

*A*  
THOUSAND  
*Shall*  
FALL

A Civil War Novel

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**Kregel Publications**

A thousand shall fall at thy side,  
And ten thousand at thy right hand;  
But it shall not come nigh thee.  
Psalm 91:7

## Author's Note

### The Shenandoah Valley

Being a Wisconsin native, I had much to learn about Virginia State history during the time of the Civil War. One of the more interesting things is that, because the southern part of the Shenandoah Valley has a higher elevation than the northern part, the Shenandoah River runs northeast, emptying into the Potomac. As a result, when one is traveling north on the Valley Pike, from Woodstock to Winchester, for example, one is going north, *down* the Valley. Traveling south, from Winchester to Staunton, is considered going *up* the Valley. It's opposite the traditional concept of "down south" and "up north."

### Whiskey and Cigars

You'll notice that my male characters, although they are Christians, indulge in a swallow or two of whiskey from time to time, and smoke cigars. In fact, the Union Army sent cases and/or kegs of whiskey to its troops to keep the men's morale up so they would continue fighting. Furthermore, history shows that whiskey was widely used by Union and Confederate troops alike for medicinal purposes, and the occasional brandy and a good cigar was quite socially acceptable for men. For example, about a decade after America's Civil War, Charles Spurgeon was reported to have said, "Well, dear friends, you know that some men can do to the glory of God what to other men would be sin. And notwithstanding. . . . I intend to smoke a good cigar to the glory of God before I go to bed to-night." While I don't personally condone the practices, I felt it was important that my story be as historically accurate as possible—but without scandalizing my readers.

### History Versus Reality

All the dated news reports came from real sources such as newspapers and telegraphs from that time period. While I did much research, I used my literary license and took great liberties with several prominent historical figures. I also added an extra regiment to General Philip Sheridan's cavalry and, specifically, to General Wesley Merritt's division. I added stores and other businesses to Woodstock's Main Street, and I superimposed my characters into Winchester's history, along with Aunt Ruth's home. Even so, I tried to remain accurate to the actual accounts and not diminish either Woodstock or Winchester's significance during the Civil War. It is fun to note, however, that General Sheridan did ride through Winchester on September 19, 1864. Historical accounts state that the general stopped on the street to speak with a couple of young ladies before he rode to the schoolhouse to thank Miss Rebecca Wright, who passed information to him and aided in the Union's victory that day.

**[map of the valley to come]**

## Acknowledgments and Further Reading

Although the Shenandoah Valley Saga is fictional, much research has gone into this series. I'd like to acknowledge the authors and their nonfictional titles which proved most helpful to me.

*What They Fought For*

By James McPherson

*Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*

By James McPherson

*The Civil War: A Narrative* Vol. 3

Red River to Appomattox

By Shelby Foote

*From Winchester to Cedar Creek: The Shenandoah Campaign of 1864*

By Jeffrey D. Wert

*Shenandoah County in the Civil War: Four Dark Years*

By Hal F. Sharpe

*The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864*

Edited by Gary W. Gallagher

(multiple historians)

*The Encyclopedia of Civil War Medicine*

By Glenna R. Schroeder-Lein

*Civil War Household Tips* Vol. 1

By Maggie Mack

*Beleaguered Winchester: A Virginia Community at War, 1861-1865*

By Richard R. Duncan

*The Civil War: Complete Text of the Best Narrative History of the Civil War*

with 100 Actual Pictures

(Multiple authors)

*Winchester Divided: The Civil War Diaries of Julia Chase & Laura Lee*

Edited by Michael G. Mahon

*Winchester, Virginia: Streets—Churches—Schools*

By Garland R. Quarles

*Early Woodstock: Facts and Photographs*

By Joseph B. Clower, Jr.

*MAJOR-GENERAL CITY POINT*  
August 12, 1864—9 A.M.

Chief of Staff HALLECK:

Inform General Sheridan that it is now certain two (2) divisions of infantry have gone to Confederate General Early, and some cavalry and twenty (20) pieces of artillery. This movement commenced last Saturday night. Sheridan must be cautious, and act now on the defensive until movements here force them to detach to send to Petersburg. Early's force with this increase, cannot exceed forty thousand men, but this is too much for General Sheridan to attack. Send General Sheridan the remaining brigade of the Nineteenth Corps.

I have ordered to Washington all the one-hundred-day men. Their time will soon be out, but for the present they will do to serve in the defenses.

U. S. Grant, Lieutenant-General

## **Chapter 1**

### **August 15, 1864**

*Ooh, that Sarah Jane!*

Carrie Ann Bell stared at her youngest sister's sloppily scratched note. How could that girl have done such a scandalous thing? Running off with a lowlife peddler? Sure, Sarah had threatened to run away numerous times in the past, but who would have thought she'd actually do it? Mama would be heartbroken when she heard the news.

*Heart-broken and angry.* Carrie could practically hear Mama crying and blaming her for Sarah running off. Mama would say Carrie paid more attention to Papa's newspaper than her sisters . . .

And maybe Mama was right. But her sister Margaret was eighteen and Sarah, fifteen. They weren't that much younger than Carrie herself. And writing for the *Bell Tower* in Papa's absence had been Carrie's refuge, a place of normalcy in a world turned topsy-turvy.

Staring at Sarah's note, Carrie wondered about not telling Mama about this at all. Maybe she'd just go looking for her youngest sister and bring her home to the Wayfarers Inn—

What an oxymoron. The Wayfarers Inn was no more a home than a damp, dark cave was an elegant mansion. But it was a roof over her family's head.

Carrie paced her father's small newspaper office. Surely she could catch up with Arthur Sims, that no-account speculator Sarah ran off with. He couldn't have gotten far in that large, rattling wagon of his.

Her hand shook as sudden fire flowed through her veins. Carrie was tempted to notify the law and file kidnapping charges against the man, except the law had better things to do than go hunting for a fast-talking swindler who rode off with a starry-eyed girl.

*Lord, Jesus, what should I do?*

Praying, thinking, plotting, planning, Carrie continued her aimless wander, circling the obstinate Washington Iron Hand Press. She halted. What would Papa do if he were here?

She'd asked herself that question countless times in the past. With Mama ill and sometimes out of her mind, Margaret a veritable hussy, and now Sarah Jane running off, Carrie was sure she'd failed miserably at the task of taking care of her family in Papa's absence.

And the *Bell Tower* . . . sales were almost nonexistent for want of supplies. Worse, the old press continually gave her fits.

Her shoulders slumped under the weight of defeat. This newspaper was Papa's purpose for living, but under Carrie's management, the next issue of the *Bell Tower* wouldn't even go to press. But perhaps it was only a temporary setback, and the newspaper could be printed regularly once the War Between the States ended.

*If only Papa would return.*

But he wasn't here now. It was up to Carrie to find Sarah and bring her back to the Wayfarers Inn.

Stuffing Sarah's note into the pocket of her faded dress, Carrie exited the tiny newspaper office and locked the door behind her. The summer heat had increased since she'd arrived at dawn, and now, as she hurried down Main Street, perspiration moistened her brow and nape. People were out and about, mostly women, as only they, old men, and boys were left in Woodstock these days. They swept their walks and shared information with each other in front of their residences and establishments, but no one seemed to notice Carrie's haste, which was just as well. Mama would have a fit if she saw her unladylike gait.

As she trotted past the printers, then Massanutten Mercantile, Swifts' Seams and Tailoring, and Owens' Bootery, she glanced across the street at the National Hotel and couldn't help recalling the days when this town had seen finer times. Now the brick and wooden structures lining Main Street needed paint and repairs. On the next block over, buildings stood riddled with gunshot. Others looked like soulless ghouls, dark and vacant.

Carrie rushed on, into the less prominent part of the town, thinking, worrying, and praying over her sister.

*That spoiled Sarah Jane, adding to Mama's worries like this! Lord, what am I going to do now?* Imagine running off when her family needed her and just because she wanted a real home. Carrie wanted the same—and more. A family of her own. A husband who adored her.

A pair of brandy-colored eyes surfaced in her memory, eyes that belonged on a Union captain's handsome, bearded face. Wounded and bleeding heavily, he'd come into the Wayfarers Inn more than a year ago. The owner and innkeeper, Mr. Veyschmidt, had ordered her not to aid or assist Yankees. But Carrie, an independent-minded journalist just like her papa, hadn't chosen sides in the conflict, unlike most citizens of Woodstock, who were decidedly Confederate. To Carrie's way of thinking, any man who was wounded, whether gray-back or blue, deserved to be helped. So she defied Mr. Veyschmidt and sutured the deep gash on the captain's forearm. Turns out, the captain was the nicest, most charming Yankee officer she'd ever met. Handsome too. Carrie could still feel the warmth of his gaze on her face as she'd stitched the wound. Immediately, she'd sensed something special about the man.

After she'd finished bandaging his arm, she gave him a copy of the *Bell Tower*. The issue contained the article she'd written about several of Lieutenant Colonel John S. Mosby's partisans who had stayed at the inn. Drunk one night, Mosby's men bragged on ambushing a Union supply wagon and

killing the Yankees accompanying it. The captain read her article as he ate his supper, and afterward he thanked her. He said the information was as helpful as her doctoring. He'd also complimented her writing style, something few people ever did around here. Such a pity the handsome captain had gotten himself killed at Gettysburg—at least that's what she'd heard from a Union sergeant who'd marched through Woodstock last fall.

A sudden clamp on her shoulder, and Carrie missed her next step. She fell forward, the plank walk coming up fast to meet her.

"Whoa, girl." A pair of strong hands brought her upright before she hit face first.

Her feet planted firmly again, Carrie stared into a familiar sun-bronzed face. *Joshua*.

Relief turned to irritation. "I almost fell on account of you!"

"Nice to see you again too, Carrie Ann." Eyes as blue as the mid-August sky above them regarded her with apparent reprimand. She'd known Joshua Blevens since . . . well, ever since she could remember. "What are you doing, running down the street like the blue-bellies are charging into town?"

She hurled an annoyed glance skyward. "I wouldn't run even if they were charging into town. If you'll recall, Federals have charged into Woodstock before."

"*Federals?*" Joshua turned and gazed at his comrade. Carrie hadn't seen the other man until just this moment. "This girl ain't always so prim and proper, I assure you."

Carrie clasped her hands in front of her. "Margaret told me you were back in town." Her sister was far too friendly with soldiers, gray-backs and blue. "I'm glad to see you haven't gotten your fool head blown off yet."

"You always were a source of encouragement to me." Joshua's dry tone said he didn't appreciate her teasing. After combing strong fingers through his walnut-brown hair, he plopped his hat back on his head.

Guilt pinched Carrie and she dropped her gaze. Like the Bible said, these days life truly was a vapor that vanished away, and she wouldn't want the last words spoken to her longtime friend to be a thoughtless quip.

She peeked at Joshua. "Where'd you get that uniform?" Amazingly, his butternut trousers weren't soiled or tattered. She touched the sleeve of his gray shell jacket. Single-breasted with five shiny pewter buttons going up the front. Black piping along the collar and sleeves added distinction, and the ebony belt circling his trim waist boldly sported the silver letters CSA. He stood tall, his chin held proudly. "Quite impressive, Joshua."

He bowed slightly. "I'm an officer now, Carrie Ann. I've been promoted to major—*Major* Joshua Blevens."

"My, my, your folks must be so proud of you." She smiled. "And so am I. Congratulations."

He grinned, his gaze fixed on her face, until his friend cleared his throat.

"Speakin' of folks," the other man said, "didn't your mama teach you any manners, Blevens?"

He whirled around and faced his cohort.

"Introduce us," the man prompted.

"Of course. Excuse my rudeness." Joshua took a step back. "Miss Carrie Ann Bell, meet Major John Rodingham. Likewise, Major, allow me to present the sassiest girl this side of the Alleghenies."

Rodingham strode forward with an air of confidence. His eyes resembled two lead balls set into deep sockets. Oddly, the major's suntanned skin and brown hair were a perfect match, and the exact color of Papa's pipe tobacco. "A pleasure, Miss Bell."

She froze beneath his weighty gaze. His cold, flat eyes reminded her of the reptiles Joshua had teased her with as a child, not all of which were harmless. She blinked, wondering which type he was.

"Carrie Ann?" Joshua jabbed her with his elbow.

"The pleasure is all mine, sir." She swallowed her misgivings.

"Carrie Ann's been working hard, operating her father's newspaper in his absence," Joshua explained, and she detected a note of pride in his voice. "Mr. Bell marched off with General Jackson

himself, taking it upon himself to document the war in hopes a publisher will purchase his writings. Ain't that right, Carrie Ann?"

"Yes, that's correct." But would she ever cure Joshua of using the word *ain't*? Probably not.

"Heard from him lately? Your papa?"

"Not for a while. His last letter arrived some three months ago." Carrie didn't add that it was postmarked from Washington, that Papa must be doing research about the Union Army now. She didn't even want to think what Joshua and his friend would do if they found out her father was working inside a "blue-belly" camp.

"I wouldn't fret if I were you, Carrie Ann." The consolation in Joshua's voice did little to comfort her.

"Folks here in Woodstock say Papa's dead." Carrie's chin quivered in spite of her best efforts to appear as brave as the Rebel officers who blocked the walkway. "But I refuse to give up hope."

Joshua reached for her hand and gave it a brotherly squeeze.

"Quite the honor to be endorsed by General Jackson, may he rest in peace." Rodingham slapped his leather gauntlets against one palm. He too wore a gray shell jacket. "You must be very proud."

"Indeed I am, sir."

The major stepped toward her, and Carrie backed away.

Joshua set his hand on her shoulder and she felt a measure of protection. "In her spare time, Carrie Ann works at the Wayfarers Inn up the block with her sisters." His gaze met hers. "What's for breakfast this morning, Carrie Ann?"

"Porridge, same as every other day this week. It's been so hot that the chickens won't lay their eggs. Then again, I left before anyone else was awake, and Margaret is the one who gathers eggs each morning."

"Were you at the newspaper office?"

She nodded. "I'm having trouble with the printing press again."

"That dilapidated ol' thing." Joshua wagged his head. "Wish I could help you with repairs like always, Carrie Ann, but I've got more important things on my mind."

"Understandable. Besides, I managed to get it working." She glimpsed her stained fingertips and quickly stuffed her hands into her apron pockets. She'd been so distracted when she left Papa's office that she'd forgotten about washing up and putting on gloves and her bonnet. She must appear a disgrace to Rodingham, although she wasn't bent on impressing him as much as she hoped she hadn't embarrassed Joshua.

Sarah Jane's note brushed against her bare palm, and Carrie's gaze bounced back to childhood friend. Would he help her—just like he used to when they were kids?

"You back home for a while now, Joshua?"

"No. Awaiting orders is all—and trying to show everyone in Woodstock that continued support of the Confederacy will bring prosperity."

Carrie's hopes deflated like one of the Union Balloon Corps' aerostats that she'd read about somewhere.

"These new uniforms and our victory at Cold Harbor a couple of months ago prove it." A slow smile spread across Joshua's face. "About two thousand Yankees dead, and we didn't even lose a hundred men."

Carrie knew the details. She'd printed them in the *Bell Tower*. "And so far, you've been able to protect Petersburg from falling into Union hands."

"The Yankees'll never get Petersburg," Joshua muttered.

Rodingham cleared his throat. "Tell us, Miss . . . what are *you* doing in town this fine morning, galloping down the street such as you were?"

Joshua stared at her from beneath an arched brow.

Carrie's cheeks burned with a rush of indignation. "I have an important message to deliver to my mother." *Not that it's any concern of yours.*



She turned to her friend. “Joshua?” There had to be a way he could help her, especially now that he was an officer. “May I speak to you privately?”

He cast a brief look toward Rodingham. “I’m a busy man, Carrie Ann.”

“It’s important.” She gave him a pleading stare.

Meeting her gaze, his blue eyes turned steely-gray, revealing a hardness that Carrie had never seen in Joshua’s gaze before. Obviously he’d witnessed more on battlefields than human beings ought to see—things Carrie only heard about when soldiers were well into their cups at the Wayfarers Inn.

Joshua clasped her upper arm and led her down the walk several paces. “All right, what is it?” Impatience clipped his every word. “I don’t want to keep Rodingham waiting.”

“It’s Sarah Jane.” Carrie got right to the point. “She’s run off with that peddler who was here in town. He and his big fancy painted wagon rolled in a couple of days ago.”

“I know who you mean.” Joshua tapered his gaze. “He’s a quite a bit older than Sarah Jane. How do you know they ran off together?”

Carrie thrust her sister’s note at him. “Sarah left this.”

He read it.

“Might you know where that no-account was headed?” Carrie asked.

“Well, if it’s the same fellow who tried to sell me a cheap pocket watch last night, then he’s likely continuing down the Valley. He mentioned having kin up north a ways.”

“I’ve got to go after him and bring Sarah back.”

“I knew you’d say that.” After combing fingers through his shaggy hair, Joshua slapped his hat back onto his head. “But get the fool idea out of your head. There’s a new army just formed, and it includes some of the most ruthless cavalymen the Union’s got to offer. From what I hear they’ll give Ol’ Jube a run for his money,” he said, referring to General Jubal Early. “But the Confederacy will prevail. Even so, I can’t imagine what those devil cavalymen would do to a naïve Southern girl like yourself, if they found you outside of town on your own.”

“But Sarah is—”

“No! You hear me?” With his hand around her arm again, Joshua gave Carrie a shake.

“Stop it. You’re hurting me!”

“What do you think those Yankee invaders will do to you?”

Carrie pulled free from Joshua’s grasp.

“Having difficulties over there, Blevens?” Rodingham’s mocking voice sailed over on a slight breeze.

“Nothing I can’t handle.” Joshua rubbed tanned fingers along his clean-shaven jaw. “I’ll inform Rodingham of the situation and between the two of us we’ll—”

“Don’t bother.” Carrie peeked at the man from around Joshua’s left arm. “I get the feeling that your friend won’t be much help. Besides, I don’t trust him.”

“You never trusted anyone, Carrie Ann. Why would you start now?”

“I trusted you.” Maybe she shouldn’t have. “The war has changed you.”

“It’s changed everyone.”

“Well, pardon me,” Carrie huffed. “I thought you were my friend.”

“I am your friend.” Joshua set his palms on her shoulders. “And you’ll always be like my little sister.” He expelled a breath. “Don’t worry, all right? Sarah Jane is probably homesick by now. She’ll be back soon enough. And we’ll keep our eye out for her. But, Carrie Ann, you can’t go after her. There’s blue-bellies camped all around Woodstock.”

“If it’s too dangerous for me, imagine Sarah out there alone. She’s just a child. What’s more, she’s in the company of a man who will likely ruin her by nightfall.” She grabbed hold of the front of his shell jacket. “I can’t stand the thought, Joshua, and I’ll confront the entire Union army—the devil himself—if I have to in order to find my sister.”

He grasped her hands. “Carrie Ann, you’re scarin’ me because I know that determined look in your eyes.”

Carrie's mind reeled through possibilities of how to reach her sister on the other side of the battleground. She suddenly remembered a Union deserter's uniform in her trunk. She'd found it last spring while cleaning the guestrooms. The Federal soldier had been on leave, so he said, except he'd left his uniform and never came back for it. After some hemming, it'd fit her. At least passably. All she needed was a pair of boots to ensure her passage past Yankee pickets.

"Joshua, please? I know where I can get a Yankee uniform. All I need is a pair of boots and that's where you can help me."

"Are you touched in the head, girl?" Joshua looked skyward. "Dressing up like a Yankee?"

"Just to get past their guards."

"That's the most harebrained idea you've come up with in all your born days!"

"But if I looked like one of them, then—"

"Then Confederates'll shoot you. What's more, if they think you're a spy, they'll hang you."

"You're just trying to scare me, like when we were children." She folded her arms. "There's got to be a way."

"Maybe, but that plan of yours ain't it. Now you'd best go tell your mama about what Sarah Jane did and leave the rest up to God Almighty."

She took a step back, unwilling to concede defeat. Not yet, anyway. "I could wear one of Margaret's gowns over the uniform while I get out of town. She's larger than I am."

"The scrawniest chicken in the barnyard's larger than you."

Carrie ignored the biting retort and accompanying scowl. After all, her idea was a good one. "I could cut my hair and wear the Yankee deserter's uniform—"

"Cut your hair?"

"Since the no-account peddler's got that heavy wagon and the sorriest-looking mules pulling it, I should be able to catch up easy enough." She imagined his punishment for running off with Sarah Jane. "When I find him, that man is as good as dead."

"Now you're talkin' cold-blooded murder. Sarah Jane went with him willingly. You've got her note in your hand and I'm witness to that fact." Joshua's frown deepened. "Carrie Ann, the truth is, if you do this thing, you're the only one who'll get killed."

That threat wasn't enough to instill the fear of God into her. Rather, it seemed as if God fanned the spark that now burned within her breast, because telling Mama . . . that idea terrified her! The angry rants, the curses, the insults and humiliation. Carrie didn't think she could bear another of Mama's episodes.

But if she had a plan, and promised Mama that she'd find Sarah Jane . . .

"You'd best know that both Union and Confederate armies are heavily armed." Joshua's voice penetrated her thoughts. "Carrie Ann, you don't understand what's going on outside of town right now."

She didn't care. All that mattered was finding Sarah Jane. "Please, Joshua?" She gave him the expression that usually made him crumble and relent. "You've known Sarah since the day she was born. She's like your sister too." Holding her next breath Carrie waited, hoping, praying. "Please?"

"A pair of black boots, huh?" His features softened. "I'll see what I can do."

"Oh, thank you!"

"I said, *I'll see*. That doesn't guarantee anything."

Standing on tiptoe, she pressed a sisterly kiss on his cheek. Maybe some things hadn't changed between them after all.

## Chapter 2

“Look alive, men!” Colonel Peyton Collier sat astride his black charger and eyed the sorry-looking horsemen of Company D. Thankfully it was the only one of twelve in his newly formed regiment that lacked both discipline and dash. Soon, however, these troopers would realize what an honor they’d received, being mustered into the service of General Wesley Merritt’s 1st Division Cavalry.

Peyton continued to survey the eighty men. Their appearances were as rough as he’d expected, considering their riotous living last night. While Peyton wasn’t a man to partake of strong drink—no more—he could understand his men’s desire to celebrate another day of life. He knew the impulse to mask the pain of reality with whiskey—government-issued whiskey at that. But drunkenness wouldn’t be tolerated under his command. Death lurked around each corner of this war. His men needed to be sober.

Peyton expelled a weary sigh at the bearded faces, shaggy hair, and bloodshot eyes that returned his stare. Shirts hung over their blue trousers. Suspenders dangled at their hips. Most hadn’t had time to don their blue sack coats before the impromptu formation. Peyton was tempted to fine them, which he could do under Army regulations. But he wouldn’t. Not this time.

He filled his lungs then slowly released a breath. This poorly managed company would surely challenge his leadership skills. Still, the men needed to hear from their commanding officer. After that, his subordinates would take charge of them.

Peyton had only been promoted to the rank of colonel at the beginning of this month, shortly after General Philip Sheridan, a comrade from years past, took command of the Middle Military Division, now the recently christened the Army of the Shenandoah. Peyton often wondered if migrating armies had been such a good idea, and it wasn’t the first time he questioned one of General Grant’s decisions. Even so, Peyton followed orders, and as a newly appointed colonel, he needed to win his men’s loyalty.

“First things first.” He sat high in his saddle. “I won’t tolerate imbibing while we’re in camp. What you do on your own time is your business, but while you’re under my command, you’ll be sober. We could come under enemy fire at any time so you’ll need to have your wits about you.” He sent a hard stare to his bleary-eyed captain. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Yessir.” The captain’s reply was accompanied by rumbling unity from the men.

Peyton leaned forward and crossed his hands atop his saddle. “As you are aware, it is imperative that the Union control the Shenandoah Valley. If this campaign is successful, which General Sheridan believes it will be, then we could soon see a Confederate surrender and a swift end to this war.”

The men cheered and Peyton felt like joining them. This war had lasted far too long and had taken too many lives.

He pulled back his shoulders. “We’ll remain here, camped by the Shenandoah River, until further instruction from General Merritt. Understood?”

“Yessir!”

Peyton glanced at his captain. “I’ll be reconnoitering with four other Cavalry officers later. You’re in charge.” He raised an eyebrow. “Don’t make me regret that decision.”

“No sir, Colonel, I won’t.”

Satisfied, Peyton dismissed the captain and his men and urged his horse Brogan onward. He stopped and delivered the same message until his entire regiment of nearly one thousand men had heard directly from him. As General Sheridan said, this campaign was too important to lose due to miscommunication at the onset.

Weariness pervaded Peyton’s limbs. Without a doubt another battle loomed, bloody and deadly. Many of the men he spoke to today might not be alive to recount the tale tomorrow. That realization sliced through him with the swiftness of an enemy’s saber.

The men he passed stopped playing cards, stood, and respectfully saluted him. He inclined his head in acknowledgment and rode toward the camp’s corral. He’d worked hard for the rank of colonel,

fought hard. His dear aunt Ruth had made sure he'd met the right people. It'd be a lie if he said he didn't enjoy the power and privileges of being an officer. Nevertheless, he understood that the rank bore much responsibility—responsibility that, after Gettysburg, he promised God he'd take seriously. And he did.

"I'll take Brogan's reins, sir."

Peyton dismounted. "Here you go, Tommy." He tossed the leather straps at the boy who longed to be a Federal soldier. Would to God that Tommy lived another year so he could legally enlist—better yet that the war would be won so Tommy could attend school and make something of himself. However, the lad seemed to have soldiering on his heart and always on his mind.

"Did you get all your talking in today, Colonel?"

"I did." Peyton pulled off his gauntlets.

"I wouldn't mind practicing some shooting again, sir, after I get your horse tended to. My chores are done."

Peyton smiled at the eagerness shining on the lad's round face. "Very well." He retrieved the revolver from the pocket inside his coat. "Go on. Just remember my instructions and warnings."

"Yessir, I will." Tommy eyed the '55 Colt Sidehammer reverently, which warmed Peyton's heart. The weapon had been Peyton's eighteenth birthday present from Aunt Ruth.

"Don't shoot your foot off."

Tommy grinned at the jest. "No, sir, I won't."

"And once we march out of camp, later today or tomorrow, you stay out of the way. Understand?"

"I will, sir."

Once more, Peyton inclined his head as the young man led the black gelding toward the makeshift corral. Bad enough that the number of men he'd lost since Gettysburg could have populated a small city. No sense in more children losing their lives. In his opinion, the army shouldn't allow men under eighteen to enlist. On the other hand, Peyton didn't know what he'd do without boys like Tommy who tended to the horses, helped the saddler, assisted the surgeon, and served as drummer boys as well as occasional couriers on the battlefields. Still, Peyton felt compelled to keep the boys who fell under his command as safe as possible in the middle of a war.

A horrid memory flashed across Peyton's mind as he strode to his tent. *Cold Harbor*. It had been a grisly disaster for the Union Army. So had most of the battles this summer. However, with Phil Sheridan leading this new army, things were definitely looking up.

\* \* \*

By nightfall, Carrie Ann was trudging down the rutted Valley Pike toward Strasburg, wearing the deserter's uniform beneath Margaret's dress. She prayed each step of the way, trusting God's hand to guide her and use her to rescue Sarah Jane. And to protect Margaret's dress. *Dear God, please do that*. She had promised to do Margaret's chores for a month in exchange for borrowing it. But Carrie knew her plan would work. It had to work. Mama screamed that Carrie shouldn't return to Woodstock if she didn't have Sarah Jane in tow, and where else could Carrie go?

She moved closer to the side of the uneven road so she wouldn't turn an ankle in her ill-fitting boots. Joshua had come through for her, providing the boots, and she was grateful to him.

With only a sliver of moonlight, she easily made out the way. She headed for Strasburg. She'd been this way before, but always with either Joshua or Papa. Known for its tanneries and pottery, Strasburg was nicknamed "Pot Town." Since the war, it had become a dilapidated place. The Yanks and Rebs alike usually marched right through it, so Carrie didn't anticipate being bothered.

Her mind came back around to Papa. If only he were home to advise her . . .

But he wasn't. She supposed the Lord was still with her, though. He had protected her from the devastating fire that destroyed the farm. He'd shielded her from drunken soldiers at the Wayfarers Inn. He was able to take care of her now and direct her path to Sarah Jane.

But would He?

Carrie decided to occupy her thoughts with fond memories instead of her mounting doubts. She recalled some of Papa's tales about the area. The native Indians had named the Shenandoah Valley "Daughter of the Stars," and Carrie had always appreciated the unique topography. The land was lush and fertile, and if it weren't nighttime, she'd see the green pastures, golden cornfields, and shimmering wheat fields that stretched out across the Valley like a patchwork quilt. The hills of Massanutten Mountain lay beyond to the east. To the west, the jagged peaks of the Alleghenies were the Valley's backdrop. Carrie had overheard farmers talk in the Wayfarers Inn. They said this summer's crops had done well. Soon the bountiful harvest would be taken to the Valley's many mills. Little wonder why the Shenandoah Valley earned the nickname "The Breadbasket of the Confederacy."

And little wonder why Rebels and Yankees were ready to kill each other in order to control it.

But fighting wasn't anything new to the Valley—not since this war began. General "Stonewall" Jackson had successfully defended it back in 1862. A shame old Stonewall had been accidentally shot by one of his own men and then succumbed to pneumonia later. Residents in the Valley mourned the loss to this day. Carrie had written a number of stories about General Jackson, and the *Bell Tower* had sold numerous copies when she'd printed them. Another Valley hero was cavalryman Ashby Turner, and of course John Mosby, who was practically a living legend because of his daring raids against the Union Army.

The long grass rustled beside her, and Carrie slowed her pace, listening. She shivered despite the night's thick, oppressive heat. Was she being followed?

A sturdy breeze wafted over her, cooling the perspiration on her brow and nape. She'd cut her curly tresses to her shoulders, hoping to resemble an ordinary shabby-looking soldier. Beneath her bonnet she wore the deserter's blue forage cap that she'd pinned into place.

Carrie inhaled deeply. The scent of an oncoming rainstorm promised to soak her within the hour. That might cool her.

But that persistent stirring in the grass . . .

Her hand curled around the butt of the gun inside the pocket of Margaret's dress and she sent up a prayer. She couldn't afford to waste ammunition.

She waited, holding her breath until her lungs threatened to burst. Nothing moved except the long grass. Carrie exhaled. Her imagination had fooled her again.

The night grew darker as the clouds moved in. More than once since leaving Woodstock, Carrie wondered if she should have waited until dawn to set off after Sarah. But, as anticipated, Mama flew into a rage at the news of her "baby girl" running off. She wailed and blamed Carrie for neglecting her duties. Then Mama said she shouldn't bother returning unless she brought Sarah home with her.

So, after helping Margaret serve supper at the Wayfarers Inn, Carrie took off, taking a gamble based on hearsay and Joshua's hunch that the scoundrel-peddler ventured down the Valley Pike. The sun had just set when Carrie left, and the chances of slipping by Union troops were better in the dark.

Weren't they?

A shadow crossed the road and Carrie jumped back. She lifted the weapon from her pocket, despising the way her hand shook. Her heart beat fast, but as the clouds briefly parted, Carrie saw nothing and no one except the empty rutted pike. She glanced up at the shadowy mountainous ridges. Whose eyes were fixed on her? The devil Union cavalymen?

*Don't think about them.* She reined in her thoughts. Jesus would protect her. She was, after all, on a mission of mercy to save her youngest sister from that no-account peddler.

But would she find her baby sister too late?

A howling in the distance caused Carrie to grip the gun more tightly. She knew how to use her weapon, and she could shoot better than some men, thanks to Joshua. He'd given her the Walker Revolver in her hand after his father gifted him with a newer model when Joshua enlisted in the Confederate Army. Of course, Joshua required that she prove her proficiency with the pistol before he allowed her to keep it in her possession, so she learned quickly. After all, a girl never knew when she'd need to protect herself and her family.

A pity she hadn't been armed at suppertime. She had a mind to shoot that philandering Confederate officer to teach him a lesson. How dare Rodingham behave so inappropriately toward Margaret—and how dare Margaret allow him to do so! Carrie had voiced her protest, only to be silenced by Mr. Veyschmidt's threats of eviction. Apparently, Joshua's friend had money to spend—and not Confederate currency either, which seemed rather hypocritical of him considering his message of loyalty to *The Cause* equaling prosperity. Mr. Veyschmidt let the rogue do as he pleased. Worse, Joshua sat by and watched it all happen. Carrie begged him to rein in his comrade, but he refused, citing the fact that Margaret neither protested nor asked for help. While true, Joshua should have intervened.

He would have before the war. He had changed and not for the better. Truth was, Joshua wasn't the only one who had changed. This war had affected everyone.

Quickening her steps, Carrie forced herself to shift her thoughts and mulled over her plan once more. Once the threat of running into Confederate troops lessened, she would remove Margaret's dress and bonnet so she could pass Union pickets. She would stuff the gown into the haversack she'd discovered along with the Yankee uniform. Then, after she found Sarah Jane, she'd put Margaret's dress back on and return to the Wayfarers Inn with no one being the wiser and Sarah back where she belonged.

Five hours later, and soaked to the bone by a rainstorm, Carrie reached the town of Strasburg only to find it teeming with Confederate troops. She couldn't take a chance at being discovered—a female out at this hour. If they searched her and discovered her disguise, she'd likely get herself hanged.

She detoured east.

As the predawn hours wore on, she glimpsed the occasional lone, intoxicated Confederate soldier, and hid behind rocks, trees, or shrubs until he passed. Only then did she continue her trek.

The early morning air weighed on her, thick and oppressive. The lined jacket she wore beneath Margaret's dress only added to her discomfort. The bonnet she wore over the forage cap contained her body heat and furthered her exhaustion. Should she shed the jacket and hide it in the haversack? No. She couldn't risk it. Not yet.

She walked on and minutes later she encountered a man. Older, maybe. A farmer, she assumed, although she couldn't see him clearly at this distance. Up ahead, he crossed the road and strode toward his barn. Carrie neared the structure, concealing her weapon, and worked up the courage to approach him.

"Excuse me, sir."

He whirled around and Carrie could tell she'd taken him by surprise. Darkness shrouded his face.

"I don't mean any harm. I'm just looking for my sister."

He slowly neared. "What in the world? Young lady, you ought not be out and about this time of day. It ain't safe."

"As I said, I'm searching for my baby sister who took off yesterday with a peddler. She's only fifteen—too young to understand the consequences."

"But old enough to know better, I reckon." The man hiked up his drooping suspenders and slid them onto his broad shoulders.

Odd that this fellow wasn't off fighting for the Confederacy. Few men were left in Woodstock, and Carrie assumed it was the same throughout most of Virginia. Just in case the man was up to no good, she slipped her right hand into her dress pocket and gripped the pistol.

"Did you see a peddler's wagon come by here yesterday?"

"I might have." He cocked his head to one side.

"If you want money, I don't have any."

"Then I didn't see a thing."

"All right, then. Thank you anyhow, sir."

Carrie resisted the urge to stomp her foot and yell. Exhaustion nipped at her every muscle, but she wouldn't stop. She couldn't, not after what Mama said. What's more, Carrie figured that even being a day behind that scoundrel-peddler she could cover more ground on foot than he could cover with his rattling, ostentatious wagon.

“Does this road—” She pointed to the one running between the house and barn. “Does it go into Front Royal?”

“Yep, but you’d best not head in that direction, Missy. There’s dirty rotten Yankees camped on the other side of the Shenandoah.”

“Well . . .” Carrie squared her shoulders. “Yankees are the ones with the money, so I imagine a peddler would head that way.”

“Go on imagining then.” There was an edge to his tone, and a second later Carrie noticed the man’s light-colored trousers. Maybe butternut, but probably gray.

*A Confederate.* Nervous flutters filled her insides. She’d best make a hasty departure.

“What you got in that bag you’re carryin’?”

“Nothing much. A few biscuits and sliced ham.” Carrie plunged her hand into the haversack and pulled out the food, wrapped in a checkered napkin. “You’re welcome to them.” She prayed he wouldn’t confiscate the rest of her belongings.

“Nice of you. Thanks.”

Carrie took a step backward. “I always do my part for *The Cause*, little as it might be.”

“Good. Now you’d best run along home.”

She released the breath she’d been holding.

“Me and my men are getting ready to take on them Billy Yanks, and you don’t want to get caught in the fray.”

“No, sir, I don’t.”

“Incidentally . . .” He paused before entering the barn. “A peddler did come through here late yesterday afternoon. He had a girl with him, although she didn’t seem too unhappy. Last I heard they were headin’ for Culpeper.”

“Culpeper?” Surprise ricocheted through her. “But that’s some fifty miles away.”

“Listen, missy, that’s all I know.”

“Thank you for the information.” Carrie glanced up the road. That peddler traveled with a burdensome load. Maybe it wouldn’t be too hard to catch up.

The soldier opened the barn door. As soon as he disappeared inside, Carrie sprinted in the direction of Front Royal, a five-hour trek. Exhausted, hot, and still wet from the earlier rainfall, Carrie knew she’d never make it by dawn. Even so, she had to try. Surely Confederate troops wouldn’t attack their enemy until after the sun came up . . .

Or would they?

## Chapter 3

For the next several hours Carrie stayed on the pike as much as possible, but she stood little chance of achieving her goal. But, perhaps, she’d happen upon that miserable peddler and Sarah Jane. Maybe they had stopped for the night. Besides, there was always hope she’d avoid the impending conflict—that is, if the Confederate soldier at the barn was correct.

As her mind gnawed on the thought, the earth began to quake beneath her feet. The rumbling grew louder with each passing second. She glanced over her left shoulder and her heart jumped into her throat. Horses thundered toward her.

On a whim, Carrie scampered into a thicket of trees. She crawled beneath the long branches of a fir and watched Confederate troops ride by. After they'd gone, she scampered up a tree-studded slope. By the time she reached the top, guttural cries of agony like she'd never heard split the stillness of the morning. Had Lee's army taken the Yanks by surprise at the north fork of the Shenandoah? Had the Yanks surprised the Rebs when they forded the river? What a story it would make. An eyewitness account! Papa would be so proud.

Carrie found a place between the trunks of two maples from where she could watch the action. Soon, however, she wished she hadn't. As the fighting intensified, the river ran red with the blood from men clad in both blue and gray. But soon the Union Army reclaimed its ground. Steel blades glinted in the rising sunshine. Gunfire exploded, causing Carrie to cover her ears. Grunts from soldiers and the tormented shrieks of the fallen increased by the minute. A heart-wrenching scene, and yet Carrie couldn't work up the gumption to turn her face and run away.

A portion of the Yankee Army chased the Rebs down the pike. Meanwhile the fighting continued on foot and on horseback. She could see the Confederates were outnumbered and outgunned. Plumes of sulfur-laden smoke wafted her way, forcing her to cough every now and again. Oh! If she could only help the wounded somehow. The color of their bloody uniforms mattered little to her. That they lay writhing on the muddy banks of the Shenandoah, helpless and dying, tore at her heart. Carrie had read of the battles and heard accounts from soldiers who stopped at the Wayfarers Inn, but she'd never witnessed the brutality of war firsthand. What a shame the United States and Confederate States couldn't solve their differences without killing each other.

Union troops came and went, and after some time, those Southern soldiers who were still alive were rounded up like cattle. Bodies were fished from the water and lined up on the riverbank. Several Yankees on horseback, cavalrymen, she figured, crossed the Shenandoah and thrashed their sabers through leafy shrubbery. However, the Confederates weren't finished. Like lightning and thunder, artillery boomed and exploded from what had to be Guard Hill. Men's bodies flew in the air like ragdolls as shells struck their targets. Horses lay dead, their massive bodies quickly multiplying in the meadow across the river.

Union troops rode along the bank and scanned the hillside. Carrie sat unmoving. Had they seen her? When finally their gazes landed elsewhere, she removed her bonnet, unbuttoned Margaret's dress, and hurriedly pulled it over her head. She stuffed the gown into the haversack. Now wearing the blue trousers, coat, and forage cap, Carrie still felt exposed and vulnerable. However, she couldn't let insecurities hinder her. She'd come this far, and she had to find Sarah Jane.

Cannon fire in the distance shook Carrie to her core. She shifted her focus to the present. Disguised, or at least she hoped so, she eased down the hill on her backside, readying herself for a fast run. She prayed the Yanks wouldn't pay her any attention. Making it to Front Royal seemed impossible. Her only hope was to hightail it across the covered bridge and then keep running until she was safely beyond the fight.

Troops galloped passed. Once clear, Carrie crossed the road. Reaching the bridge, she looked over her shoulder only to see Confederates on horseback engaging the Union horsemen. Bullets whizzed by dangerously close to her head, but fear momentarily rooted Carrie in place.

But then she realized it was either move or die.

Hoping to hide, Carrie climbed over the side of the bridge and shinnied down a wooden support until she couldn't go any farther. Her feet brushed a thick beam, so she climbed over and stood on it. Looking down, she guessed it was a twenty-foot drop to the riverbank, so a safe jump was out of the question. Besides, she'd land in the middle of warring troops.

Clouds of thick smoke rolled over her, making her cough, but thankfully hiding her from all the action below. Men's grunts and shrieks, their cries before death, made her shudder. She had to escape.



With her hands on the large post, now above her, she scanned her surroundings for options. The giant sycamore that reached skyward and stood just a few feet away seemed the obvious choice. If she could just leap to the closest branch, she could hide in the tree and climb down once the battle was over.

Above her, the bridge shook violently from the weight of men galloping their mounts across its planks. The wooden beams creaked as though they might snap like twigs.

Carrie had to act. It was now or never.

Bending at the knees, she pushed off and sailed across the short expanse between the bridge and the tree. Smoke stung her eyes. She blinked, and in that second, she missed her intended target. An odd sense of weightlessness engulfed her before she landed hard in the middle of two thick branches. Her heart hammered as realization dawned. She'd nearly fallen onto the fighting men!

As the world righted and clearer thinking returned, it became apparent that she'd landed in the crux of the sycamore. She wiggled her toes. She appeared unhurt for the most part, although she'd injured her left wrist. Had she cracked a bone? It would have to be bound somehow. She shrugged her haversack's strap off her right shoulder and tried to grab it with her right hand, but the sack dislodged and fell between the branches before she could catch it.

"No! Oh, no!"

The clashing armies paid no mind to Carrie's cry or the fallen haversack. Pain began numbing her senses while despair filled her being. Helplessly she watched her belongings float away on the swift current of the Shenandoah.

\* \* \*

With his senses on high alert after today's surprise meeting with enemy forces, Peyton combed the north fork of the Shenandoah, searching for dead or injured men, fugitives, and Confederate soldiers. A few select troops rode with him. Meanwhile, the enemy continued to lob shells in their direction. They exploded and more smoke billowed, blocking out the sun.

"Let's go, men. Time is of the essence." Peyton had orders to retreat to Nineveh, but he wasn't about to leave any of his troops behind if he could help it.

A strange sound came from somewhere over his head. Peyton reined in Brogan and lifted a hand, slowing the men behind him. He sat, listening. Sure enough. Coughing. And it came from . . . from the treetop?

Peyton lifted his gaze and glimpsed a patch of blue uniform. "What in the world are you doing up there, soldier?" A coward? Had the man hidden in the tree to avoid the fight?

"I—" *Cough. Cough.* "I fell."

"You fell into a tree?"

"Off the bridge." The fellow's voice was raspy, no doubt from choking on the incessant smoke.

Peyton's gaze wandered to the covered bridge on the Front Royal Pike. It was possible, he supposed, but what had the fellow been doing up there in the first place? Running?

"Come down from there at once." If he'd run during a battle, the soldier would be immediately shot. Either way, he'd have to face Peyton. "Do you hear me? Climb down now!"

"I can't." *Cough. Cough.* "I'm stuck."

Swiveling in his saddle, Peyton motioned for his sergeant to dismount. "Get that man down from the tree."

"Yes, sir." Sergeant Donahue climbed the bank and over the gnarled tree roots. He glanced upward and then walked back toward Peyton. "Sir, I'm afraid I can't get the man. You see . . ."

"Get to the point, man." Peyton's temples began to throb.

"I'm timid of heights, sir."

"For crying out loud!" He swung down from his saddle and walked to the base of the tree. Upon closer inspection, he noted that the barking soldier sat between two thick branches that were fairly high up indeed.

“I can get him down, Colonel.” Corporal Bob Tompkins approached with a confident swagger and a coil of thick rope over one shoulder.

“Good—and be quick about it.”

Peyton visually scoured the area. He and his men were easy targets here for enemy sharpshooters. The last thing he wanted was to go on the defensive again. They were all weary from today’s fight, but it’d be worse to wind up in Confederate hands.

Tompkins climbed the tree and Peyton ordered the other men to continue their scouting along the riverbank. All the while, shells exploded around them.

“Hurry up, Corporal.”

“Um . . . Colonel?”

Peyton stared up into the tree. “What is it?”

“This here ain’t no man. It’s a boy. No more than fifteen, I s’pect.”

*Thank God. Then he’s not a fugitive.*

“And he’s wearing sergeants’ stripes. No way he outranks me.”

Peyton groaned. The corporal was forever complaining about the unfairness of his lowly rank. “Bring him down. We’ll discuss the details later.”

An intense rustling ensued. “Ow!”

“What’s going on, Corporal?”

“The ingrate bit me!” Tompkins climbed down. After jumping from the lowest hanging branch, he faced Peyton and extended his bare palm where the bite marks were evident. “That boy can stay up there forever as far as I’m concerned.”

“No, he has to come down.”

*Cough. Cough. Cough.* The tree-bound lad’s hacking persisted. If it continued, he might cough his way out of the tree and fall to his death. Peyton had seen enough of that today.

“Lend me your rope, will you?” He’d get that kid down if it killed him. And it just might at that.

The corporal complied and Peyton began his ascent. Smaller branches snapped beneath his boots and a barrage of twigs fell as he climbed. When at last he reached the boy, he could smell the fog of war, lingering in the sticky vegetation. And sure enough. The kid sat with his back against the trunk while his lower body was pinned between two thick branches. He’d certainly got himself wedged in tightly.

Peyton found sure footing. “What’s your name, son?” He arched a brow. “And don’t say Zacchaeus because I’m in no mood for fun and games.”

“My name’s . . .” It came out wheezy. “. . . ’ary.”

“Harry? Is that what you said?” Hard to hear between the boy’s hoarseness and Confederate shelling. Peyton tried to get a good look at him, but the kid’s features were concealed beneath a layer of soot. Amazingly, though, he hadn’t lost his blue forage cap in the fall. “What’s your last name?”

“Bell.”

“Well, all right, *Harry Bell*, allow me to introduce myself. I’m Colonel Collier. I mean you no harm. No need to bite, scratch, or claw, understand?”

A slight nod.

Peyton noted the sergeants’ stripes that his corporal had been quick to point out. The coat obviously didn’t belong to this boy. It appeared four sizes too big, although its sleeves along with the trousers had undoubtedly been hemmed.

So where’d he get it?

“I’m here to get you out of this predicament. Do I have your full cooperation?”

After another slight nod, the boy regarded him with a glassy-eyed stare that suggested shock.

“Good. We understand each other.” Peyton tugged off his gauntlets and tucked them into his belt before securing one end of the rope around the boy’s waist. “Where’s your weapon?” he asked, finding none as he tightened the knot.

No reply.

*Definitely shock.* Peyton had seen it before, especially on soldiers who had just fought their first battle. The sight of rolling heads and severed limbs wasn't soon forgotten. "Where's your gear?"

"River." The boy began coughing hard again. Branches shook beneath them.

"Easy now." Peyton considered the kid's slim form and decided the best way to get him down—them down—safely was to tie the other end of the rope around his own waist. If the boy fell, Peyton could support his slight weight and likely prevent the youth's demise.

"What are you doing? Are you going to hang me?" *Cough. Cough.*

Peyton waited for the fit to subside. "On the contrary, *Sergeant Bell.*" He couldn't help the sarcasm. "I'm trying to save your life and get you out of this tree."

Bracing himself first, Peyton then cupped the boy's upper right arm. His hand nearly fit around its circumference. A weakling? Except he felt some muscle beneath his palm. Something didn't add up, but there was no time to figure it out now.

He gave the boy a hard yank and freed him from the sycamore's grip.

"Don't let me fall!"

"I won't. Just don't look down. We'll work together, one branch at a time. Got it?"

"My wrist . . ."

"Injured?"

The boy nodded.

"Let's have a quick look." With his own arm slung around a branch, Peyton reached for Bell's injured one. Pushing up the coat's sleeve, he spied the black stains on the boy's rather delicate-looking hands.

"What's that?"

"Ink."

"Ink?" *What on earth . . .?*

Something hauntingly familiar passed through Peyton, but before he could give it more thought or force the boy to explain, another round of hacking ensued. Peyton's own lungs were becoming irritated by another onslaught of dark plumes, moving into the treetop.

"You all right up there, Colonel?"

Peyton knew the voice. "I'm fine, Major Johnston." He regarded the boy once again. "It doesn't appear broken, but I'll examine it again once we're on the ground. For now, do the best you can. The main thing is we get down safely."

They climbed down easily with Peyton descending one branch at a time, getting a sure footing, and the boy following after. When he reached the lower crux of the tree, Peyton jumped to the ground. Seconds later, a weight crashed into him. He lost his balance and slid on his back over bumpy tree roots and into the Shenandoah. He opened his mouth to yell, but got a mouthful of murky river water instead.

Moments later, he managed to toss the ballast off his chest. Sitting, Peyton gulped his next breath. The imitation sergeant stared back at him with wide eyes.

"Boy, are you trying to drown me?"

"No, sir."

Major Vernon Johnston, Peyton's most trusted friend and *aide-de-camp*, had the audacity to smile from atop his horse. "The rope between you two was short, Colonel. You jumped, the kid didn't, and—"

"I get it." Obviously the mishap hadn't been intentional. "Corporal," he said to the trooper standing nearby, "help this boy to his feet. Watch his left arm. It may be broken."

"At least he's got an arm, sir. Some ain't been so lucky today." Tompkins jerked the boy upright before giving Peyton a hand up.

Dripping with river water, Peyton pushed his hair off his forehead and glared at the kid. At least he had the good grace to appear frightened—well, maybe not frightened exactly.

And hadn't he seen this boy before? "Have we met?"

Bell lifted his slender shoulders.

“Hmm . . .” Peyton could swear their paths had crossed at some point. “If we have, it means you’re a persistent troublemaker for the Union Army.”

“No, sir.” *Cough. Cough.* “I’m no troublemaker, especially where you’re concerned.”

Peyton drew his chin back. What in the world was that supposed to mean?

“What do you want me to do with him, sir?” Tompkins gave the boy a shake.

“I’ll think of an appropriate punishment while we ride back to camp.”

“Colonel, he’s obviously impersonating an officer,” Tompkins insisted.

“I’m aware of that and I’ll deal with it accordingly once we’re out of the line of fire.”

Tompkins puffed out his chest. “I’ll tie his hands. He can walk behind the horses.”

“No.” Peyton regarded him and their fellow cavalrymen. Hardened expressions said they wouldn’t be pleased to share their saddles with a younger man who illegitimately outranked half of them. Peyton wasn’t exactly thrilled to be encumbered on his mount either, for that matter, but Harry Bell was just a lad, perhaps Tommy’s age. “He can ride with me.”

“No! Let me go!” The boy squirmed, coughed, and squirmed some more. “I’m looking for my sister. She ran off yesterday morning with a no-account peddler.” He croaked out each word. “All I wanted to do was get past . . .” *Wheeze.* “. . . past Union lines.” Bell coughed again.

“You’d best learn right now—” Tompkins gave the boy a cuff upside his head. Bell fell to the ground. “No one talks to the colonel like that.”

“That’ll be enough.” Peyton stepped between the two.

Bell cradled his left arm. That dazed look had reentered his eyes—deep blue eyes that Peyton knew he’d seen somewhere else.

But where?

He’d have time to mull it over as they rode toward White Post.

“Don’t bother with the boy, Corporal.” Peyton helped the kid to his feet. “I’ll deal with this one—*personally.*”

## Chapter 4

His voice certainly sounded like Captain Collier’s. Carrie had heard it plenty of times in her dreams. It was the same bass timbre with that perfect blend of silk and steel. And this man looked like the same captain whom Carrie gave aid to nearly a year and a half ago, although from her place behind him, she couldn’t be absolutely sure.

Was she only imagining that it was him?

She didn’t dare try to catch a glimpse, lest she slide off the saddle and get trampled. Instead, she clung to him a little tighter, trying desperately not to gag from the stench of wet wool and raw humanity.

She busied her thoughts and continued pondering her captor’s identity. Last fall, she’d heard the captain had fallen at Gettysburg when Union troops stopped in Woodstock, and she’d never forget the sorrow that filled her—sorrow for a man she’d met only once. How foolish. And yet that dashing, charming officer had occupied a lot of room in her mind until she learned of his tragic demise.