

TOO DEEP
for
WORDS

A decorative rectangular frame with ornate, symmetrical scrollwork and floral patterns at the corners and midpoints. Inside the frame, the text "CHAPTER 1" is centered in a white, serif font against a dark gray background.

CHAPTER 1

October 6, 1864

“Well, I’ll be hanged. The Yankee Cavalry is ridin’ into Woodstock.”

Margaret Jean Bell paused in midstroke and dropped the rag she’d been using to clean the sticky bar. She looked toward the entrance of the Wayfarers Inn where a raggedy-dressed old man stood staring out to the street. “More Yankees in town?”

“That’s what I jest said, girl.” The old man swayed slightly and kneaded his bristly jaw. “Judging by the black smoke over yonder, them blue-bellies is burning ever’thing in sight too!”

Margaret clutched her midsection. Questions tumbled through her mind. Would one of the Yankee soldiers recognize her and, if so, did he have an inkling of her trickery?

Instinct screamed, *run!* Her breath came and went in quick repetitions, as if she’d already cantered a mile up Main Street.

Breathe. Breathe.

Her lightheadedness slowly abated. Logic soon returned.

Wasn’t she accustomed to soldiers, Yanks and Rebs alike? She was, sure as the sun set in the west. She’d learned men were men, bluecoats or gray, and she held her own in their presence, even when they turned violent. Should one of the soldiers insist on getting his money back for services that were promised but never rendered, Margaret would simply tell the truth: Mr. Veyschmidt

had snatched her ill-gotten gains. Therefore she was unable to provide him with a refund. Afterward, she'd accept the beating likely to come.

All the louts who frequented the Wayfarers Inn were the same, dark and volatile.

Oh, God, get me out of this place!

Her mind turned to Carrie Ann. How lucky her oldest sister was to escape by marrying a blue-belly. Her younger sister, Sarah Jane, managed to get away by running off with a peddler, except she got herself killed in the process.

Mama too was gone now. Died at the end of September. Now Margaret alone dealt with the temperamental, tyrannical innkeeper who enjoyed reminding her of the debt she owed. And insisted on gold coins for payment no less. He paid her nothing for the daily chores, nothing for serving plates of food and ale to customers. She often worked until the wee hours of the morning when every other eighteen-year-old young lady was fast asleep. And each week the sum she owed grew larger, not smaller. Margaret, in all the rest of her life, could never repay him.

Yes, death was preferable to this wretched existence.

She set down two bottles of Mr. Veyschmidt's backroom concoction, which he called *ale*, on the bar. Then she waited. Soldiers, both Reb and Yank, usually had a powerful thirst when they walked in. They may be on opposite sides of the war, but their behavior was no different.

The portly innkeeper stared out the window and nervously chewed a fingernail. Margaret clenched her jaw. *The swine*. What a blessing it would be if the man got shot dead by a Yankee bullet.

Within minutes, a tall, bearded, blue-clad officer strode over the threshold. His spurs chinked against the plank floorboards and his accoutrements jangled with each step he took. He squinted as his eyes surveyed the room. The gold trim ornamenting his uniform bespoke an upper rank.

Odd. Men of his caliber didn't usually wander into the Wayfarers Inn.

Two additional Yanks followed him. They made such an ominous threesome that the few remaining men loitering about in the saloon scattered like roaches after a match strike.

The first officer made his way to the bar. He removed his wide-brimmed hat and a flicker of familiarity cinched Margaret's gut. Had this man visited the Wayfarers Inn before?

“Care for a drink?” Her question nearly stuck in her suddenly dry mouth. “The innkeeper says it’s on the house.” She poured a glass of ale and pushed it toward him.

“I said no such thing,” Veyschmidt growled. His beady, wide-set eyes sized up the large officer and his comrades. He reconsidered, just as Margaret expected him to. “Well, all right. But only one’s free.”

“No, thanks. I’m looking for Miss Margaret Bell.”

Her heart stumbled over its next beat.

“That’s her.” Mr. Veyschmidt pointed a thick finger. “Right there, she stands.”

No help or hope of protection from him—as usual.

Margaret set her hands on her hips. “Listen, mister, I don’t give refunds, so—”

“Are you Miss Bell?”

She nodded and lifted her chin, fully expecting an explosion of pain from his fist connecting with her face. If he was like all the others, she’d swindled him. She prayed he’d knock her senseless. Maybe she’d never regain consciousness.

“My wife would like two jugs of the innkeeper’s ale.”

Margaret’s tension eased and she released an audible sigh of relief.

“She claims the ale aids in the healing of wounds. In fact, I’m living proof it does.” The Yankee’s mustache twitched with a small smile. “She also insists the stuff is a marvelous metal polisher. Wonder of wonders.” He pierced Veyschmidt with a saber-sharp stare.

“Metal polisher?” Margaret tipped her head. The only person who touted Mr. Veyschmidt’s ale as good for anything other than sheer inebriation was . . .

Margaret sucked in a breath. Surely this wasn’t her oldest sister’s Yankee husband?

She considered the officer again. Not a chance. This man was large and handsome with a head of thick blond hair and neatly trimmed whiskers. His rank and demeanor suggested he was too refined for a poor, skinny, pie-in-the-sky dreamer like Carrie Ann. More likely a customer heard of the ale’s supposed benefits and spread the word. Medicine was scarce, what with wounded men pouring into towns up and down the Valley, so every sort of home remedy was in high demand.

Margaret fetched two stoneware jugs and set them on the bar. The officer slapped a couple of bills into Veyschmidt's wide, outstretched palm. Next the colonel retrieved an envelope from his coat's inner breast pocket and extended it in Margaret's direction.

"May I speak with you in private, Miss Bell?"

Before a single utterance passed her lips, Mr. Veyschmidt stepped in front of her as if she'd suddenly become a precious commodity. "Afraid not, Mister. You want a *private appointment*, shall we say, then you'll have to pay for it like everyone else."

The blond officer's expression hardened. "I suggest you shut your mouth and get out of my way."

Veyschmidt eyed the man, snorted, but relented. "Make it quick," he muttered to Margaret. "And you owe me every coin you get out of him."

She squeezed her eyes shut. If hating a man was indeed the same as murder like the reverend preached, then she was guilty a thousand times over.

The colonel moved several steps away from Mr. Veyschmidt. Margaret forced panic down and fingered the small vial of potion in her pocket. It was her only source of protection.

"Allow me to introduce myself, Miss Bell. I'm Colonel Peyton Collier, Cavalry Division of the Army of the Shenandoah."

Collier. So this was indeed Carrie's husband. How had her sister snagged such a fine gentleman?

"I understand you're my brother-in-law."

"Yes, that's correct."

"Well, well . . ." Veyschmidt stepped out from behind the bar and puffed out his barrel-like chest. "What a coincidence. Your, eh, wife, left quite a large tab here what needs to be paid."

Colonel Collier's face reddened and his eyes narrowed to angry slits. "Spare me more of your lies. My wife owes you nothing." Anger blazed in his gaze as he defended Carrie Ann. "Destroying your inn would be within my orders, but it's because of my wife's request to leave this place intact for her family's sake that I hesitate." He glanced at Margaret before peering down at Veyschmidt again. "I am well aware of your abuse of the Bell sisters and their mother over the past two years. They came to you in need, but week after week you overcharged them for room and board despite their hard work. In

short, you enslaved them. Worse, you left my wife and her family unprotected and vulnerable to every kind of evil.” The shake of his head was slight. “You are a despicable worm in my estimation and had it been up to me—”

“Please, sir . . .” Mr. Veyschmidt’s voice sounded shaky and his beady eyes grew round.

Margaret tucked her chin to hide her amusement. She liked her new brother-in-law already.

“It would give me great pleasure,” he added, “to watch this sorry place go up in flames.”

Mr. Veyschmidt wisely held his tongue, although he chewed his thick lower lip and worked his hands anxiously. Margaret knew why.

“Pardon the interruption, sir,” one of the other Yankees said. He stood even taller and had even broader shoulders than the colonel. He too had removed his hat and an abundance of shaggy brown hair framed his face. “This establishment has most likely been a Rebel meeting place and gave sustenance to the enemy. I suspect Rebels are recovering in rooms upstairs as we speak.”

“No, no. Ain’t no soldiers here,” Mr. Veyschmidt insisted. “I refused all the wounded. Don’t want the mess, the blood and all.” He waved a meaty hand and shuddered.

The colonel’s eyes met Margaret’s and she gave a slight nod. Confederate soldiers had met here only days ago. Several injured lay in rooms upstairs as the major suspected.

“Gather your men and search the premises, Major Johnston.”

“Yes, sir.”

Within minutes, a small army of Yankees crowded into the Wayfarers Inn. Mr. Veyschmidt grew increasingly anxious as the soldiers dispersed to search. He fell to his knees in a pathetic, theatrical display.

“Please don’t burn my inn,” he begged. “This business is all I have left of my dearly departed mother who worked her fingers to the bone to make this a respectable place for one to lay his weary head.”

Margaret rolled her eyes and barely kept from snorting aloud. What lies! And respectable? How utterly laughable.

“Miss Bell?” The colonel’s brown eyes fixed on her. “I am allowed to show mercy where it’s warranted. What do you think I should do?”

“Me? You’re asking me?”

“Don’t bother with the girl,” Veyschmidt grouched. “She’s nothing. Customers often complain about her poor service. She’s brazen and rude.”

“Quiet, you scoundrel!” The colonel turned back to Margaret. “Miss Bell?”

“I have no place to go.” Despite her best efforts, her bottom lip quivered. It wasn’t the answer she longed to give.

“It’s my belief that my wife will want you and your mother to live with us in Winchester. She’s been worried about you. But given the fact I’m a Yankee, your mother most likely will not accept my invitation.”

“Mama’s dead,” Margaret blurted, “and I doubt my sister will want me living with her now that she’s married.”

A scene from the past clouded her mind. They were girls and on the farm and she and Carrie were quarreling. As usual, Carrie was demanding that Margaret complete some menial chore and Margaret was refusing to obey. They were only nine months apart in age. Margaret thought she and Carrie should be equals, but Carrie was determined to hang on to her eldest daughter status which included being the boss when their parents weren’t anywhere in sight.

The memory faded and the harsh reality of Margaret’s surroundings pressed in on her. Things had changed. She missed Carrie’s bravery. What’s more, she hadn’t begun to fathom just how much Carrie had protected her and Sarah Jane until she herself bore the brunt of drunken patrons’ groping and Veyschmidt’s beatings.

Remembering the bruise on her cheek, Margaret finger-combed strands of hair onto one side of her face.

“Please accept my condolences—on your mother’s passing and your younger sister’s also.”

The colonel’s deep voice recaptured Margaret’s attention. He sounded sincere. He reached across the scuffed wooden bar and pressed the sealed envelope into Margaret’s hand.

She inspected it, impressed by the expensive parchment. She couldn’t read well, hardly at all, but she recognized her own name penned across the front of the envelope in Carrie Ann’s neat handwriting.

She closed her eyes. To her left, Mr. Veyschmidt’s pleas for mercy grated on her nerves.

“Carrie addressed this letter to you personally because she guessed your

mother would refuse to read the missive. She didn't suppose that your mother would ever forgive her for Sarah Jane's death."

"Carrie was almost right." Margaret traced each letter with her fingertip. "You see, I received the telegram about Carrie Ann's marriage and about Sarah Jane's death, but Mama had passed on by the time the news arrived."

"You've survived quite an ordeal, Miss Bell. I urge you to come to Winchester. You can safely travel with a group of freed slaves and German Baptists called Dunkers who are following the army down the Valley. Because of the war, they've been forced to leave their homes for one reason or another." The colonel walked around the bar. Standing directly in front of Margaret, he tapped the envelope in her hand. "Besides, you'll be doing me a huge favor." Mischief glimmered in his eyes. "My wife will be quite miffed at me if I allow you to remain here." His gaze darkened as it fell over Mr. Veyschmidt, who pleaded for the soldiers to spare his establishment. "In fact, miffed is putting it mildly."

This cavalryman was afraid of Carrie's wrath? Surely not.

The colonel's features softened as he regarded Margaret again. "Carrie volunteers at an orphanage. If I were a betting man, I'd say that she will want you to help out there too. Many hands make light work."

"Oh, I would. I love children." Margaret's mind whirred with new possibilities.

"Sounds like you'll do very well in Winchester then."

One of his officers interrupted them. Margaret stepped back. The colonel appeared quite confident as he spoke with the other man, but not in an arrogant way. He scanned the dark interior of the inn with an unspoken authority. Margaret got the feeling he wasn't a man to argue with . . .

So how did he manage Carrie and her sharp tongue? The idea that this man even married Carrie was most curious.

Margaret couldn't wait to find out the answers to her many questions.

The colonel's troops finished their search and he conversed with them in undertones. Minutes later, they filed out of the inn, and he refocused his attention on Margaret. "I'm afraid I must have your decision now, Miss Bell."

She only needed one glimpse of Mr. Veyschmidt, whose beefy hands were now clasped as if in prayer—the same hands that shamelessly groped and

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beat Margaret and her sisters, each to varying degrees. And Mama too. He'd killed Mama the same as if he'd strangled the life right out of her.

Oh, how Margaret despised the man!

"I accept your invitation, Colonel. Thank you." She tasted sweet freedom in the air. "But please, I beseech you"—now it was her turn to beg—"light your Yankee torches and burn this den of iniquity down to the devil where it belongs!"

Alexandria Gazette

October 11, 1864

Dispatch:

STRASBURG, Va. Midnight, Oct. 9. 1864

Lieutenant General U.S. Grant, City Point:

In coming back to this point I was not followed up until late yesterday, when a large force of cavalry appeared in my rear.

I then halted my command to offer battle by attacking the enemy. I became satisfied that it was only all the rebel cavalry of the valley, commanded by Rosser [CSA] and directed Torbert [USA] to attack at daylight this morning, and finish this "Saviour of the Valley" [aka Rosser].

The attack was handsomely made. Custer, commanding 3d cavalry division, charged on the back road, and Merritt, commanding the 1st cavalry division, on the Strasburg pike. Merritt captured five pieces of artillery; Custer captured six pieces of artillery, with caissons, battery forge, etc. The two divisions captured forty-seven wagons, ambulances, etc. Among the wagons captured are the headquarters wagons of Rosser, Lomax, Wickham, and Col. Pollard [CSA].

The number of prisoners will be about 330.

P. H. Sheridan, Major General

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CHAPTER 2

October 14, 1864

Such sad musings—and on a night when the sky appeared so magnificent too. Brilliant stars gleamed like diamonds on ebony velvet. Seemed a shame to waste a show of God’s splendor on useless tears.

Carrie Ann Collier opened her bedroom window a little wider and poked her head out to get a better view of the glimmering heavens. The autumn breeze had a nip to it, but she ignored it to imagine Sarah Jane walking in God’s majestic kingdom. True, the girl had tried Carrie’s patience plenty of times, but she didn’t deserve to suffer at the hands of a low-life peddler.

Would things have been different if Carrie kept a closer eye on her youngest sister?

But when? How? Carrie had been trying to keep Papa’s newspaper alive and keep up with her chores at the Wayfarers Inn too.

And then one day Sarah Jane was gone; she’d run away.

If only Carrie had found her sister sooner . . .

Her eyes filled with a new onset of moist regret, but then the pounding of hooves sounded an alert before they even rode into the yard. Her heartbeat quickened—

And then she caught sight of them. Several blue-backed horsemen. *Union horsemen.*

She blinked and one particularly gallant officer came into view. He looked up at the window. Carrie’s heart somersaulted.

He's home!

She closed the window and rushed to the basin where she splashed water on her face. It wouldn't do for Peyton to suspect that she'd been crying. She'd read somewhere that the most important duty of an army officer's wife was keeping up her husband's spirits so when he faced his adversaries on the battlefield, he wasn't distracted by troubles at home. It was a duty Carrie welcomed, even relished.

After quickly brushing her hair, Carrie hastily tied back her mass of auburn curls with a pretty gold ribbon, and then she headed for the door. From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the dying embers in the hearth beckoning for attention. Peyton had been sleeping outside in the elements and would welcome a warm bedroom.

She tossed more kindling in and banked the fire, satisfied when its flames licked upward.

And now to greet her husband. . .

Carrie dashed from their bed chamber and headed for the steps. About halfway down, she met Peyton, who was taking the stairs two at a time.

"Welcome home, darling." In her excitement, she missed the next step.

Peyton caught her, his eyes wide. "Oh, the calamity that could have just occurred."

Before an apology could leave her tongue, he had drawn her closer and pressed his lips to hers. Carrie closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth of his embrace that sent a shiver down her arms.

He pulled back gently and helped her regain her footing. "You needn't throw yourself into my arms every time I come home, Mrs. Collier."

She tipped her head and batted her lashes. "No?"

He chuckled. "No."

"Then I'll reserve it for special occasions."

"You do that."

"Colonel, sir, where would you like your gear?"

With an impatient huff, Peyton turned on their stair and gave parting instructions to the enlisted man. Then his aide, Major Vernon Johnston, appeared.

"Sorry about that, sir. The men know they aren't supposed to enter the house."

“It’s all right . . . *this time*.” Taking Carrie’s hand, he led her the rest of the way up. “New enlisted man in my regiment,” he whispered. “Vern will straighten him out.”

They reached the upstairs hallway where Vern’s wife Meredith met them in her satin night wrapper. Her soft brown hair hung in waves to her hips. A blush stole across her face, illuminated by the lamp she held.

“Nice to see you, Colonel. I hope you’re returning my husband unscathed.”

“I am, Mrs. Johnston. And your husband will be up shortly.”

Carrie heard the smile in his voice above the feigned formalities. Major Vern Johnston was Peyton’s closest friend, and Meredith had become like a sister to Carrie.

“And now if you’ll excuse us . . .”

“Of course. Welcome home, Peyton.”

They continued to their quarters, comprised of a sitting room, a bedroom, and an alcove for dressing, fronted by a wooden screen for added privacy. Once inside the door, Carrie pivoted and peered up into Peyton’s face.

“I’m so happy to see you.”

“I should hope so. We haven’t been married long enough for you to have grown bored with me.”

“Oh, Peyton, don’t tease.”

Smiling, he stepped farther into the room where he tugged off his leather gauntlets. “No sense of humor tonight, my sweet?”

“I worry about you when you’re away.”

“I worry about you too.” He tossed the pair of gold sheathes followed by his blue slouch hat onto a nearby chair.

“I’m perfectly safe here in Winchester, so you have no need to fret.”

“Are you saying I should leave all that nonsense, the worrying and fretting, to you?”

“Yes.”

Peyton chuckled lightly and raked his fingers over his dark blond hair.

Carrie’s exasperation mounted. “Have you no idea how much I miss you when you’re gone?”

Peyton’s brows drew inward. “Was I gone that long?”

“Eight days.” They’d only been married fourteen days, total.

How did the other soldiers’ wives manage without seeing their husbands

for months—even years? Carrie had been spoiled by Peyton’s close proximity. As a colonel in General Sheridan’s Army of the Shenandoah, his business kept him in the Valley.

“Missed me, you say?”

“Yes, I say.”

Swooping her off her feet, Peyton spun her around. “You’d better miss me!” He smothered her giggle with a fervent kiss that made Carrie ache with desire, but all too soon he set her feet back on the carpet. “Unfortunately, I’m not home for long.”

“What?” Disappointment quickly replaced longing. “But why?” It was a foolish question.

“General Merritt’s entire cavalry division has been assigned to accompany General Sheridan on a mission.” He unfastened the front of his shell jacket. “We leave tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? But—” She swallowed her complaint. She’d married a Union cavalryman and his duty reigned supreme. For now, anyway. “What sort of mission?”

“Nothing you’d find interesting, my little journalist.” He shrugged out of his jacket.

Carrie sent him a look of mild reproof while he unbuttoned his shirt. “I wasn’t asking as a journalist, but as your wife.”

Peyton lifted the corners of his mouth. “Oh, yes, I have a wife, don’t I?”

She slapped his arm and he didn’t say more. Obviously, he wouldn’t expound on his mission, and perhaps it was better she didn’t know details. “Well, at least we have a little time to spend together.”

His features softened. No doubt he appreciated her understanding, even if it didn’t come from her heart. If she had her way, he would resign his command and the two of them would travel to England. Carrie stifled a sigh. She would have to wait until the war ended for her honeymoon.

“Speaking of journalism, Peyton, the newspapers reported skirmishes up the Valley and in surrounding areas. Each time I prayed God would protect you.” *And that you would keep your promise to spare Valley residents and their homes.*

“God heard those petitions, my love.” He removed his suspenders, and then gathered her in his arms once more. His lips found hers in the sweetest of kisses. “Carrie,” he whispered against her cheek, “if I should fall—”

“Peyton! I won’t hear of it.” But even as the words rolled off her tongue, she spied the silver chain he wore around his neck and the cross that dangled from it. Inscribed on the pendent were his name, army, and regiment.

“Yes, that’s what you said last time I broached the subject, and the time before that. We need to have this discussion, Carrie.” He placed his hands on her upper arms. “Did you at least hear what I told you to do if . . . if the worst should happen?”

She clamped her mouth shut, unwilling to have this particular conversation. However, the iron determination shining in Peyton’s golden-brown eyes cracked her resolve. “Yes, I heard you. I contact Mr. Finch, your solicitor.”

“Correct, and he’ll handle all the rest.”

She understood.

“And don’t wear black when I’m gone. I’ll be in heaven, walking the streets of gold.”

“Stop it, Peyton. What’s wrong with you tonight?”

He cupped her chin. “You’re too young for widow’s weeds and too pretty to wear black. Besides the color is utterly depressing.”

“Widow’s weeds?” She slapped his hand away. “Why are you tormenting me? I don’t find it amusing in the least.”

“I’m sorry, my dearest. I’m afraid I’ve seen my share of despondent wives lately. Widows in black, looking so lost and forlorn. I’ve offered to help them, but I’m a Northern Invader—their enemy, and the cause of their suffering.” He held Carrie close. Nestled against him, she felt safe, protected, and cherished. She heard his heartbeat, strong and steady. “I need to rest assured that you, Aunt Ruth, and Tabitha will be all right when I’m gone.” He planted a kiss on top of her head.

“When you’re gone?” Carrie stepped back and stared up at him. Two could play this morbid game. “Why, you’re much too ornery to die in battle.” She arched a brow. “Besides, you survived the injuries you sustained at Gettysburg.” The fact guaranteed nothing, but it sparked a hope in Carrie’s soul that maybe God wasn’t through using Peyton here on earth.

“All right.” He pushed out a smile that appeared born out of sheer acquiescence and nothing more, and pressed a kiss on her forehead. “Always remember, my sweet Carrie Ann, that I love you with all my heart.”

“And I will always love you, Peyton.” Her fingertips found the cross-shaped

pendant that rested against the soft matting of chest hair. “May we talk of better things now?”

“We may.” The upturned corners of his mouth became a full-fledged smile. “However, I fear I reek. My apologies. Tabitha is filling the tub.”

“At this late hour?” Carrie gave a wag of her head, although the odor emanating from Peyton’s body was rather . . . ripe. “I’m sure she had something to say about that.”

“She suggested it actually . . . right after she scolded me about tramping through her kitchen with my spurs on.” Peyton’s golden-brown eyes twinkled. “I know better, but my mind was on other things.”

Warmth crept into Carrie’s face.

“But apparently Tabitha’s sense of smell is as keen as anyone’s. She’s heating water for Vern also, except one of us will be using the smaller tub, so I plan to get downstairs first.”

“What about your men?”

“They will have to use the bathhouse in town. Tabitha’s good graces have their limits.”

“Indeed.” Carrie imagined the freed black woman’s reaction to Peyton and Vern, traipsing in after dark. Nonetheless, Tabitha was as much a Collier as Carrie, and she took pride in caring for her family in addition to her housekeeping and cooking. She wasn’t shy about letting everyone know of her efforts. But in spite of Tabitha’s craggy disposition, Carrie had come to care deeply for the older woman—almost as much as she cared for Peyton’s mischievous spinster aunt, Ruth Collier.

“I trust Tabitha isn’t giving you too much guff.”

“No more than I can handle.”

“Aunt Ruth has been behaving?”

“Of course. That is—as far as I know.”

Peyton groaned. “I hate to think what that means.”

“It means I do have a sense of humor tonight.”

“Ahh . . .” He chuckled.

“Seriously, everything here is as fine as spring rain, Peyton. If not, I would say so.”

“I trust you would.” He dropped onto the settee. “Any financial business I need to be aware of?”

“None.”

“Excellent. I have an appointment to see Mr. Finch tomorrow morning. Afterward, I’ll rejoin my regiment.”

“That means I’ll only have you here with me for a few hours tonight.”

“I’m afraid so, although . . .”

“Yes?” Carrie perked up.

“A photographer set up his tent just outside town. How about if you and I get our photographs taken after my appointment?”

“That sounds delightful. I’ve never had my photograph taken.”

“Ah, well, then, it’s about time.” He smiled. “And I have another surprise for you.”

“Oh?” Perhaps he’d inform her that he wouldn’t be gone long.

“My troops and I made it to Woodstock and I personally handed your letter to Margaret.”

“And?” Carrie wondered over the reaction of her sister—or stepsister, if her childhood friend Joshua Blevens had been correct. They’d made a pact as children never to lie to one another, and certainly Joshua wouldn’t lie about something like her mother and sister Margaret not being blood kin. “What was Margaret’s response?”

“She’s coming for an extended visit.”

“Here?” Wide-eyed, Carrie shook her head. “No. Please tell me you’re joking.” She clenched her jaw. Margaret never shared the responsibilities that weighed heavily on Carrie’s shoulders. She added to them. With the wicked innkeeper’s blessing, Margaret became a shameless hussy and would only bring scandal to the Colliers’ doorstep. “I don’t want her here.”

“I had no idea you felt that way.” Peyton’s forehead creased and his eyebrows drew inward. “I was certain of quite the opposite. I assumed you would insist she come. She’s alone and has nowhere to go.”

“The Wayfarers Inn is her home.”

“Not any longer. It burned to the ground at your sister’s request, and in keeping with my orders.”

“It’s gone?” A rush of emotions flooded Carrie’s being. Relief that she’d never see the likes of that place again, vindication that now Mr. Veyschmidt was homeless and as vulnerable as Carrie, her sisters, and mother had been two years ago. However, what rose to a greater level was the trepidation over

her stepsister's impending visit. Mama, of course, wouldn't deign to visit a Yankee's home. "You said Margaret is alone . . . of course my stepmother, being a loyal Confederate, wouldn't step foot into our home."

"I'm so sorry . . ." Peyton's expression softened. "Your mother is dead."

"Dead?" She spun toward the hearth, her eyes burning with sudden, unshed tears. Despite the abuse and threats Mama delivered, along with Joshua's news, grief tore at her heart.

Carrie found her voice. "I guess I'm not surprised Mama died, given her poor health."

"Your sister said she passed before ever learning of Sarah Jane's tragic fate."

So the news hadn't killed Mama as Carrie feared. She was grateful Peyton didn't push the subject. He knew about her painful past.

Hearing his grunt, she glanced over her shoulder. Peyton struggled to remove his knee-high leather boots. Carrie crossed the room and bent to help him.

"I suppose Margaret convinced you that we owe her more than the dress I lost that day after I left Woodstock."

"I invited her to come, Carrie. I decided she'd be safe enough following the army north, down the Valley."

Carrie gave a last tug on his boot and it slid off. "When will she arrive?"

"To be honest, I thought she'd be here by now."

"Perhaps she enjoys being a camp follower." Carrie had spent time in a Union camp, particularly traveling in its rear with ambulances, medical personnel, and followers who'd attached themselves to the army. Some were necessary, even vital to the army, like the sutlers who provided services from blacksmithing to saddling and shoemaking. Others, like the Dunkers, were abolitionists and followed the army north to escape Confederate persecution.

And others offered services that were unmentionable in good company.

"Margaret may have already found her new home." Carrie set Peyton's boots near the door. She turned to face him and placed her hands on her hips.

Peyton unfastened the cufflinks on his shirt. Carrie's cheeks warmed at his probing perusal. "I'm shocked by your heartless reaction. I anticipated the opposite. You're kind and giving to others. I admire your volunteer work at the orphanage. I assumed you'd insist upon caring for your sister."

“Why would I?”

“Because she’s family and next to God’s firm foundation, a person’s family provides love and stability.”

“My family was never stable. You know that. What’s more, Margaret is no relation to me.”

“So says Blevens.” Peyton collapsed against the back of the settee, opposite the hearth. “And I thought we discussed this already.”

Carrie lifted one shoulder. It was true. They’d talked about the matter in great length, but she couldn’t seem to shake the doubt.

“You cannot trust the word of a spy. I suspect Blevens dropped that lie in an effort to manipulate you and nothing more.”

“Joshua wouldn’t lie to me.” The words were out before Carrie thought better of them.

Peyton arched one brow. “You still defend him?”

Carrie glanced away. She couldn’t stand to see the disappointment in Peyton’s eyes, yet she believed what she said was true. “I do not defend Joshua or his despicable actions here on our wedding night. But he did keep his promise to me when he located Sarah Jane.”

Peyton muttered something under his breath and Carrie wished she’d never spoken Joshua’s name tonight. He had nearly torn apart her relationship with Peyton. Once her most trusted friend, Joshua now sought to divide and destroy based solely on political principles—and he’d nearly accomplished his goal earlier this month. As it was, his deception caused sixteen-year-old Tommy to be shot during an act of heroics. Carrie and Peyton had both been fond of the boy, but now Peyton wanted revenge. He had vowed to kill Joshua if their paths crossed again. And Joshua would like nothing more than to meet the challenge. He viewed all Yankees as traitors and invaders—Carrie included. Truly, Joshua was the enemy.

Even so, he was most likely right about her family. It made sense. Carrie never fit in. As a girl she had often followed Papa to his newspaper office to escape Mama’s demeaning rants. The newspaper office had been her refuge while growing up on the farm. She could still recall the pungent smell of the ink as Papa ran off his two-sided newspaper copies.

“Carrie, give your sister a chance.” Peyton’s deep voice cut through her thoughts. “I believed you would be pleased that I got her out of the Wayfarers

Inn. You'll find that she's changed a lot in the past couple of months. She's no longer that flirty, naïve girl. After you left, Margaret fell under Veyschmidt's tyrannical thumb. Things got worse for her, and it seemed to me that she has learned some valuable life lessons as a result."

Valuable life lessons, indeed. Carrie turned toward the hearth. Did Margaret blame her for the abuse she'd suffered at Mr. Veyschmidt's hand? Carrie winced. She could still feel the explosion in her cheek when Veyschmidt's fist met her face.

"You've changed for the better, Carrie. Why can't Margaret have changed for the better too?"

Carrie didn't have a reply.

"On a more pleasant subject, I managed to purchase a couple of jugs of Veyschmidt's ale before torching his establishment." Peyton's tone held a note of amusement. Clearly, he wanted to lighten the tension between them.

She forced a smile. Not only did Mr. Veyschmidt's ale have healing properties but it also shined silver, which would be favorable news to Tabitha. "Thank you, Peyton."

He sent her a devilish but utterly charming wink and Carrie's stormy mood dissipated. "No, my wife doesn't require expensive gifts upon my return. She wants home-brewed ale, guaranteed to rot a man's gut right through."

A little laugh popped out of her mouth. "Forgive me for having a poor attitude about my sister's visit."

"Forgiven . . . and forgotten." Peyton took hold of Carrie's wrist and tugged until she landed on his knee. "Did I tell you that I missed you?"

"Yes, I believe you did." She slipped her arms around his corded neck. She could count on one hand the days she'd spent with Peyton since their wedding. "But I'm getting tired of sharing you with the Union army."

"It won't be for much longer." He lay her down against the cushioned settee. He brushed several tresses off her cheek and then touched his lips to hers.

"Peyton?"

"Hmm . . ." He sounded distracted as his lips trailed to her neck then her collarbone.

"About that bath . . ."

He brought his head up sharply. "That bad, eh?"

She replied with a weak smile. While months ago, she probably smelled

worse than he did at this moment, she'd quickly become acclimated to more pleasing aromas.

With a growl, Peyton stood and collected clean clothes. "I'll be back," he said with husky promise.

"I'll be waiting."

Carrie smiled as he left, although it soon faded from her lips. Thoughts of her sister's arrival plagued her anew. God had blessed her with a new life here with Peyton, Tabitha, and Aunt Ruth. Meredith too.

Yes, Carrie belonged here. She had a new home with a new family. She married a prince of a man—a man she loved beyond reason. Her life was a fairy tale come true. She hated to think of Margaret barging in—and bringing a healthy dose of reality with her.