

TAMERA ALEXANDER



—
COLORS *of*
TRUTH
—

ACCLAIM FOR TAMERA ALEXANDER

“Tamera Alexander takes us to the Civil War battlefield with a vivid yet sensitive portrayal of war and its aftermath. With warmth and grace, she shows us hope and faith at work in the midst of suffering. The beautifully drawn characters and rich history in *With This Pledge* work seamlessly to demonstrate that Christ’s love and romantic love can triumph even in our darkest moments.”

—Lynn Austin, bestselling author of *Legacy of Mercy*

“I thoroughly enjoyed *Christmas at Carnton*! This tender love story between two wounded people whom God brings together for healing is a book readers will enjoy anytime—but *especially* at Christmas!”

—Francine Rivers, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Redeeming Love* and *A Voice in the Wind*

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

—*USA Today*

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

—*Library Journal*, starred review on *To Win Her Favor*

“Tamera Alexander has once again given readers a beautifully written story full of strong characters and tender romance—all while staying true to the actual history of the people and events she describes. From the horrors of war to the hope of blossoming love, Lizzie and Roland’s story will live in my heart for a very long time.”

—Anne Mateer, author of *Playing by Heart*, on *With This Pledge*

“Based on actual events surrounding the Battle of Franklin in 1864, Tamera Alexander vividly captures the resilience, strength, and ultimate hope of those men and women who endured this dark chapter in American history.”

—Joanna Stephens, Curator, The Battle of Franklin Trust (Carnton), on *With This Pledge*

“With heartwarming humor, romance (and recipes) to savor, Tamera Alexander delivers a sweet, second-chance love story between a widow and a wounded soldier. A wonderful Christmas gift for readers everywhere!”

—Julie Klassen, bestselling author of *The Ladies of Ivy Cottage*, on *Christmas at Carnton*

“History, hardships, and a heroine, *Christmas at Carnton* offers a new perspective of the home front during the Civil War in Tennessee. Thank you, Tamera, for honoring our site.”

—Elizabeth R. Trescott, Collections Manager, The Battle of Franklin Trust: Carnton and Carter House

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

—*RT Book Reviews*, 4 stars

“Alexander continues her ode to the magnificent Belle Meade Plantation, using it to illustrate questions of race, faith, and loyalty that continue to haunt today. Richly drawn secondary characters add depth, humor, and a sobering perspective on how Reconstruction affected racial relations, social status, and economic fortunes. Fans will appreciate and applaud the smooth merging of social commentary and a sweet love story.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *To Win Her Favor*

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

—*USA TODAY* on *To Whisper Her Name*

BOOKS BY TAMERA ALEXANDER

Carnton Novels

Christmas at Carnton (novella)

With This Pledge

Colors of Truth

Belle Meade Plantation Novels

To Whisper Her Name

To Win Her Favor

To Wager Her Heart

To Mend a Dream (novella)

Belmont Mansion Novels

A Lasting Impression

A Beauty So Rare

A Note Yet Unsung

Timber Ridge Reflections

From a Distance

Beyond This Moment

Within My Heart

Fountain Creek Chronicles

Rekindled

Revealed

Remembered

Stand-Alone Novels

Among the Fair Magnolias (novella collection)

The Inheritance

COLORS OF TRUTH



TAMERA ALEXANDER



Colors of Truth

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Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Fountain Creek Press.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Alexander, Tamera, author.

Title: Colors of Truth / Tamera Alexander.

Description: Nashville, Tennessee : Fountain Creek Press, [2020] | Series: The Carnton novels; book 2

Summary: "Based on the real history of Carnton, an antebellum home that served as a Confederate hospital, *Colors of Truth* follows the journey of an Irish immigrant arriving in a country where her kind isn't wanted, and of a former Federal soldier returning to the scene of a battle that almost destroyed him" Provided by publisher.

Subjects: LCSH: Carnton Mansion (Franklin, TN)—Fiction. | GSAFD: Love stories. | Christian fiction.

Printed in the United States of America

*To all those who, like me,
are drawn to cemeteries
and the secrets they hold*

I, the Lord, search all hearts
and examine secret motives.

I give all people their due rewards,
according to what their actions deserve.

Jeremiah 17:10 NLT

Chapter 1

MARCH 16, 1866

FRANKLIN, TENNESSEE

21 MILES SOUTH OF NASHVILLE

Catriona held tight to her younger sister's arm, knowing better than to loosen her grip when surrounded by such tempting delights. For once, she could buy Nora almost anything a mercantile might offer to satisfy the desires of a seven-year-old girl's heart. But as she'd spent the bulk of her life skimping and doing without, rarely knowing the contentment of a full belly, much less a full cupboard, not even the thick wad of bills Ryan had mailed back to the family in Ireland could persuade her cautious nature to yield to extravagance. Not with so uncertain a future.

"Let go of me cape, Cattie!" Nora pulled hard, her frown more severe than usual. "I'm only pinin' to take a keener look at her."

"A keener look, you say!" Catriona kept her voice low, mindful of the busy mercantile but especially of one man's scrutiny from behind the counter up front. The proprietor, she guessed, based on his close interest and the air of authority he wore. Apparently store owners in the town

of Franklin held the same low opinion of the Irish their counterparts in Nashville did. They hung the same shingles above their entryways too—No Irish Need Apply. But the sign just above that one outside—No Freedmen Allowed—bothered her far more. The word *freedmen* had been crossed off, and another word, a vile word she'd learned upon disembarking in New York City, had been scratched into the wood.

So much for a warm welcome to America. And to Franklin, Tennessee.

She tugged her sister closer, aware of other patrons looking their way. “Child, you’re forgettin’ that I know what a *keener look* from you is akin to.” She shook her head. “Nay. You no more want to take a keener look at that doll than I want to travel in soot and cinder for another three days goin’.”

Nora again yanked hard in response and lunged for the porcelain doll propped against a vase atop a much-too-low shelf. The determined little scamp was surprisingly strong for one so wee, and the heat of her temper rivaled the flaming red of her hair. But Catriona held fast. While she didn’t share the fiery Irish kiss of her sister’s curls, her own hair a darker shade, she did share her temper and matched it full on.

“Nora Emmaline O’Toole, quit your olagonin’,” she whispered through clenched teeth. “You’ll mind yeself, or we’ll be havin’ more than words when we get back outside. Are you hearin’ me?”

Nora glared up, her slender jaw set like granite. Not for the first time, Catriona felt more like the mam than the older sister, and with seventeen years between them, no wonder. That feeling scared the starch right out of her wits. Because she was no mother. A sister? Aye, she knew that role well enough. But she strongly suspected that Nora needed far more than she could give. And

the girl deserved it. But one thing Catriona knew for certain: experience had taught her to hold tight to her sister lest the cute little rascal take to doing what *she* wanted to do instead of what she'd been told, much as she'd behaved on the voyage from Ireland.

Recalling what could have happened brought Catriona a shudder. She'd crushed Nora to her that night, so grateful nothing worse had befallen her young sister in that dark corridor aboard the ship—and so thankful that Ryan had insisted on teaching her how to handle the dagger he'd given her before he left for America with his three closest friends. Yet even as relieved as she'd been once they'd made it safely back to their cabin, she'd also wanted to throttle Nora within an inch of her life for giving her such a fright.

The mere recollection of the memory stoked her ire and sickened her stomach, and Catriona doggedly continued in the direction of the dry goods, half dragging her sister behind her. But the mercantile was packed with patrons, and progress was slow.

She would make the scant purchases they needed, then leave the crowded store before Nora could do any harm. Not that she was eager to face their next undertaking here in Franklin. Far from it. Every day since they'd boarded that ship more than a month ago, she'd felt this particular dread growing inside her. If there were any way to avoid calling upon Colonel John McGavock, she would do it.

But in Ryan's last letter, her twin brother, so full of family honor, wrote of his determination to confront the man whose grandfather had cheated the O'Tooles out of their ancestral land years ago. Why he felt such a compulsion to settle that score after all these years, she didn't know. Yet if Ryan *had* found his way to John McGavock's home, the man might at least possess some information regarding her brother's whereabouts, and that was information she desperately

needed. Because Ryan's last letter, the envelope dated the twenty-ninth of November 1864, well over a year gone now, was the last they'd received from him. And that had taken more than five months to find its way to Ireland, arriving ahead of the wrapped bundle of bills by only a handful of weeks. *This money will be enough to bring the family here, and to let us start fresh*, Ryan had scribbled on a scrap of paper tucked inside the currency. *Keep it from Da. Don't let him spend it on drink, and come as soon as you can. So me heart can feel whole again. Believe me ever to be your loving brother . . .*

Catriona couldn't wait to see him, her *baby* brother—born five minutes later—who stood a head taller than her and had shoulders as broad as a doorway. And she *had* come to America as soon as she could. But how would she find the words to tell him the cruel twists and turns life had taken in recent months? Da had been the first to succumb to dysentery, which she'd written to Ryan about last summer with little emotion other than relief. But the events that followed were too painful to put to the page. A month after Da's death, when they'd been set to sail for America, Mam, Bridget, and Alma all took ill with the same ravaging disease. Bridget and Alma had walked a hasty path through the veil. Only eighteen days. But Mam . . .

Mam had lingered for weeks, wasting away despite Catriona's caregiving and repeated prayers. Bridget and Alma, scarcely twelve and ten, had passed on the very same day, as close in death as they'd been in life. For that reason, she chose to bury them together, and half of her heart had lowered into the earth with them. The rest of it had been buried along with Mam. In the days following, she'd taken to bed herself, weak and exhausted from caretaking and grief. But Nora, youngest and strongest of them all, had never shown a hint of sickness. And now, finally, here she and Nora were. In America. But where was Ryan?

Had he ever received her last letter telling him about Da's passing? If so, he'd never responded. Perhaps he'd written a separate note with instructions on where to meet him over here. Only, she'd never received such a letter. Maybe it arrived *after* she and Nora had sailed from Dublin. Whatever the case, how would they ever find each other in this endless sea of a war-torn country without help? So like it or not—and she didn't—Colonel John McGavock seemed to be her only hope.

Strong-arming the fear inside her, she pushed it away, as she did the question that plagued her day and night: Was Ryan still alive? She'd heard of mothers sensing when their children had died, but she'd never heard of a sister able to feel the death of a brother. Even a twin. But if it could be done, she was certain she would have felt that moment *if* Ryan had breathed his last. They'd been inseparable growing up, bonded in a way that even she couldn't explain after twenty-four years. She'd loved him all her life, and from the moment Da had started beating on him, she would have given her life for his. So surely if Ryan was gone, she would know it. She would feel it in her bones. But she didn't. Which had to mean he was still alive.

And once she located him—and she *would*—the three of them would find a way to move on. Together. She would fulfill her promise to Mam to find her “baby boy,” and they would make a new start here, just as Ryan said. Things would be better then. He had such a way with Nora. He, of all people, could bring their little sister back to the land of the living. Nora had never made any secret of the fact that Ryan was her favorite. So despite the theft of their ancestral land by the McGavock family, if lowering herself to prevail upon them would assist in finding her brother, then she would—

Somehow Nora broke free. Catriona spun to lay claim of the girl again, but she couldn't, and the next few seconds seemed to stretch forever.

Nora turned and lunged for the doll, and this time managed to grab the hem of its skirt. But she also bumped the shelf. For a heartbeat, both the vase and the porcelain Southern beauty teetered, the doll's stylish blonde curls bobbing as though she were debating whether to remain where she was or take a headlong plunge to her certain demise. The weight of the vase proved more substantial than Catriona would have first imagined, and she hoped that perhaps—

But no.

The vase pitched forward and brought the blonde-headed beauty along with it. Catriona braced herself for the impact.

The crash of glass on hardwood silenced the thrum of patron conversation, and the subsequent absence of noise was deafening. Catriona's face burned as curious onlookers turned to stare. She looked at Nora. Gone was her little sister's former bravado, her creamy white complexion now pale. Though not as pale as that of the porcelain-faced doll, now lying in a most unladylike heap at their feet, her silk skirts in disarray, her once-lovely painted countenance and even her demure porcelain hands strewn in pieces across the floor.

Nora looked up, eyes wide, and Catriona bit back the harsh words begging to be let loose—especially when she spotted the proprietor barreling down the aisle toward them, his face all manner of red.

“You're gonna have to pay for what that daughter of yours just did! That doll was special-ordered from Paris, France. And the vase was *pure Flint glass!*”

The accusation in his tone only deepened her embarrassment, and she didn't bother correcting his misassumption. "Aye, sir, I'll be payin' for the damages. We're at fault."

"You bet you are." His eyes slid from her to Nora, then to the damage done, then to her again. "First, your kind comes in here trying to steal me blind, taking what don't belong to you. Then you waltz in and start breaking everything in sight. Problem is you all got no respect for others' property. So like I told you, you'll be paying for *every* last penny of what that cost me. Plus what I stood to make before your little urchin went and—"

"I've already given you me word, sir. I'll be payin' what we owe." His anger scalded her pride, but his arrogant contempt prodded her temper. Catriona nudged Nora to stand behind her, wanting to shield her from the man but also to shield him from her. Her sister looked as sweet as Mam's butterscotch pie, but the girl was ornery with a capital *O*. And yet Nora *was* her sister.

"One question does come to me mind, sir. Somethin' I find a wee bit curious." Catriona managed a partial smile. "*Why* would you be placin' so precious a doll on so low a shelf? And beside a vase made of *pure Flint glass* and all." She purposefully pronounced the phrase with the same hoity-toity inflection he'd used—and judging by the crimson creeping up his beefy neck, her insinuation wasn't lost on him.

He took a step toward her, but she didn't shrink away. From a young age, she'd learned to stand her ground when pitted against a man's anger, and this man wasn't five pints full of whiskey and rum, which always made the situation more precarious. That said, her father had never taken a hand to her or her three sisters when deep into his liquor. He'd saved that for when he was sober. As though he wanted to remember the feel of the back of his hand striking them across the face. Yet Mam and Ryan had borne the brunt of his rage, his being sober or not.

Catriona had tried to protect them both, but Mam had known how to draw Da's attention away. And Ryan, God bless him, had come into this world with a sense of chivalry that wouldn't allow him to stand aside. He'd considered the duty of protecting the women as his alone. Through the years, their father had made certain Ryan paid for that decision. Again and again.

Ryan had struggled with the decision of going to America, not wanting to leave the rest of them vulnerable to Da's wrath. But when he'd been faced with either starving to death or bearing the brunt of their father's abusive nature, the decision had been clear enough. And, along with Mam, Catriona had managed to protect the younger ones.

She never realized how much she hated their father until she saw him lying in that pine box, his hands folded over his chest so easy and gentle-like. Such a contrast to the hand raised in rage. She'd sworn then never to waste another tear on the man, and she was finding that an easy pledge to keep.

"The doll was displayed where patrons could see it!" The proprietor's tone, tough as steel, matched the glint in his eyes. "And if you'd read the sign right there—the one written in good *American* English—you would've known the doll was fragile. And anyone with half a brain would know the vase was too." The smirk curving his mouth darkened his eyes as well.

Sure enough, a handwritten placard stared mockingly from the shelf, affirming his claim, which only fueled Catriona's irritation. "How much am I owin' you, sir? For the doll and the vase?"

His eyes narrowed. "Sixteen dollars and fifty cents."

Soft gasps rose from onlookers standing nearby, and Catriona had to quell a gasp of her own. The amount was far more than she'd wagered. She had that much—and considerably more—thanks to Ryan, though it pained her to part with such a sum under the circumstances.

“So will you be paying what you owe? Or should I fetch the authorities?”

Clear challenge lined the man's ultimatum, and Catriona caught a hint of pleasure in his tone as though he hoped he'd be called on to do the latter. “Aye, sir. I'll be payin' you. As I said I would.”

Disbelief furrowed his brow.

“But I'll be needin' a bit of”—she softly cleared her throat—“privacy to retrieve the funds.”

His gaze moved over her, though not in a lewd manner. More as though she were some wretched pup wandered in from the fields covered in muck and mire.

She sighed. “Could I make use of a storeroom, perhaps?”

“I'm not letting you go in there by yourself. You'll rob me blind, then take your leave out the side door, and that's the last I'll ever see of you and your little girl.”

“Me name is Nora!” Nora pushed past Catriona, tiny fists on her hips. “And I'm her sister, you nasty oaf, not her daughter.”

Catriona yanked Nora's arm and sent her a scolding glance. But the bravado in Nora's eyes had returned. *This child . . .*

“Sir,” Catriona continued quickly, eager to see the situation resolved, “I'm not a person who shirks her debts. But since you're not trustin' me, enlist your clerk there, the girl behind the counter, to be goin' with us.”

Begrudgingly, the proprietor made the arrangements. But Catriona felt his gaze on her and Nora every step of the way as they followed the young clerk into the storeroom. Catriona gestured for Nora to precede her and gave her another look, daring her to do anything other than stand statue-still and hold her tongue.

She had to find a way to get Nora under control. The child had grown up without proper constraints. How many times had she warned their mother about that? *“But Nora’s me youngest, Cattie, and me last,”* Mam had whispered in her final weeks. *“One day you’ll understand, when you’re havin’ bairns of your own. You’re goin’ to have to be both sister and mam to her. But I know you can. I’ve seen you with her. Go to America, find Ryan, and make a good home . . . the three of you. But please, let me Nora be a child for as long as she can. This world thieves away youth so swiftly. Much as it did for you. Much as it’s still doing, me sweet, stubborn Cattie. Remember what I’ve been tellin’ you time and again—God’s help is nearer than the door. Don’t let life harden you, dearest. There’s still much good in this world despite all the bad. Sometimes it’s just hard to see for all the nettles.”*

Recalling her last conversations with her mother and the promises she’d made against her better judgment caused her throat to tighten. Mam had endured such a difficult life, thanks mostly to Da. Catriona swallowed hard. Never did she want to be yoked to a man like her mother had been. Life was challenging enough without willingly taking on that added burden. Best to go through life alone. She had Nora and Ryan, after all. That would be enough.

Aware of the clerk’s somewhat shy attention, Catriona turned to the side and discreetly lifted her skirt. When she’d sewn herself a new reticule, she’d also fashioned a money pouch with

laces that tied snugly around her upper thigh. She didn't trust stashing the money in their trunk as they traveled, and she for sure wasn't about to carry it around on her wrist in a reticule.

She untied the money pouch, then retrieved the additional cash she needed. *Sixteen dollars and fifty cents*. Such a sum for a silly blunder. What would she have done if she *hadn't* had the money? Ryan must have saved every last dollar he'd earned after being conscripted into the Confederate Army before sending it all back home. She'd read about the wealth and prosperity that could be found in America, but she'd had no idea a soldier in the recent war could earn so generous a wage. Especially a soldier on the losing side.

Yet even knowing that, she found the claims of this country's bounty unaligned with what she'd witnessed upon arriving in Nashville late yesterday afternoon. If it were possible for a city to mourn itself, that's how she would describe the Nashville she'd seen. Buildings boarded up, the faded names of businesses lingering in ghostlike letters on dilapidated brick walls. Streets largely deserted save the contingents of armed, blue-clad Federal soldiers on nearly every corner. Women draped in black and brown—much like her and Nora—their heads bowed, most of them with ragamuffins in tow. But the clusters of men in tattered trousers and coats, former Confederate soldiers from the looks of it—the outcome of the war written in their stooped shoulders, in the lostness in their gazes—reached deepest inside her and tugged hard. She'd searched each of their faces, hoping to see Ryan's.

She counted the bills she'd withdrawn a second time and slipped the rest into her reticule, then secured the pouch again to her thigh and adjusted her skirt. With the pouch facing outward, the folds of fabric hid it well enough.

“That was very brave,” the young clerk whispered.

Catriona turned and looked at her.

“What you did out there. Standing up to *old Mr. Pritchard*. That’s what people call him behind his back.” The girl glanced toward the door leading into the mercantile.

Hearing admiration in her tone, Catriona shook her head. “I’ve no patience a’tall for people who treat others with such disdain. ’Specially someone they don’t even know. Some people look at a person and see what they’ve *decided* to see instead of what’s truly there. But I have to be tellin’ you”—she lowered her voice—“it did feel right good to stand up to the ol’ tyrant.”

The girl laughed, and Nora did too.

“What’s your name, dear?” Catriona asked.

“Braxie.”

Catriona smiled. “Now there’s a name with a story comin’ behind it, to be sure.” She guessed the girl was around eleven or twelve. Bridget’s age. She was pretty in an understated way, and her brown eyes had a cleverness about them that issued a warning. Anyone wise enough to see it would do well not to underestimate her.

“My papa named me after a boy he grew up with back in North Carolina. A friend of his. Turns out, that friend became a general in the war. General Braxton Bragg.”

She’d stated it with pride, and Catriona nodded for her to continue, sensing there was more.

“I shortened it to Braxie some time back, though. Me and Mama figured that sounded more like a girl.”

“I agree. And I’m likin’ the name. It suits you. Have you ever met your esteemed namesake?”

“No, ma’am. But I hope to one day.” Braxie’s eyes brightened. “General Bragg commanded the Army of Tennessee for a while.”

“The Army of Tennessee?” Catriona found her interest piqued. “Me brother was in the—”

“*Our* brother!” Nora peered up, her expression obstinate as she fiddled with a ball of string she’d found who knew where.

Catriona confiscated the string and placed it on a nearby shelf, countering her sister’s mulishness with a sharp look. Nora responded by turning up her nose and stuffing her hand into the pocket of her cloak. Even before the girl withdrew its contents, Catriona narrowed her eyes. She’d warned Nora to stop picking up those blasted stones. But everywhere they went, she insisted on gathering them. She’d even hidden a sack of them from home in their trunk. With defiance glittering in her blue eyes, Nora held out a handful of rocks, and Catriona took a deep breath, determined not to take the bait. She turned back to Braxie.

“*Our* brother was in the Army of Tennessee,” Catriona continued, her voice determinedly even.

“He fought in the war here?” Braxie looked back and forth between them.

“Aye, he did. He and three of his mates came here from Ireland in spring of ’62, and straightaway they were conscripted into the Confederate Army.” In the space of a blink, the vivid image of Ryan, Liam, Brody, and Ferris—friends since childhood—leaving to board the ship in Dublin rose to mind. Dear Ferris had been killed early on in the war, Ryan had written. A bullet to the heart. Ryan penned that when Ferris had stumbled beside him, he’d leaned down to help him up only to discover his friend already gone. Catriona couldn’t fathom. “So,” she continued, pulling her thoughts close again, “we’ve come to Franklin to—”

“*Braxie!* Aren’t y’all done back there yet?”

Irritation sharpened the proprietor's voice, and Braxie moved to open the door, though none too hastily. Catriona silently applauded the girl's gumption.

"All is fine . . . Uncle." Braxie gave Catriona a pointed look, and a smile tipped her mouth.

"He's your uncle?" Catriona whispered, cringing at how she'd described the girl's relative a moment earlier.

Braxie's smile gave way to laughter. "I took no offense to what you said. He may be my uncle, but he's an *ol' tyrant* too." With a reassuring look, Braxie led the way back to the front.

Catriona followed, grateful for the girl's understanding and to discover the mess in the middle of the aisle cleaned up. To her relief, most of the patrons who'd witnessed the debacle were nowhere to be seen. With Braxie's assistance, she located the items she'd come for and proceeded to pay.

Braxie blew out a breath, fingering the bill in her hand. "I haven't seen a fifty-dollar greenback in *forever*."

Catriona smiled, slightly uncomfortable at the attention Braxie's comment drew from patrons close by but even more so beneath *Uncle* Pritchard's close attention. He stood only feet away, silently auditing the transaction, no doubt making certain she paid for her transgressions.

Beside her, Nora had grown sullen, which was more customary than not these days. These dark clouds usually descended in late evening, closer to bedtime, and most always they portended a bout of silent sobs. Hearing her sister weep like that broke her heart. Once, shortly after dysentery finished its cruel work and Mam had passed, she tried pulling Nora close to comfort her. But Nora pushed away. Only after she'd finally surrendered to sleep could Catriona coax her little body close and attempt to soothe the hurt. The same hurt breaking her own heart.

Braxie counted out her change, then held out the cloth sack containing their purchases. “You and your sister please come back anytime,” she said in a friendly yet overtly conspiratorial tone.

Grateful, Catriona accepted the sack and glanced over to see if Mr. Pritchard had noticed, but he’d already moved on to help another customer. “Thank you again for your help, Braxie. Maybe we’ll see you again while we’re in town.”

“I hope so.” Braxie glanced to Nora, then looked at Catriona again. “I just realized I don’t even know your names.”

“Oh, forgive me. I’m Catriona O’Toole, and this is me sister Nora.”

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

“Likewise, to be sure.” Catriona peered down to see if Braxie’s comment might have drawn her sister out a bit, but the dark frown remained. With Nora’s hand securely in hers, she’d just started for the door when she spotted Mr. Pritchard carrying the porcelain doll to the storeroom. He was meticulously brushing the dust from the doll’s skirt when it occurred to her that . . .

“Beggin’ your pardon, sir!” she called out.

He didn’t respond.

She tried again. “Mr. Pritchard!”

He paused, and then gradually, almost begrudgingly, he turned. His eyes narrowed. She waited, but apparently a hateful expression was all the response she merited.

“We’ll be takin’ that doll with us, please.” She gestured, closing the distance between them.

He looked at the doll, then at her. “But it’s ruined. Worthless.”

She couldn't be certain, but she would've bet all the money in her reticule that he didn't believe that. "She's broken, not ruined. And not beyond some form of repair, I think. So we'll be takin' her, thank you kindly." Catriona held out her hand.

He made no move to comply.

"I've paid good money for that doll, sir. Far more than she's worth, in me good opinion. And I'm not of the mind to be leavin' her behind. I'll take the vase too." The expensive glass was broken to bits, but some pieces were larger, and she wouldn't risk him working those into something else and getting one cent of value—or satisfaction—from the item she'd paid for so dearly.

"The vase is already in the rubbish bin."

She cocked her head. "Then it won't be difficult to be pourin' the pieces into a sack, now will it?"

The tightening in his jaw told her he'd about reached his limit. He glanced around them, then back at her. "You'd best watch your tongue, girl," he said low. "A lot of folk around here don't take kindly to you people moving in, trying to settle in our town."

She widened her eyes. "Who's sayin' I'm movin' in? Although seein' as how *kind* everyone's been to us, this might not be a bad place to be puttin' down roots."

Meanness slid in behind his eyes, and while she didn't fear him acting on his anger here, in the middle of a mercantile with onlookers, the slight weight of the dagger hidden up her sleeve gave her courage. She'd used the blade only once before, in self-defense in that corridor on the ship, but the outcome had been quite effective despite how her hands had shaken. She'd vowed

then to always keep the weapon with her. Because she knew men. Knew the wrath, and wrong, they were capable of.

Pritchard retrieved the broken shards and thrust the bag at her, then held out the doll before letting go prematurely. Catriona managed to catch her, sparing the now faceless and handless beauty a second trauma for the day. She flashed Pritchard a triumphant if not a tad gloating smile. “Nice doin’ business with you, sir.”

She didn’t waste another look at him as she and Nora left the store.

Outside, a cruel March wind snaked a chilling hand inside their woolen cloaks, and Catriona pulled the hood of her cloak up over her head. She reached down to do the same for Nora, but her sister batted her hand away. *Fine, then.* Once those little ears turned to ice, she’d think differently.

They walked in silence down the muddy street. She spotted a church on the corner a short distance ahead and squinted. Franklin Presbyterian Church. Constructed of brick, the building was fancy enough with its stained glass windows as tall as two doors placed end to end and with a steeple as high as heaven itself. A person could probably see the church from miles away. Not that she planned on darkening the doors of that building anytime soon. She’d given up on the feeble promises such places had to offer. But the lovely grove of walnut trees bordering the church . . . Now, *that* she would welcome anytime, along with a lazy summer afternoon.

They continued on for a piece until they passed the Williford Hotel they’d visited earlier, the hotel the porter at the train station recommended. She’d already secured a room for them for the night. Then, depending on what she learned from John McGavock today, if she learned anything at all, they’d move on from Franklin to . . . somewhere.

Her eyes filled unexpectedly with the flood of weariness and grief she'd coerced into submission for weeks, nay, months now. But the long-denied emotions fought back with a vengeance and near stole her breath away. It wasn't that she didn't believe the Almighty saw people's plights and worked on their behalf. She did. She simply no longer believed he would do that for *her*.

"I'm hungry, Cattie!"

Catriona breathed deep, struggling to find her voice—and the tiniest thread of hope. "Finally, you're speakin' again."

Nora's scowl grew fierce. "I'm not likin' this place. And I'm *not* wantin' to be here."

"Truth be told, I don't like it much either. But rarely do we get to be choosin' our path in this life. We talked about that. Do you remember?"

Nora said nothing, but her eyes narrowed to slits.

Catriona sighed. "We're here because it's the last place we know for certain our dear Ryan said he was goin' to be. *Franklin, Tennessee*. He wrote that in his last letter. I read that part to you again on the train. So we're goin' to walk some distance from town to make inquiry of a man I'm hopin' can help us find our brother." Catriona reached into the cloth sack and withdrew a box of crackers, then held them out. With Braxie's help, she'd stealthily purchased a special treat for her sister as well, but she was saving it for later that night, at bedtime when Nora would need it most.

Without a word, Nora grabbed the box, then opened it and began shoving the salty bits into her mouth.

Catriona waited, then pointedly eyed her sister. "I'm beggin' your pardon?"

Nora peered up sweetly. Too sweetly. “Thank you, Catriona . . . for the *dry* crackers.”

Catriona heaved a sigh, tempted to snatch the box away. After all, Nora couldn’t be that hungry. They’d shared a generous plate of hotcakes, eggs, and bacon in Nashville before boarding the train earlier—and a cinnamon bun too. They both adored confections of any kind, one of the few things they could agree on these days.

But if she took the crackers away from her sister now, she’d have to deal with tears or rants or worse, and she had neither the patience nor the will for any of that at the moment. So she walked on, attention trained ahead and intent on her task, all while the ache for home and family carved an even deeper hole inside her.

She looked at the field spreading out to their right, all wintry gray and lonely feeling. How she missed the brilliant blues and greens of home, standing on the edge of the cliffs in County Antrim and staring out to sea, the spray of the ocean chilling her face even as it kindled memories of what she and Ryan had dreamed America would be like for their family. How different that dream was turning out to be.

The road leading south from town narrowed as they went, and to avoid the worst of the wagon ruts clawed deep into the center, she edged her way to the right-hand side and gestured for Nora to do the same. The clerk at the hotel had given her directions to the McGavocks’ home. “It’s about a mile or so southeast of town, along Lewisburg Pike. The Harpeth River will be on your left, Carnton on your right.”

Carnton. So the McGavocks had taken a bit of the homeland with them when they left Ireland behind all those years ago. Despite the grip of British rule, Gaelic was still common enough in County Antrim, but she found it odd that the McGavocks would choose to describe

their home in America with such a word. *Cairn*. A pile of stones. A memorial. To honor the dead, no less. Like a cemetery. A macabre choice to name a home, in her opinion. For as long as she could remember, she'd loathed cemeteries. Hated the finality they represented and the images they conjured from childhood. Images she determined to let stay buried back in Ireland.

Something the hotel clerk added still rang uneasily within her. "*You can't miss the place.*"

That sounded as though John McGavock had done more than a little all right for himself—by treading on the backs of the O'Tooles, of course. Printers by trade for generations, her family had never been wealthy, but they'd done well enough—especially since Ryan possessed a special talent for illustrations and decorations. He had an astounding eye for detail and a deft drawing hand. Wealthy people paid a goodly sum for such things.

She shook her head. How different her own family's legacy might have been if John McGavock's grandfather hadn't cheated her great-grandfather out of their land. Without land, a family was nothing. And that's what hers had become. Nothing. She laid a weighty measure of the blame at her father's feet. He'd squandered what inheritance he'd been given, little though it was, on drink and wagers. But maybe if he'd been given everything due him, he'd have been a different man. A better one.

Gray clouds billowing overhead finally made good on their threat, and soft sheets of drizzle, fine as the fanciest lace, fell without a sound, soaking everything that moved and didn't.

"I'm thirsty, Cattie!" Nora whined, several steps behind her.

"Then tip your head back and open up that gob o' yours. You'll be findin' your thirst slaked soon enough."

A moment passed.

“Me feet are achin’! *Och!* These boots you bought me are good for nothin’.”

“They’re a far sight better than the wafer-thin slippers we had before we left home, so hush up and keep to walkin’. We’ll be to where we’re goin’ soon enough, then you can rest yeself.”

An exasperated sigh was all the comment Catriona got, and she offered no response. She focused instead on what she’d rehearsed to say to John McGavock. Right at the outset, she planned to state who she was, and admittedly, she was eager to see if a flash of remembrance lit the man’s eyes at the name O’Toole. A bundle of years and more had passed since her family’s land had been thieved away, long before she was born. Her father himself had been only a wee lad. But she’d heard Da recount the story so many times that she could recite the woeful tale herself.

Next, she’d ask McGavock about Ryan, her real reason for coming here, and whether her brother had ever called upon Carnton to speak with him. If Ryan had made it there, hopefully he hadn’t left social relations with McGavock on so poor a footing that the man would intentionally withhold information from her for spite. She hoped against hope to be leaving Franklin on the morrow with some scrap of detail about—

A curdled scream rose behind her.

Catriona nearly turned around before she caught herself, knowing better. “Nora, I know you’re tired,” she called out. “But I’ve no more time or patience for your theatrics today. So hush your whinin’ and keep movin’. We’ll be there soon.”

“Cattie! Help me!”

Anger flared hot in her chest, and Catriona quickened her pace, throwing the words over her shoulder like stones. “Nora Emmaline O’Toole, I am weary to the bone of your—”

“H-help me, C-Cattie. *Please!*”

Catriona slowed. It wasn't in her sister's nature to beg. She turned around, but as soon as she spotted Nora perched atop an old tree stump, taking a rest, her anger spiked again—until she read the look of terror on her face. Catriona dropped the two cloth sacks and ran.

She'd scarcely raced fifteen paces off the road when she saw it, like something from Dante's *Inferno*. At the base of the stump upon which Nora sat huddled, face buried in her knees, was a hand protruding from the earth, its fingers stiff and twisted, reaching up as though to grab hold and drag you under. Time and nature had eaten away most of the flesh, and Catriona swallowed a scream of her own. Especially when her foot sank into the mud and met with something solid beneath. She looked around and sucked in a breath. Not six inches behind her was a skull. But what shook her to the core was that it appeared to still be attached to a body. The one beneath her boots.

She lifted Nora into her arms and ran, tripping over what appeared to be a crudely made head marker that bore a name and other markings she didn't stop to inspect. When they reached the road, Nora's vise-like grip around her neck grew fierce, making it even more difficult to breathe.

“Nora . . .” Catriona gasped for air. “I've got you, dearest. I've got you.”

But Nora kept her face buried in the curve of her neck. Her little body convulsed, whether from fright or cold or both, Catriona couldn't be sure. She held her sister tighter and smoothed the bright red curls down her back while whispering over and over, “It'll be all right, it'll be all right,” just as their mam had done before she died. Yet even as the promise left Catriona's lips, she tasted its hollowness.

She squinted and stared across the field that stretched for a good mile or more, and she spotted countless other protrusions from the earth that, from a distance, had lent the appearance of a furrowed field in early spring. But now she suspected differently. At that moment, the wind shifted, and she put her hand to her nose, her suspicions confirmed.

Nora's arms tightened around her neck, and Catriona kissed her and cradled her close, pondering what sort of fiendish hell had visited the sleepy little town of Franklin—and hoping with everything in her that their dear Ryan hadn't been part of it.

Chapter 2

“The name’s Wade Cunningham, Colonel McGavock. I’m obliged to you for meeting with me this afternoon on such short notice, sir.” Satisfied that his tone sounded cordial enough, Wade took McGavock’s welcoming expression as further confirmation.

“It’s my pleasure to speak with you, Mr. Cunningham. Please take a seat.”

Wade eased into the Grecian rocking chair opposite the man seated behind the desk, a man he’d been investigating for the past several weeks.

McGavock had ushered him into what appeared to be the office, or perhaps study, of the well-appointed mansion. Lingering aromas of pipe tobacco and well-oiled leather reminded Wade of his own father’s “study”—a room off one side of their barn where he’d helped his father mend saddles and farm equipment. And where, on occasion, once the day’s work was “*done enough, even if not fully done,*” as his father used to say, Pa would throw open the side door and invite his boys to join him. Then they’d all sit and admire the sunset as his father smoked his pipe. Wade still cherished that pipe. And the memories.

McGavock glanced out the window. “I see the weather’s turning disagreeable again. I’d hoped all this cold and rain would have moved on by now.”

Wade raised a brow. “Seems nobody informed March that spring should be upon us.”

“March in these parts can be as wet and cold as December. But spring in Franklin is a most beautiful sight. I don’t know whether the business that brings you to Carnton will allow it, but I hope you’re able to stay long enough to experience it.”

Wade nodded. “As do I, sir.” Engaging in cordial conversation with Colonel McGavock was like a burr in his saddle. The man himself, whose military rank had been bestowed, not earned, was everything he’d imagined a Confederate plantation owner to be. Well-bred, in the Southern sense at least, with an air of wealth and confidence about him. But that air held a putrid stench Wade had fought a war to subdue. No, not subdue. Eradicate. Yet what troubled him far more was being back here in Franklin, Tennessee, a corner of the world he’d sworn never to return to.

When he joined the newly formed United States Secret Service last spring, he understood that, as a government operative, he could be assigned anywhere in the country. Anywhere with counterfeiters. And where counterfeiting was endemic. With over a third of the money currently in circulation counterfeit—and this still-fragile nation on the brink of bankruptcy—*coney men*, as the agency called them, were setting up shop everywhere. The Nashville area was rife with them, and their enterprises were prospering while also bedeviling the Federal Government and posing a serious threat to the nation’s banking system.

Yet when Chief Wood informed him he’d been assigned to Franklin specifically, he’d strongly objected. But it quickly became clear that Wood wasn’t going to budge, so Wade had determined to get in here, get the case solved, and leave this place behind him. For good. He’d

figured he would need a month, at the most, to solve this case. But now, sitting here only a mile away from where it all happened, he felt a lot less confident, his gut churning with memories of what he'd seen and what he'd done the last time he was here. He wished he'd pushed the chief a lot harder.

McGavock gestured. "That rocking chair you're sitting in was a gift to my father from a most distinguished friend. The late president Andrew Jackson."

Working to re-center his thoughts, Wade heard admiration in the man's tone and ran a hand over the curved wood and leather arm of the chair as though impressed. "It's a fine piece of furniture, Colonel. And holds a treasure of memories for you and your family, I'm sure."

"Indeed, it does. And those memories grow only dearer with time's passing. Once, when I was a young man, President Jackson joined us for dinner, and afterward, he sat in that very chair and regaled us with stories about the wars he'd been in and all the . . ."

Wade did his best to appear interested. In preliminary investigations, he'd unearthed the association between the McGavock family and the late president. Jackson and Randal McGavock, John's father, had been close associates. And from a young age, John McGavock himself had been known to be a "great favorite" of Jackson's. Helped along by that distinction had been an appointment facilitated by Felix Grundy, John's uncle and an influential lawyer and politician. Grundy had personally arranged for John to be the aide-de-camp for the late president James K. Polk, then governor of Tennessee. And this with John only twenty-five years old. To say the owner of Carnton had enjoyed a privileged upbringing was putting it mildly.

Wade wasn't about to admit it in present company, but President Jackson wasn't a man he'd ever choose to emulate. The country's seventh president had been a slave owner, for starters. And

a staunch Democrat, like McGavock. But Jackson had possessed one trait Wade found worthy of respect. According to older colleagues in Washington, DC, who'd known Jackson personally, the president had been fiercely jealous of his honor. That had led him to engage in occasional brawls, and Jackson had even killed a man in a duel for casting an unjustified slur upon his wife. Wade had to admire that depth of honor. Because a man without honor wasn't a man.

Integrity. Uprightness. Fairness. All traits he strove to build his life upon. Sometimes his position with the agency mandated secrecy and deception, and while he never liked lying to people, he did what had to be done. Much like the late president Lincoln, he ranked the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution as the guiding principles of his life. Granted, he didn't read the first of those three as often as he probably should. But he was well-versed in the Declaration and the Constitution, and he'd memorized large sections of each. Integrity, upright, and fairness were woven throughout those documents. And in his estimation, they were traits greatly lacking in men like John McGavock. These men were traitors to their country, short and simple.

So it hadn't surprised him at all when, during his preliminary investigation, John McGavock's name rose to the top of the list of those under suspicion of counterfeiting. So many of these large plantations were facing financial ruin after the war—and with good reason. That world was part of the old South, not the new. Yet Carnton was still prospering, and he aimed to find out how.

It had been Chief Wood's idea for him to keep his affiliation with the agency undisclosed. Not that operatives didn't routinely keep a low profile. They did. Sometimes trusted leaders in the community were notified of the agency's presence. But this time several of those "trusted

leaders” were suspects. No, with nearly fifty thousand dollars of counterfeit money issued from this part of the country, too much was at stake, and they didn’t know who their allies were.

Only two people in town knew who he was and why he was here. A contact at the local bank and one at the post office, two of the three favorite “business venues” for counterfeiters—the third shops and mercantiles, for obvious reasons. The employees at the bank and at the post office had each been subjected to a thorough evaluation. They were clean and eager to lend assistance to the agency. One of them even held strong, albeit secret, Northern sympathies, which was good to know. Still, Wade had to be careful, as evidenced by the recent murder of a fellow operative. Injustice tightened his chest.

Anson Bern’s body had been found floating in the Cumberland near Nashville, his throat slit. A former police officer, Bern had been an excellent investigator—and friend. They’d worked together on several cases. Always affable and quick to laugh, Bern had feverishly pursued justice and the upholding of the Constitution. He’d been a formidable force, too, both in his commitment to the agency and in life itself. Over six feet tall and resembling a tree trunk, Bern hadn’t been easy to take down. Wade had managed it only once, and that right hook had been merely lucky. Besides, it had all been in fun, a way to blow off some steam. He could still remember the look of surprise on Bern’s face, though. *“Didn’t know you had that in you, Cunningham!”*

Wade swallowed. Bern’s body was discovered nearly two months ago, and he still had trouble believing his friend and fellow operative was gone. Over the past several months, the Secret Service had dismantled nearly one hundred counterfeiting rings, and Wade felt a sense of pride that nineteen of those could be credited to his efforts. His and Bern’s. Given time and

patience, and with the agency's far-reaching connections, the Secret Service could locate and apprehend almost anyone.

But after a brief surfacing of counterfeit money in Nashville and New York last year, this particular group of counterfeiters had eluded them completely—until a tip they'd received from New York directed them once again to Nashville, then here, to Franklin. Now, along with John McGavock, several of the men with whom McGavock conducted business were in the crosshairs. The foremost being Woodrow Cockrill, a former Confederate officer and, of all things, an accountant in Franklin. *McGavock's* accountant. It wasn't difficult to imagine, considering the devastation the war had wrought upon Nashville and the surrounding area, that an accountant would feel pressure to seek an additional line of income.

Wade needed to quietly investigate all the suspects. So when the chief saw the position of Carnton overseer advertised in the Nashville newspaper, the man recognized the opportunity for what it was and insisted Wade apply. While Wade understood the advantage that being overseer would give him, the memories of what had happened here still haunted his waking and sleeping hours.

But John McGavock's position in this town, his social connections, and the interest Carnton's business dealings drew from outlying areas would prove of great worth to his investigation. The very meeting Wade had witnessed taking place in the parlor across the hallway when he arrived confirmed that fact. He just didn't know the nature of the gathering—yet.

At first glance, though, several prominent men of the community appeared to be in attendance, and that alone sparked his interest. Perhaps they were plotting another Southern subversion, following the South's first catastrophic—and failed—attempt in the recent war. Even

now, pockets of resistance against the Federal Government still permeated the South. Post-war rebellions remained plentiful, some more passive than others.

He'd learned that McGavock had a brother-in-law, a General William Giles Harding who lived near Nashville on an estate called Belle Meade. The man had vowed not to cut his beard again until he saw the South resurrected. As far as Wade was concerned, General Harding could die with that beard puddled around his ankles.

An assault of a much more serious nature was materializing in a town on the southern border of Tennessee in the guise of a secret "society" of white-robed, hooded ex-Confederate soldiers. They were assaulting and terrorizing Negroes, sometimes lynching them. All for no reason other than hatred and a continued antagonism toward the North and the freedmen in general. There'd been rumors that the "white-robed membership" was expanding to Franklin, and one of the suspects already on Wade's list for suspicion of counterfeiting had been linked to those murmurs. That made sense, because societies, even immoral ones draped in white robes, had to be funded.

Outside, the rain and wind picked up, and the branches of a newly bloomed redbud waged protest against the window pane and directed Wade's full focus back to McGavock's voice.

"Jackson's men marched in agony, as you might imagine." McGavock continued with his story, shaking his head. Wistfulness filled his eyes. "Many took ill; even more died. Jackson bought provisions for them out of his own pocket. After all that happened, his men started calling him 'Old Hickory' because he was so tough. And he was that, let me assure you."

Wade gave an acknowledging tilt of his head. "I believe you might have learned a thing or two from Old Hickory, sir. You're a mighty fine storyteller."

McGavock laughed. The sound came across as easy-natured, relaxed, and Wade knew he was well on his way to winning the man's trust, which he had to do to pull this off. If McGavock somehow found out who he really was—not only a US Secret Service operative investigating him and his peers but a former Federal officer of the United States Army, the latter of the two being the most offensive to any good Southerner—he was done for. He'd never get the information he needed. But after he'd identified the counterfeiters? He didn't give a lick if McGavock found out about him. In fact, when the time came, revealing who he was to this staunch supporter of the Southern cause might be enjoyable.

“Now, Mr. Cunningham, to the matter that's brought you here today . . . You said you wanted to speak to me about Carnton. But you haven't yet revealed what—”

“Forgive me, sir.” Wade leaned forward. “But are you certain you have the time to spare? When you granted me entrance, I couldn't help but notice that I called you away from other business at hand. Perhaps I should take my leave and return later this afternoon when—”

McGavock waved off the comment. “Not at all. The men and I were finished with our discussion. We were merely reviewing details about a community matter that's needed to be dealt with for some time now.”

Wade nodded tentatively as though not fully convinced, while silently congratulating himself on reviving the Southern accent he'd worked so diligently to rid from his speech years earlier. Growing up in southern Kentucky had afforded him many advantages, but the slight drawl hadn't been one of them. As part of preparing for this assignment, he'd nurtured the abandoned drawl until it was more than passable now. Whatever the job demanded.

The silence lengthened, but Wade only leaned back in the rocker. A longtime student of human behavior, he'd learned that reticence in conversation wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Some people were rattled by the silence, and in their discomfort, they attempted to fill the space, revealing more than what they might have otherwise. Other people merely enjoyed the opportunity to talk about themselves. Both types served his purposes.

"Sometimes with community matters," McGavock continued, looking at him over steepled hands, "the greater number of opinions gathered equates to less progress being made. However, in this instance, my neighbors and I find ourselves of like mind. Especially considering the current state of affairs since the war. And what the Federal Government is doing to us. Or, in this case, is *refusing* to do."

Wade offered what he hoped was a commiserating look. "The Federal Government can be . . . cumbersome to deal with at times."

McGavock gave a quick laugh. "That, Mr. Cunningham, is one of the truest statements I've heard of late." Gradually, his expression sobered. "You came down Lewisburg Pike on your way here."

It wasn't a question, and Wade shifted in his chair. "I did."

"And may I assume you're familiar with what happened here in Franklin toward the end of the war? And that you saw the condition of the field today off to your right?"

Wade hesitated. It had taken all his resolve not to look across that field as he'd passed it earlier, and memories that only moments earlier had churned his gut suddenly pushed their way to the surface. Images from that brutal night fifteen months ago rose as clear and ghastly in his mind as when he'd stood atop the Federal breastworks with the 104th Ohio Volunteer Infantry

that Indian Summer day and stared across the Harpeth Valley. As long as he lived, he'd never forget that burnt-orange sun sinking low on the western horizon as he and twenty thousand fellow Federal soldiers watched the grisly spectacle of Confederate death unfold.

As daylight faded and Federal cannon fire began to rain down, he'd searched the endless sea of butternut and gray marching steadily forward, row after row, column after neat column, all while hoping he wouldn't see his brother's face, praying that perhaps Wesley's regiment had been summoned elsewhere. Temperatures swiftly plummeted that night, and a bitter wind ushered in freezing rain and sleet. Still, Wade had searched every face. But the single wish he'd carried within him for months during the war—to see his little brother again—never came. He never spotted Wesley on the vast battlefield that day. Never got to make things right between them. And never would. Which only made the recent sale of the farm in Kentucky at auction feel even more like a betrayal.

He'd held on to the family land and home for more than a year, knowing he'd never return to live there. It wasn't home anymore. Not with his parents and Wesley gone. He still had his sister, Evelyn, but she was seven years younger and married with children. She hadn't wanted the place either. Her life was in Chicago with her family. His was in Washington, DC, and anywhere else his duties for the agency took him. He'd received a fair amount of money for the farm. And even after giving Evelyn her share of the proceeds, coupled with what he'd already saved, he had enough to purchase land and build a house elsewhere.

He knew he'd done the right thing in selling. Even though at times like this it sure didn't feel like it. Problem was, no other place felt like home either. He wondered if any place ever would.

Sensing McGavock's close attention, Wade swallowed against the tightening in his throat.

"I'm aware of what happened here, sir. And of what's in that field."

McGavock's slow sigh held a weight of fatigue. "A group of us petitioned the government to help exhume and properly bury the nearly two thousand men lying in the Harpeth Valley and in the yards of homes and businesses in town where the fallen soldiers were buried after the battle. We especially must remove the remains of all those buried in the fields, exposed to the plowshare. But the government has refused to give aid. They consider those men traitors to their country." He shook his head. "Men who were willing to give their lives for the Confederacy, same as those who were willing to die for the Union. We were a nation of brothers fighting brothers. Don't they know that? But now that war is over. Should we not strive to put the division behind us and move forward as one?"

It took everything within him to even try to appear sympathetic. "*A nation of brothers fighting brothers . . .*" McGavock stated it with such conviction, as though he really understood what that meant. And this from a man who hadn't even fought in the war. Who had never looked down the barrel of a Springfield aimed dead-on at another man's chest before pulling the trigger. As for the exhumations, what McGavock told him wasn't news. Wade had been made privy to the town of Franklin's request that the government pay for reburying the Rebel soldiers. And he wholeheartedly agreed with their decision not to. After all, the South chose to secede. To very nearly tear this country apart. All to maintain a livelihood built on the belief that one race was superior to another.

"What's worse," McGavock continued, "is that they've already exhumed the Federal soldiers buried here. This past fall, all those bodies were removed and shipped to Stones River National

Cemetery in Murfreesboro. So while they're at rest, our boys are still lying out there in the cold earth, their honor slowly being stripped away with every day that passes. They deserve so much better." He leaned forward. "Hence, a group of us have formed a burial committee with the aim of seeing every last one of those Confederate soldiers properly buried. I've spoken to my wife, and Mrs. McGavock is in full agreement that we donate two acres of land in our backyard for that very purpose."

"You'd bury them all here? Hundreds of soldiers? On your own land?" The question was out before Wade had properly thought through the delivery. He heard the disbelief in his tone and silently chastised himself for not being more guarded. "What I meant to say, sir, is—"

"I know it may seem odd to some. But we got to know many of those boys personally. Carnton was designated to be a field hospital that night. And you saw the condition of that field today. I daresay you wouldn't be able to leave the men you'd fought with for nearly four years, the men who'd died beside you, in such a state."

A muscle tightened in Wade's jaw. "No, sir. I wouldn't."

McGavock studied him for a moment, and Wade felt certain the man was sizing him up.

"What division did you serve in during the war?"

Having anticipated this question, Wade was prepared for it. But he wasn't prepared for the prick of guilt needling his conscience. Recalling the oath he'd taken upon being sworn in as a government operative of the United States Treasury Department helped him push past it. "The Army of Northern Virginia."

"So you were with Lee? In Richmond? At the end?" McGavock's voice had quieted. Faint nostalgia swept his expression.

“I was.”

He’d had to choose the Army of Northern Virginia. Outside of General Lee’s army, only one other Confederate force had been left in the western theater in the winter of 1864—General John Bell Hood’s here at the battle in Franklin, which Colonel McGavock was far more familiar with. “Grant had Lee in a most difficult situation up in Virginia, sir. But I believe General Lee handled himself with the greatest of decorum. And that he did what was best for the Confederacy. One might even say he did what was best for the country.” The lie came out smoothly, as though he believed it was God’s honest truth.

McGavock eyed him. “My feelings align with yours to a great degree, though I hold that the outcome of that battle was tragic. Given a handful of strategic decisions, the situation might have turned out very differently. General Lee was one of the greatest militarists of our time. Perhaps . . . of all time.”

Movement through the window caught Wade’s attention, and he spotted a little redheaded girl hurrying up the brick pathway to the house, her head bent, shoulders stooped against the wind and rain. She couldn’t have been more than six or seven years old, and she appeared to be alone. Perhaps she was McGavock’s daughter.

“So . . .” McGavock straightened. “Enough about the war and days past. We must turn our faces to the future. You stated at the outset that you’re interested in speaking with me about Carnton.”

“That’s correct, sir. About a position, actually. I read an advertisement in the *Nashville Daily Union* stating that Carnton needs an overseer. Someone to run things. I was raised on a small

farm in southern Kentucky. I learned the business from my father. So there's not much I don't know in that regard. And as is the case with so many former soldiers these days, I need a job."

McGavock regarded him. "And what business brought you to Nashville?"

Wade detected distrust in the man's demeanor—or at least apprehension. "As I said, I need a job. The family farm is gone now. My folks are too." He looked down and away, the mournful expression required in the moment coming more easily than he would've liked. "Kentucky doesn't hold anything for me now."

McGavock gave a slow nod. "And what do you know of Carnton?"

Wade looked back. "I know it's not just any farm. Carnton has quite the reputation. But surely you know that. From what I hear, not too many years ago you garnered an award for Carnton being the best farming estate in the county." Another tidbit Wade had unearthed in his digging.

Satisfaction colored McGavock's expression, and Wade could tell his comment had hit its mark. One foolproof way to get on a man's good side was to compliment what he considered his life's work. It never failed.

"Yes, Carnton's reputation has quite a reach. Which is not due solely to my own efforts, of course. My own good father, God rest his soul, laid Carnton's foundation. Literally and otherwise. We all stand on the shoulders of those who've come before us, wouldn't you agree?"

Thinking of the countless slaves who were no doubt responsible for laying the foundation of this house, this estate, McGavock's wealth, and the once-burgeoning, now-collapsing Southern economy, Wade chose to treat the question as rhetorical. Because Randal McGavock wasn't the primary person John needed to thank. Not by far.

McGavock picked up a fountain pen. “Do you have references with you?”

Wade pulled a single piece of folded paper from his coat pocket. “Just the one, sir.” He handed it over and then watched as McGavock read it.

The man finally looked up. “This is a military commendation from your commanding officer, *Lieutenant Cunningham.*”

“Yes, sir. The only farm I’ve ever worked is the one I was raised on. My father and mother have passed, as I said. My only brother too. So unless you want my younger sister to put her opinions to the page, that’s what I’ve got to offer.”

McGavock looked from Wade to the letter and back. Wade held his stare. The letter was authentic. The only thing the secretary in Washington, DC, had changed when copying it was the name, rank, and signature of the reporting officer.

“You know livestock, Lieutenant?” McGavock finally asked. “That’s primarily what I’m dealing in now.”

“Yes, Colonel, I do. From cattle to pigs to horses to chickens.” At least that wasn’t a lie. His father had taught him everything there was to know about working a farm. Not that theirs had been anything like Carnton.

“A while back I had a few Ayrshire cattle imported from Scotland. Have you had occasion to work with that breed?”

“No, sir. But I’ve heard they’re hardier than Guernseys and have an easier time birthing.”

McGavock nodded. “One of my heifers is set to birth soon, so we’ll see.”

The sound of a door opening in the entrance hall brought McGavock to his feet. “Well . . . thank you, Lieutenant Cunningham, for—”

“Please, sir. *Mr. Cunningham* is fine. Like you said, best turn our faces to the future.” And better for him personally if the two of them avoided anything that might spawn future discussions about the war.

“I agree. Thank you for coming to see me today. You’re staying in town, I assume?”

“Yes, sir. At the Williford Hotel.”

“Very good. Mrs. Williford and her manager run a clean place, nothing fancy. Fairly simple, in fact. But she has the best food around, next to what you’d get here, of course. I’ll get word to you within a few days at most.”

Wade followed him into the entrance hall, where they discovered the meeting across the way dispersing. Wade took mental notes on the various men, listening to their conversations, evaluating them. But what drew his attention most was the little girl loitering in the corner by the door, clutching a tattered-looking doll to her chest, her red curls seemingly impervious to the inclement weather. Her impish features were downright charming, downcast though her countenance appeared to be.

“Is that your daughter, sir?” Wade asked, gesturing.

McGavock trailed his gaze. “No, it’s not. In fact, I don’t know who the child belongs to. Perhaps she’s a friend of my daughter’s. But . . . before you leave, I have one last question. I’m curious as to whether you’ve—”

“Colonel John McGavock?” A confident voice of the feminine persuasion came from behind them.

Wade turned along with McGavock to see a woman staring up at their host with a spark of fire in her eyes. And though her auburn hair wasn’t quite as curly as the little girl’s, the

similarities in their features—maturity only having deepened their beauty in hers—made any denial of kinship untenable. Even the drab brown color of her dress beneath her cloak did nothing to diminish her loveliness.

McGavock inclined his head. “Yes, ma’am. I am Colonel McGavock. How may I be of service?”

“Me name is Catriona O’Toole. And I hail from County Antrim. Our homeland.”

The lilt of her Irish accent was thick, but Wade didn’t think he’d imagined the emphasis she’d placed on her last name. And he was certain her mention of County Antrim and *our* homeland was meant to hold weight. Sure enough, when he looked at McGavock again, he knew for certain the young woman had struck a chord.

And she knew it too. The slightest lift in her chin confirmed it, as did McGavock’s unmistakable backstep.

Chapter 3

“County Antrim, you say, ma’am?”

Wade caught uncertainty in McGavock’s tone, as though the man didn’t trust what he’d heard.

The young woman nodded. “That’s right, sir. And I’d appreciate a moment to speak with you. Preferably without an audience listenin’ in.”

She glanced first toward the group of men, then in Wade’s general direction. While she didn’t directly meet Wade’s gaze, he caught her meaning loud and clear and curbed a smile. Judging by the woman’s directness, she wasn’t intimidated by McGavock, nor by the man’s home or his wealth. Knowing little more about her than this, save first impressions, which couldn’t always be trusted, he found his interest piqued and his estimation of her increasing by the second.

McGavock glanced at the tall case clock on the opposite wall, then gave a tilt of his head.

“Of course, ma’am—”

“Catriona *O’Toole*,” she supplied, a slight frown revealing her irritation—perhaps over McGavock’s quick glance at the clock, or maybe at having to repeat her name, which she’d

already offered. Wade had made note. What he hadn't heard was an accompanying Miss or Mrs. He guessed the latter based on the child she had with her. That was one lucky husband and father. Something he hoped to be—someday. Not that the path he'd chosen with the agency allowed for such.

She looked over at the girl and mouthed something he didn't catch. Yet the forefinger she aimed pointedly at the child's boots communicated a firm *stay put*. In a blink, the girl's countenance went from disheartened to out-and-out annoyed. And again, Wade worked to mask his amusement. Though not swiftly enough, he realized, when the child flashed her blue eyes in his direction. With a single look, the little pixie told him she found his enjoyment at her expense unacceptable. Which only encouraged the smile he already knew he wasn't hiding well enough.

“Please, ma'am, remove your damp cloak”—McGavock pointed to where a couple of men's coats hung on a mahogany coat rack—“then step inside the farm office here.” He gestured to the room he and Wade had just exited. “Have a seat, if you would, and I'll be in to see you after I bid my guests good day.”

She did as he requested, removing the child's cloak as well. Wade watched her as she stared past him at McGavock and the men who were leaving. If he were a betting man, which he wasn't, he'd wager a hard-earned dollar that she and her daughter were just recently off the boat. Based on the traces of soot and cinders still clinging to her travel clothes, even a little in her dark reddish curls, he guessed they'd disembarked not more than a day ago. Two at most. But even weary from the long trip, Catriona O'Toole could turn a man's head, as was evidenced by several of the men glancing in her direction even now. They were careful not to stare overly long or inappropriately, Wade noted. But with unmistakable appreciation. Which he shared.

“A word with you, John?” A man approached McGavock, tall and lean and with interesting facial features. Sloped eyes half hidden by bushy brows, a deep cleft in his chin, and highly pronounced cheekbones. Taken as whole, they lent a quite melancholy look. Studying him, Wade couldn’t shake the feeling he’d seen him somewhere before. Yet he’d been to Franklin only that once. Still, something about the man sent him scouring his memory. Even the way his shoulders stooped forward as though bowing beneath an unseen weight seemed familiar.

“John, I appreciate you and your wife accepting this responsibility.” Southern heritage deepened the cadence of the man’s voice. “Don’t think for a moment that I am unaware of what this will cost you, friend. Not only in a pecuniary sense but also in living with the constant reminder of that night, of all that we’ve lost. And in your backyard to boot.”

McGavock shook his head, then glanced at Wade as though to say, *Excuse me for a moment*. Wade nodded and stepped off to the side, though not too far off.

“In a sense,” McGavock said in a low voice, “what we’re pledging to do here, Fount, is no more than what *you’ve* done for all these long months. Those are your fields they’re buried in, after all. And as we discussed earlier, we’ll find various ways to raise funds from the community. An idea I failed to mention to the burial committee is also petitioning the states represented by each regiment of soldiers buried out there. We can write them, asking them to assist with this effort. I believe we can influence them to help since their fathers, sons, brothers, and uncles are among those to be reinterred.”

The man nodded. “That’s an exceptional idea.”

“For which I cannot take credit. Mrs. McGavock contributed that insightful suggestion. And as we both know, my wife is a woman most comfortable in speaking her mind.”

“Yes, she is. And she does it so graciously. She is a most practical, and good, woman, John.”

McGavock’s expression turned earnest. “As was your dear wife, Polly. May she rest in peace.”

The men continued speaking, and Wade listened, in no hurry to leave. McGavock had been about to question him on something. And considering it could be about the position of overseer, he was content to wait. If McGavock liked his answer, he might just leave here today with that job, which would greatly aid his investigation. Beyond that, Catriona O’Toole had fueled his curiosity. He wanted to know more about her business here at Carnton, and what, if anything, that business might reveal about McGavock.

Wade glanced toward the little girl and had to smile. Contrary to clearly issued orders, she had moved several feet in the direction of the parlor. And she was working hard at scraping something from the plank wood with the heel of her boot. Intent on her task, she’d tucked her bottom lip beneath her front teeth, and determination scrunched her brow. *Spunky* came to mind as he watched her. *Handful* too.

She glanced up and caught him watching her—and stilled. Her gaze grew wary, and she took hasty steps back toward the front door. He could clearly read her thoughts. Was he going to tattle on her? Tell that she’d moved when she shouldn’t have? Innocence swept her expression, and it might have looked convincing if not for the slight, defiant tilt of her chin. Like mother, like daughter. Wade didn’t even try to hide his grin this time, and her eyes narrowed in response.

“Mr. Cunningham . . .”

He turned to see McGavock waving him over.

“Join us, please. And allow me to introduce you to Mr. Fountain Branch Carter, a neighbor of Carnton’s whose property is about a mile due northwest from here.”

Carter:

The last name hit Wade like a blow to the chest, and the tucked-away memory from a moment earlier suddenly jarred loose. His regiment had confiscated the Carter farm before dawn that fateful morning on November thirtieth over a year ago. Brigadier General Cox had momentarily debated whether to take command of the house straightaway or wait until sunrise. Deciding that time outweighed inconveniencing a family, the general had ordered a detail to the Carters’ front door. Wade had led that detail.

Fighting the urge to turn and run, or at least duck his head, Wade met Carter’s gaze steady on and held out his hand. With any luck, the older man’s memory had begun to brittle with time and age. And there *had* been a dozen men in that pre-dawn detail, not to mention the twenty thousand Federal soldiers who’d overrun the man’s house and grounds. Upheaval best described the scenario in Wade’s memory. Waking everyone in the house as US soldiers flooded every room, eventually relegating the family to the cellar, where they, their slaves, and neighbors took refuge once the battle started. Surely a man wouldn’t remember one soldier’s face out of so many. Looking at it from that perspective, Wade took hope and calmed—until the sharpness in Fountain Branch Carter’s gaze took that hope by the throat and squeezed.

“Mr. Cunningham.” Carter’s grip was firm. “You were with us here in Franklin, weren’t you, son.”

It wasn’t a question, and Wade felt the weeks of preliminary work he’d done for this case begin to crumble. He opened his mouth to respond.

“No,” McGavock answered, beating him to it. “*Lieutenant* Cunningham had the honor of serving with General Lee himself up in Richmond.”

A shadow eclipsed Carter’s expression, as though he was certain he’d seen something only to look back a second time and find it gone. “Richmond,” he repeated, rumination still coloring his tone.

Wade merely nodded, his pulse creeping up a notch.

Carter’s eyes narrowed. “I bet you saw yourself some sights there, son.”

Still sensing doubt in the man’s bearing, Wade embraced the accent he’d cast off so willingly. “Yes, sir. I did. None of them are sights I care to recall, though. Hard enough to live through it once, much less live it again every day in your memory.” Wade knew the images coming to his mind were vastly different from those of these two men. His were inspired by the celebrated field reports he’d reviewed during Grant’s successful siege on the former Confederate capital. Reports detailing how the Rebel troops were starving, their supplies depleted on nearly every front. He’d read those reports and tasted victory and freedom. These men had digested that same news and tasted defeat and subjugation. Ironic, considering both of them had owned slaves.

“Come now, my old friend.” McGavock gripped Carter’s shoulder, his tone effectively sweeping away the cobweb of memories. “Mr. Cunningham and I agreed only moments ago not to go down that dark path again. Let’s focus instead on the task ahead of us. On moving forward. To that end . . .” McGavock accompanied Carter to the double front doors and onto the sheltered but windy front porch, the two men conversing as they went.

Wade let out a held breath, shaking his head to himself. If Carter had truly recognized him—though he felt certain now that the man hadn't—this whole case could've been compromised. He could only imagine how irate Chief Wood would have been if that had—

Sensing someone watching him, Wade looked up to discover that now *he* was the object of attention. A mischievous smile spread across the little girl's face, but the way she looked at him—like a matronly schoolmarm peering over eyeglasses at half-mast—told him better than to think the gesture was kindly meant. If he was reading her right, and he bet he was, she was letting him know she thought he'd told a fib a moment earlier. That little urchin . . .

Feeling foolish at the possibility of being found out by a child, Wade quickly replayed his conversation with the two men and decided that his imagination was getting the best of him. He'd done his own share of bluffing in his life, and he was good at it. To that end, he aimed a well-crafted stare at the little girl with the sole intent of nipping in the bud any speculation she might be entertaining. The look did its work, too, judging by her fading smile. Yet despite his efforts, the spark of defiance in those little blue eyes still smoldered.

“Now, what I was going to ask you earlier, Mr. Cunningham . . .”

Wade hadn't heard McGavock return. “Yes, sir?”

“It regards working with the freedmen who are sharecropping my land now. No injury is meant by this comment, I assure you. But I gather by what you shared earlier—you said you were raised on a small family farm—that your family was not in a position to have slaves.”

Wade shook his head. “No, sir, we were not.”

“And yet you would consider yourself well equipped to supervise freedmen? To manage the contracts I’ve made with them and to ensure they’ll meet the obligations to which they’ve agreed?”

Wade stared steadily, wondering how McGavock would react if he told the man about his experience with commanding a regiment of colored troops about fifteen months into the war. And about how those men were some of the finest, bravest, and most loyal soldiers he’d ever had the honor of serving with. When his own commanding officer had told him what regiment he was being assigned to lead, Wade had reservations. Not because the men were colored but because they hadn’t been properly trained. How did you send untrained men into war? You didn’t. Not unless you wanted them to be slaughtered. So he’d worked hard. They all had. He’d shared an analogy with his men, one he’d heard as a young boy from a “traveling man of God,” as his father had called him.

The preacher said that even though life was far from perfect and anger and despair abounded, each person had a choice, like every other person who’d ever drawn breath. *“You have to find a way to move forward! To make a better life. For yourselves, and for others. Life isn’t fair, plain and simple. You can either scuttle,”* the preacher had said, looking out across the small gathering, *“or you can sail the seas.”* A deeply satisfied smile had swept the man’s face. *“Navigare necesse est,”* he’d finished, looking directly at Wade. Even now, recalling that moment, he felt his heart beat a little faster.

The men under his command had adopted the Latin phrase, and it became their regiment’s motto, of sorts. *Navigare necesse est. One must chart his course and sail.* And so they had. Each

of them in his own way. And the phrase had grown only more meaningful to them when Wade shared that the traveling preacher was a freedman.

Natural leaders gradually rose from among the regiment of United States Colored Troops—Isham Pender, Samuel Cabble, Louis Martin—and they eventually assumed command. So Wade was transferred to another unit. But he still thought about them. Especially Isham, a fellow captain and good friend. Cabble and Martin had been killed in the war, he'd learned. But there'd been no record of Isham's death or current whereabouts when Wade checked last summer. Sometimes soldiers just *disappeared*, especially following a brutal battle that involved heavy artillery. Often, too little was left of a man to know who he'd been. At other times, soldiers deserted and fled west, leaving no trail. No way would Isham do the latter. So Wade hoped, and had even prayed, that his friend had made it through.

But since sharing all this with McGavock would fail to get him any closer to gaining the position of overseer . . .

“I have managed men before, Colonel, and I've worked with freedmen on many occasions. I believe if you treat people with respect, most will reciprocate with the same.”

McGavock nodded slowly. “And how would you manage those who do not . . . reciprocate, as you call it?”

Wade shifted his weight, wanting to respond more bluntly than his circumstances allowed. He knew only too well what atrocities many plantation owners had committed under the guise of *managing* their slaves. And he knew better than to think that behavior had ceased once the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued into law during the war or even when the North had finally claimed victory. The war was officially over, but battles were still being waged. Even

now, standing in this finely appointed entrance hall, face-to-face with McGavock, he sensed the burden of a deep-seated past shaking a begrudging fist at the future. He wished he knew what kind of slave owner McGavock had been. Either way, it didn't change the depravity of owning human beings. And clearly, the man standing before him was still on the wrong side of the war.

“I believe leadership must be rooted in integrity. A leader without integrity is a tyrant in the making. And frankly”—Wade weighed the cost of speaking so openly and chose his words with care—“I think freedmen are like any other men. They want an honest day's wage for an honest day's work. They want the chance to make their lives better. Same for the lives of the people they care about. They want what, I imagine, you and I both want, sir. A chance to chart their course . . . and sail.”

McGavock didn't answer immediately, but when he finally did, his expression was inscrutable. “If you'll excuse me, I have a guest waiting. I'd appreciate it if you'd see yourself out. Good day, Mr. Cunningham.”

Feeling put in his place by the man and resenting it, especially since McGavock stood for everything the Federal Army had fought to conquer, Wade nodded.

McGavock left the door to the farm office partially open—for propriety's sake, Wade assumed. And Wade begrudgingly gave him credit for it. He caught the exchange of pleasantries coming from within, McGavock's sounding far more pleasant than Mrs. O'Toole's. What could the woman possibly have against John McGavock? She'd only recently arrived from Ireland, after all—if his guess was right. And it was obvious they hadn't known each other before today.

McGavock's voice softened, and Wade stepped closer to the door, attempting to make out the words. He was careful not to look in the little one's direction, knowing she was likely giving him the evil eye for lingering. But he wanted to know what business her mother had here at Carnton.

Bracing himself for the girl's reprimanding stare, he finally turned toward the front door—to find her not the least interested in him. Her dark frown was aimed squarely at a well-dressed, brown-haired boy who stood considerably taller than her. McGavock's son, he assumed.

But the tiny aproned servant glaring at him from the parlor across the hall, hands on hips, told Wade lingering was out of the question.

BUY Colors of Truth

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