the streets?”

Andrew cocked his little head. “We’re not gonna live at home anymore, Mama?”

Confusion riddled his expression, and Aletta wished again that she hadn’t had to bring him along. But leaving him with MaryNell wasn’t an option at present. “Everything will be fine, sweetheart,” she said softly, wishing she believed it. She turned

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back and sighed. “My apologies to you, Mr. Tanner. Focusing my anger toward you is out of line. I know you did all you could. It’s simply . . . two weeks is not a very long time. Especially for a woman . . . in my circumstance.”

Mr. Tanner briefly bowed his head. “I understand, Mrs. Prescott. And may I offer, again, my sincere condolences on your loss. I, too, am sorry. I held such hope that this would turn out differently.”

She heard the finality in his voice and started to rise—when Andrew lunged again for the candy dish. She swiftly grabbed his arm. But not before he snatched a handful of peppermints. He yanked away from her, hitting the candy dish and sending it crashing to the floor. Shards of glass and peppermint scattered everywhere.

Heat poured through her. “Oh, Mr. Tanner! I’m so sorry! Allow me to help clean this up.” She rose, holding on to Andrew while already calculating how to kneel, something that was becoming more of a challenge.

“Don’t worry yourself over it, Mrs. Prescott. Please. My secretary will see to it.”

He crossed to the door and opened it, a clear message sent in the act. Trying to regain her composure, Aletta followed, Andrew in hand. She couldn’t bring herself to look up at Mr. Tanner as they exited.

“Thank you for your time, sir.”

They were nearly to the front door of the bank when Andrew tugged hard and attempted to turn back. But Aletta was having none of it, her grip viselike.

“Andrew, I told you—”

“There’s Mrs. Goodall’s friend.” Andrew pointed.

Sure enough, Aletta turned and spotted the man she'd seen at MaryNell's house last week. He was seated behind a large desk in an office near the center of the bank. Her gaze went to the shingle hanging above the door, and the truth expelled the breath from her lungs.

Herbert Cornwall, President, Franklin Bank.

The man happened to look up, and their eyes met. His gaze deepened in recognition, and Aletta felt the heat of indignation rush through her. She still hoped her suspicions were mistaken. However thin that hope was. So much about this world was wrong, and unjust, and didn't seem at all to be moving in the right direction. What kind of world would her son—her *children*—grow up in? She didn't know. She only wished they could have had their father alongside them as they did.

She turned and strode from the bank, Andrew in tow.

"You want one?" he said after a minute. "I'll share."

She looked down to see him extending his hand, two peppermint candies nestled in his sticky palm.

"Mr. Tanner sneaked 'em to me as we left," he said quickly. "I promise."

Reading honesty in his eyes, she took one of the candies and popped it into her mouth, the cool rush of sweetness nearly overwhelming her taste buds.

"It's good. Huh, Mama?"

She nodded, seeing Warren in his expression, and cherishing both of them.

"News from the War Department!" a newspaper boy called out from the corner.

Unwilling to part with another precious coin given her circumstances, she still wanted to read that list. Some would call

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her foolish, she realized. But she'd heard of a woman who had received notification of her husband's death only to read his name sometime later in the War Department's updates—where he was listed as having been wounded in battle and was still very much alive.

She spotted three women huddled close around a newspaper and waited, understanding their heartache, as, gradually, relief smoothed a measure of the worry from each of their expressions. One of the women happened to look up and meet her gaze. A wordless exchange passed between them, and she held out the paper to Aletta.

"Thank you," Aletta whispered. "I'll look quickly."

"You can keep it," the young woman responded, unmistakable relief softening her voice.

With Andrew beside her, Aletta turned the pages, then scanned the list of names under the heading "Tennessee—Killed, Wounded, and Missing," all while telling herself she wasn't nurturing foolish hope.

She was simply still hoping.