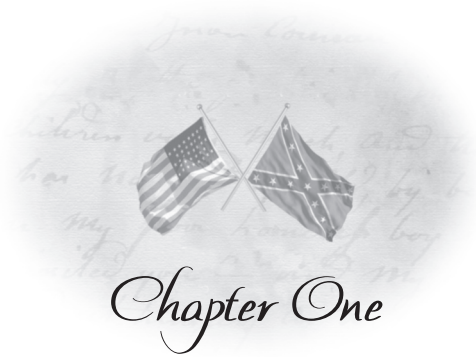




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## Chapter One

Atlanta, Georgia  
Sunday, July 5, 1863

*T*raitor.

A rifle butt slammed between Caitlin's shoulder blades, pitching her forward on the narrow plank. Stumbling, she righted herself again, wrists bound behind her. A dangling rope brushed her face.

*How could you?*

She squinted up at the voice, edged with hatred yet still familiar. *Jack?* Blood streamed from his chest.

His hazel eyes blazed. *You did this to me.*

*No!*

*If you do not stand with me, you stand against me.*

The noose was around her neck now, burning like live coals. *It is only distance that separates us!*

He shook his head, his hair curling over one eye. *It is everything that separates us. The chasm can never be crossed.*

Caitlin looked past Jack to the shallow grave behind him. The seven bodies of the Andrews raiders lay decomposing into one brittle mass. But there was room for one more. Terror pulsed in her ears.

*I had no choice!*

*You made your choice. To be one of them.*

*I am one of you!*

*You are neither.*

A single kick to the scaffold beneath her feet, and—

“Jack!” With a scream in her throat and fists clenching her collar, Caitlin burst from her nightmare into the hot breath of Atlanta. *Surviving in enemy country is not a betrayal!* She railed against her recurring dream. *I am not a turncoat!*

A knock on the door. “Caitlin? It’s me, Minnie.” She knocked again. “I haven’t got my key.” Caitlin sat up and rolled her neck. The residual fear of her nightmare dissolved under her roommate’s muffled drawl. “You didn’t fall asleep on your books again, did you, honey?”

At nineteen years of age, Minerva Taylor was four years younger than Caitlin, and she called everyone honey, whether she was truly fond of them or not. As the Atlanta Female Institute’s music teacher whose pupils ranged from the talented to the uncooperative, it was a capacity that proved to be as diplomatic as it was habitual.

Caitlin tripped on a dog-eared book as she went to open her door. “What else is a Sunday afternoon for if not reading and napping?”

Minnie shook her head of perfectly coifed sunshine-blonde hair, her face radiant in spite of the pockmark scarring. Parasol in hand, she stepped into the room and shut the door behind her, muting the rowdy conversations of the other boarders at Periwinkle Place. “Reading for pleasure I could understand. But something tells me you’re preparing for your classes. On a Sunday!” She plucked the worn volume from the floor. “Why, we’re almost out for the summer! You’re such a bluestocking!”

Caitlin’s grin faltered. Her classes were the best thing about Atlanta. When they ended for summer break, she would sincerely miss teaching.

Perhaps the Southern sun had addled her brain for her to not hate living here the way she once did. Atlanta had given Caitlin what New York City could not. A way to survive without marrying. Or soldiering.

She pasted a smile back into place. “And who’s to say I don’t find pleasure in *Paradise Lost*?”

“You would.” Minnie laughed, her grey eyes dancing. “But tell the truth. It’s in your curriculum too, isn’t it?”

“What kind of a literature instructor would I be if it weren’t?” The fact that Caitlin was a literature instructor at all was no small miracle. But the Atlanta Female Institute was only three years old and, with the war calling the men away, in dire need of teachers. Caitlin had been offered the position vacated by an enlisting soldier as a personal favor from the principal to Dr. Periwinkle. That they believed her to be a Confederate veteran had worked to her benefit, as well.

“What about you?” Caitlin asked, twisting her shoulder-length, cinnamon-colored hair back into place beneath her pins. “Don’t you play the piano and sing when you’re not in class?”

“Of course I do. But this?” She read the text with a hint of vibrato: “‘Live while ye may, Yet happy pair; enjoy till I return, Short pleasures; for long woes are to succeed . . . ’ That’s just morbid, honey!”

“What’s morbid is how you completely murdered the iambic pentameter!”

Minnie shrugged. “I’ve got to let you be better than me in *something*. Aside from shooting a gun, that is.” Her dimples deepened in rosy cheeks, as they always did when she teased.

“Let’s leave the past where it lies. I’ve certainly won few friends with mine.”

“I know you don’t like to talk about your soldiering in the army, but the truth is, I only wish I were as brave as you so I could lick some Yankees myself!”

But Caitlin had not felt brave in battle. Not with lead tearing toward her and cannons shaking the earth beneath her. Not with men unraveling around her like rag dolls in the mouth of an unseen beast. Not

with her lifeblood seeping out of her. She'd been terrified then, and the recollections jangled her still. "Never wish for a fight, Minnie. It is a horrid thing."

"But for a just and righteous cause such as ours—"

"For any cause."

Minnie laid a hand on her arm. "I've upset you. I'm sorry, honey." Her gaze traveled to the white line on Caitlin's jaw, likely assuming it was a mark from the war, and Caitlin did not correct her. "Come, let's go for a stroll."

By the time they stepped out onto Alabama Street, Caitlin's heart rate had almost returned to its normal pace. Apple peels and peanut shells crunched beneath every step along the busy dirt road where soldiers swarmed between local residents and travelers.

When two Rebels half-bowed in their direction, Minnie trilled the chorus of the ever-popular Bonnie Blue Flag. "Hurrah! Hurrah! For Southern rights, hurrah! Hurrah for the Bonnie Blue Flag that bears a single star."

Caitlin smiled at her friend's beautiful soprano voice, but could not stop the Battle Cry of Freedom from running through her own mind at the same time.

*The Union forever! Hurrah, boys, hurrah!  
Down with the traitors, up with the stars;  
While we rally round the flag, boys, rally once again,  
Shouting the battle cry of freedom!*

"That one's looking at you," Minnie whispered.

Caitlin kept her gaze straight ahead. "Not likely. Or necessary."

"Don't you want to find a beau?"

"No."

"Why ever not? With your education, you could secure quite a husband."

“With my education, I don’t need a husband.” She arched an eyebrow. “I can make my own way.”

Minnie’s jaw dropped. “You don’t mean you’d rather have ‘single blessedness’ instead.”

“I most certainly do.”

Their conversation stalled at the corner of Whitehall Street and the railroad tracks. Knots of women and old men huddled in silent groups outside Wittgenstein’s saloon.

“What is it?” Minnie asked a woman nearby.

“There is news.” She nodded to the second floor of the building, the *Atlanta Daily Intelligencer* office. “If we can but survive the waiting for it.”

Minnie blanched and gripped Caitlin’s hand. “Father.” *Jack*. “Pray, stay with me until we hear.”

Hours passed, and the sun glared haughtily down upon them, baking all those who waited, exposed, below it. Sweat pricked Caitlin’s scalp beneath her palmetto hat and bloomed beneath her arms.

Prudence Periwinkle stood on the fringe of one cluster, clutching a bottle of smelling salts the way young mothers press babies to their chests. Horses swished their tails and pawed at the red dirt road, and the people choked on dust and suspense and fear.

No one spoke.

All eyes were on the arched door leading up to the *Atlanta Daily Intelligencer* office, waiting. News from the West reported that Vicksburg had surrendered. The Confederacy lay cut in two. But every breath still hinged on the news that would come from a little town in the North called Gettysburg.

Minnie’s whispered prayers were for her father, while Caitlin’s only thought was of Jack.

“There it is!” someone cried.

In the shadow of the door’s alcove, someone reached out and fed a ream of papers to hungry hands. Finally, the casualty list had arrived.

The sheets of names passed through the crowd, sending up wails and moans from nearly all who touched them. When it was Minnie’s

turn to read them, her hands shook so fiercely she thrust the pages into Caitlin's hand.

"Please," she whispered, eyes squeezed shut. "Thomas Taylor. Quickly, quickly, I can't bear another moment."

Caitlin scanned the tiny columns of names, the fresh ink now blurred and smudged. Hastily, she skipped to the *T*s.

And found the name.

"He is . . ."

Minnie's eyes popped open, and Caitlin labored to force out the words. "He was . . ." She shook her head. "He is at peace."

For a moment, Minnie sat in silence, as if frozen by the incomprehensible news. Then her face crumbled, yet she did not make a sound. Caitlin wrapped her arms around Minnie, and the grief of a father's daughter bled out onto her shoulder. Caitlin's face was wet with empathy.

Around them, sorrow thickened in the air, souring every breath. Caitlin tasted no victory in their despair.

In the edge of her vision, she saw a woman drop to her knees in the dusty road. Heart hammering on her ribs, Caitlin looked once more at the casualty list, slowing when she found the *P*s.

*Pelton, Pemberly, Pendleton, Periwinkle . . .* Blood rushed in Caitlin's ears. *Periwinkle, Stuart*. Dr. Periwinkle's son. Prudence's precious nephew, the one she helped raise and love as a mother would have done. Gone. Prudence bowed down on the street, clawing fistfuls of dirt and letting them crumble over her silver hair.

The war would not come to Atlanta, they said. But from the fields of Pennsylvania, its long fingers wrapped around its throat with an iron grip. The sons of the city had been slain. They had even been defeated.

The fissures in the House of Dixie were running deeper, yawning wider. How long would it be before it came crashing down, as the crack in Edgar Allen Poe's "House of Usher" had sent it rushing into the sea?

*And if I am here when the Confederacy collapses, will I be saved by the North? Or will I go down with the South?*

Words from her nightmare reverberated in her spirit. *You are neither.*

Caught between two nations desperately at war, Caitlin McKae was on her own.

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New York City  
Sunday, July 5, 1863

“Jesus loves me—this I know, For the Bible tells me so.” Ruby O’Flannery rocked her one-year-old son and relished his warm weight on her lap. “Little ones to Him belong—They are weak, but He is strong.” She hummed the refrain and mused what a difference the truth of the song had made in her life, and in his. Before he was born, she had not wanted him, for reasons too painful to dwell upon. Now however, she could not imagine life without him. He had brought joy back into her life and laughter to her lips.

Aiden’s eyes drifted closed, and his dimpled hands loosened their grip on the zebras from his wooden Noah’s Ark set. Pressing a kiss to his pillowy cheek, Ruby laid him in his crib and gently brushed copper curls off his forehead.

“Sleep well, darlin’” she whispered.

Ruby tiptoed out of the room and descended the wide walnut staircase of the Waverly brownstone just as a knock sounded on the front door. Caroline Waverly, her employer, was reading in the rear parlor, but no matter. This caller was for Ruby—the only caller she ever had.

She opened the door, a smile already on her lips, to see Edward Goodrich still in his Sunday best. He was not devilishly handsome—she wouldn’t trust him if he was, given her previous experience with that sort. But he was genuine. Kind. His coffee-colored eyes were deep and warm, not mischievous—and certainly not lustful, thank heaven.

“Is he down?” Edward looked past her to the stairway.

“You just missed him. You know, sometimes I wonder if you come here for our Bible studies or to play with my wee babe.” Tilting her head in mock disapproval, her smile didn’t fade. “Come in, come in.”



Edward hung his hat on the hall stand, swiped a hand over his caramel-colored hair, and followed Ruby. She stopped in the kitchen to pour two glasses of lemonade before they went to the garden for their Sunday discussion. Ever since she had come to work for Caroline last year as the maid, she could not get enough of this beautiful space. Growing up as the daughter of a potato farmer in Ireland and as an immigrant living in New York City tenements for years, nature's beauty simply had not been part of her life, until now.

Shaded by a maple leaf canopy, Ruby and Edward sat at a wrought iron table flanked by hydrangea bushes drooping with white blooms. The rest of the garden was splattered with vibrant hues: yellow primroses, pink and red roses, and, hugging the tree trunks, green-and-white-leaved hostas.

"Thank goodness for the shade," Edward said as he shrugged his shoulders out of his tan broadcloth suit jacket and tugged at the cravat at his throat. Not a single breeze stirred the air. "Still, it beats the heat of Washington, doesn't it?"

"Aye." She sipped her lemonade, the glass already sweating in her hand. Ruby had first met Edward in Washington City the first year of the war. He was a hospital chaplain there, and she was there to be close to her husband in the Sixty-Ninth New York regiment. She had lodged with Sanitary Commission nurse Charlotte Waverly, her employer's daughter, and Charlotte's sister Alice. Now Charlotte was co-director of a Rhode Island military hospital, and Edward . . . Ruby sighed as she looked at his lean, care-worn face. Edward's plans had been altered by news of his father's accident at the shipyard. He had stepped into a coil of rope, which tangled around his legs when the pulley yanked up. Not only did his legs break with the force, but when his body hit the block at the top, his arms, which had been raised to cover his head, broke too. Edward requested a transfer to New York so he could care for him at his home only a few blocks from the Waverly residence. Lucky for Ruby, he also helped her understand the Bible during Aiden's Sunday afternoon naps. Ruby's faith was about as old as her toddling son, and

though eager, it was not always sure-footed. She was grateful for Edward's guidance.

Edward laid his black leather Bible on the table and leaned back, stretching his long arms behind his head. "So, Ruby. What shall we talk about today?" She had insisted long ago that he dispense with calling her Mrs. O'Flannery. After all, she was just an Irish immigrant, a servant. His family employed people like her.

"I read about a Samaritan in the gospel of Luke chapter twenty-one."

"Ah. One of my favorite parables." He leaned forward on his elbows. "What do you think it means?"

"Well, the lesson seems to be that we should help people in need. But I stumble over the 'thees' and 'thous.'" She'd been working on matching her Irish tongue more to American-English speech patterns like Mrs. Waverly's, but the poetic language of King James sometimes stumped her.

"It takes some getting used to. You've gleaned the main point, but let's dig a little deeper. The first two men who found a man stripped, robbed, and beaten on the road were Jewish religious men. They knew the right thing to do, but they didn't do it, because it wasn't convenient. The third man was a Samaritan. Do you know what that means?"

Ruby shook her head.

"Samaritans were despised by the Jews. But it was the Samaritan who loved his neighbor when the religious leaders chose not to. That should alarm us. See, we can be full of Bible knowledge, but if we don't love our neighbor, we still aren't pleasing Jesus."

"Who is our neighbor?"

Edward's smile broadened, and faint lines framed his eyes. "Anyone who God has brought into your life. Friends, family, Mrs. Waverly, but even those you meet at the market, or perhaps people you knew before you came to work here. Many times it isn't convenient to love your neighbor, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't."

Inwardly, Ruby shuddered. *I've spent this year trying to forget my*

*past entirely. Am I really to go back and care for those in the tenements now?*

The French doors opened and Caroline rustled out into the garden with Dickens, Charlotte's cat, beside her. "I do apologize for interrupting." She sat on a stone bench opposite Ruby and Edward, her olive-colored day dress billowing from her waist. "But I've made up my mind. I'm going."

Ruby's eyes widened. "To Gettysburg?"

Edward's eyebrows arched. "What's this?"

"The fighting at Gettysburg. If the papers can be believed, it was by far the worst battle of the war to date." Dickens jumped into her lap. "The need is desperate and the resources few. Charlotte asked me to join her; she says I can be of use just by stirring a cauldron of stew. For once, I said yes." She paused, stroking Dickens's marmalade fur.

Aiden's fussing floated out the open second-story window now, and Edward gathered the empty glasses from the table. "I'll get him, if it's all right with you."

It was. Edward's limp was barely perceptible as he ducked into the house.

Ruby turned back to Caroline. "What about her hospital in Rhode Island?"

"Olmsted insists he must have her field hospital experience on hand." Frederick Olmsted was the executive secretary of the Sanitary Commission. "Her co-director can manage without her for a time."

*And I'll thank God I can stay right here.* Where there was bloodshed, Charlotte was keen to go. But Ruby had seen enough of battlefields and army hospitals to suit her. She'd never forget the sea of wounded at White House Landing, Virginia, where she watched her own husband die right before her eyes just hours before Aiden was born.

Edward returned to the garden, carrying Aiden like a sack of flour and blowing kisses on his round belly. The baby giggled and squealed, squirming until his little feet stood on the soft grass. Stooping, Edward let Aiden grasp his fingers while he practiced walking.

“She’ll be in New York tomorrow, and from there we’ll travel on together and stay as long as they need us. Olmsted is already there by now. So is Dr. Lansing.”

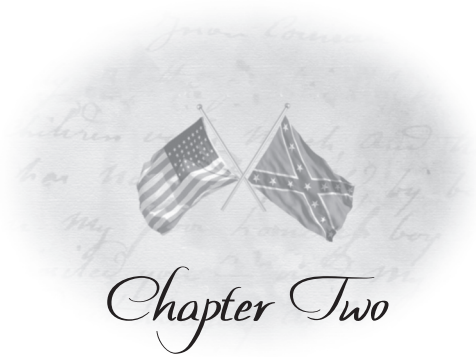
Ruby nodded. At least Charlotte would catch a glimpse of her fiancé, then.

Edward sighed. “Where there are men—especially wounded men—there should be chaplains.”

“I’m sure there are, dear. And the Christian Commission has sent delegates, too.” Caroline patted his shoulder. “The spiritual welfare of the entire Army of the Potomac is not up to you. The patients in New York’s hospitals are lucky to have you here, and so is your father. And so are we.” She glanced at Ruby, then back at him. “Edward, will you look in on Ruby and the baby while we’re gone? Between Sundays, too? I’m letting the cook have some time off so she can visit her family. I’d feel so much better leaving if I knew I could count on you.”

“Of course you can.” Aiden sat on his foot as Edward straightened and grinned at Ruby. “That’s what neighbors are for.”

“Aye.” Ruby nodded and chuckled. “Whether it’s convenient or not.”



Atlanta, Georgia  
Monday, July 11, 1863

*I*'m sorry. If there was any other way . . ." The principal trailed off, mopped his brow with a kerchief.

"You're closing the school?" Caitlin gripped the wooden bench that supported her. Sunlight bathed the Atlanta Female Institute's chapel, and in the silence suspended between the principal and his six staff, Caitlin heard echoes of the 140 girls who had begun and ended every day by singing here.

"They need the building for a hospital."

Caitlin caught Minnie's narrowed gaze, unspoken questions passing between them.

"And soon. The news from Gettysburg . . ." He shook his head before pinching the bridge of his nose. "And Vicksburg . . . as the hospital center of the South, we must prepare. They are taking our school. As I said, if there was anything I could do . . . but there isn't."

Caitlin clasped Minnie's hand and whispered, "What will you do?"

"What else can I do? I'm going home. Grandfather will be all alone now, and I'm sure he'll be grateful for the company." Minnie tucked her fingers in the pleats of her unevenly dyed black dress.

Caitlin's heart sank. "Home" for Minnie was a plantation in Tennessee, near Chattanooga. She would lose her job and her friend all at once.

"I'll see you back at Periwinkles," Minnie said. "I need to determine arrangements for the students I'd planned to teach over the summer break."

Nodding, Caitlin rose and exited the chapel's double doors.

"Miss McKae."

The deep voice, like the distant gallop of cavalry, could only belong to Noah Becker, the German immigrant lawyer who taught modern languages part-time. She need not slow her gait for him to reach her in three long strides.

"Yes?" Impatience edged her voice.

"Where can you be off to in such a hurry?" Sunlight shone on his tobacco-brown hair as he looked down at her, his hat in his hand.

"Nowhere."

"I'm headed that way, too. Share my carriage and you'll get there even faster." A grin softened the features of his angular face and teased a grudging smile from her lips. With a slight nod, she fixed her straw bonnet onto her hair, and he placed his hat back on his head. Together, they left the institute and found his tethered team.

"It is hard news." Mr. Becker said as he assisted her into the carriage. "Do you grieve for a loved one at Gettysburg or Vicksburg?"

*Was it a test?* "I grieve for all of them, of course." Silently, she breathed a prayer for Jack.

"Of course." Red dust lifted off the road as hoofbeats plodded down Ellis Street. The closer they drew to downtown, the more Caitlin's nose pinched. Ever since the casualties from Gettysburg had twitched across the telegraph wires, the air had soured as women dipped their

dresses in pots of pungent black dye.

Mr. Becker sighed. "I don't know how to say this delicately."

"Speak your mind."

"Without an income, you will soon run out of money for boarding." Caitlin goped for a reason to contradict him. She found none.

He continued. "I have a large house."

"How nice for you." Heat scorched her face as the wicked words slid out. She had not intended to be so discourteous.

Mr. Becker chuckled. "Come now, lass, hear me out."

She laughed at the slight German accent layered on the Irish word and bade him continue.

"You are not from here," he began, and her heart lurched. "Neither am I. I've lived here for years, but though I have adopted Georgia as my homeland, some days I'm not altogether certain *it* has adopted *me*. I don't blend in—never could speak like them."

"Nor can I."

"So I noticed." He laughed again. "Your Irish accent sharpens when you're agitated. Otherwise, you just sound like a Northerner."

The honeysuckle cloying in the air suddenly lost its charm. "Say your piece, Mr. Becker."

He cleared his throat and turned the corner onto Peachtree Street. "I understand what it's like to be more of an outsider than an insider. To be on your own when most people have families—large ones—for built-in support."

"Are we going somewhere with this or is it more like our carriage ride?"

His steel-blue eyes grew serious. "You need a place to live. And, as I said, I just so happen to have a house."

"I don't need your help, Mr. Becker."

"You miss the point entirely. I need you. I'm going to enlist. Live in my house while I'm gone." No flame of eagerness flared in Noah's countenance, no prediction of speedy victory passed his lips. A lump shifted in his throat. "Can you think of any reason why you should not? When

the war is over, the school will certainly reopen and you'll have your position back. But in the meantime . . .”

“It wouldn't be proper, I'm sure.”

“Nonsense. You wouldn't be alone. Bess does the cooking and cleaning, and her husband, Saul, cares for the property and horses.”

“Your slaves?” The words bolted from her before she could rein them in. Of course they were his slaves. She hazarded a glance at his countenance, wondering if her obvious feelings on the matter had condemned her already.

Mr. Becker shifted the reins in his hands. “I hire them from their master in Decatur, about eight miles from here. They sleep in their own quarters above the kitchen and carriage house, and I pay them honest wages for their work. The percentage they pay back to their master is not up to me. As far as I'm concerned, they are merely servants . . .”

*But not free.* This time she bridled her tongue.

“Does that make me Simon Legree?”

Caitlin turned away from him at his reference to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She'd be lying if she said the novel did not color her perspective.

Shoulders sagging, Noah dropped his voice to a whisper. “I operate under the law, even if I don't agree with it.” Faint lines fanned from his eyes, and Caitlin wondered just exactly what his opinion was. But, “The ‘peculiar institution’ is not the debate I intended to have right now. Please.” His tone tugged at Caitlin. “Will you come?”

*Make your own way. Depend on no man.* Her mother's voice rattled in her spirit. “I thank you for your offer, Mr. Becker. But I will find a way to weather this storm without relying on your charity.”

He nodded, jaw set. “Shall we simply enjoy the fresh air and continue the ride then?”

Caitlin agreed, and settled back into the seat, swatting a trio of flies away from her face.

The clanging rhythm of wartime factories signaled their approach to the clogged center of town. The carriage lurched haltingly along the road, navigating between cabs, wagons, omnibuses, and the steaming



calling cards horse-drawn conveyances inevitably dropped behind. Four railroad lines converged in Atlanta, and the citizens never forgot it. Day and night, iron horses belched and screeched. Every departure carried away railroad supplies, saddles, shoes, percussion caps, rifles, ammunition, swords, and more. Every arrival brought more wounded and refugees. The city nearly choked on the business of war.

Caitlin did not care for downtown Atlanta. The inherent odors of a population outgrowing its sanitation system were not new to her. What New York didn't have, however, was Confederate soldiers stationed along the dusty streets, doffing their caps to her as she rode by. Had her regiment battled with their brothers? Would those Rebels raise their guns against her if they knew? She dropped her gaze to her calico-covered lap.

"Here we are." Mr. Becker drew rein and the carriage stopped.

Caitlin looked around, confusion grooving her brow. "But why?" They were near the railroad tracks, surrounded by boxcars. Grimy children played in the dirt and women hollered at them from the shadows. Some of the refugees had brought pets or pianofortes with them. Most had trunks and cookware. All of them looked hungry.

"Welcome home." He was not smiling. "Without a residence, this will be your only realistic option."

*No.* "I'm staying at Miss Periwinkle's boardinghouse—"

"How long can you stay without an income? She might let you stay for free because she's so fond of you, but you'd be taking money from her by taking the place of a paying customer. Would you do that to her after she already looked after you all last summer during your convalescence?"

Caitlin's throat went dry. Without Prudy and Dr. Periwinkle, she would have withered away long ago, in spirit as well as body. Taking money from Prudence was no way to return the favor. And if Periwinkle Place was not an option, neither was the Trout House, Atlanta Hotel, or any of the other lodgings that carried no affection toward Caitlin.

"Take a good look, Miss McKae. Do you want to join them in the

boxcars? You'd have to share the space with four other families, but at least you'd have a roof over your head. They say you get used to the smell."

She glared at him. Everything in her being revolted at this place. The filth of living without proper water closets, the deafening shriek of the never-ending trains, the aimless purgatorylike existence. How quickly the tide of her life could turn on her!

Mr. Becker grasped her trembling hands in his. "Come away with me, Miss McKae. This is no place for you."

Maybe it was, though. After all she had done, maybe this was exactly the place for the likes of her.

A train wailed and the earth rumbled with rolling freight as Mr. Becker's large hands tightened over hers. *Why would God put a lifeline in my hands if He did not intend for me to use it?* He had shown her the way out before. Perhaps He was doing so again. But to be indebted to a man grated on her no end.

"It is not charity." Mr. Becker said, as though he could read her mind. "It is business."

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Noah's palms grew damp on the leather reins as they rode past city hall and turned right on McDonough Street. Oak trees dappled the road with shadow while pink-and-red blossoms sizzled across crape myrtle branches. Soon they would be home. The thought of having a woman in his house again should not set his nerves on edge this way. This was nothing like the last time, so many years ago. Entirely different circumstances.

*Entirely different women.* He slid a glance toward Miss McKae, but saw only the tip of her nose poking out from the bonnet that shielded her. Not that he needed to see her face to remember her molasses eyes, the faint spray of freckles—and the thin scar lining her jaw on the left side. The little spitfire had a story to tell, that much was certain. Whether he would ever hear it, however, remained to be seen.

“I would ask something of you while you’re here. I would ask you to teach a little girl. Just one child, seven years of age.”

Caitlin blinked. “Only one pupil? Is that all?”

His full lips flattened for a moment. “Not quite all. I would ask that you care for her as your personal charge.”

Caitlin tilted her head, squinting at him, and he feared she would say no. His heart dipped. No other woman would be right for the job. Her students not only loved her, they learned from her. What’s more, she made them *want* to learn. And yet she did not coddle them like their mummies had. She taught personal responsibility as well as any subject in the curriculum. It was what set her apart.

As they drew near to his home, she finally spoke. “Who is she?”

“Papa!” The door on his white, black-shuttered plantation plain home slammed shut behind Analiese. She flew out onto the columned porch, braids streaming out behind her. Rascal, his coonhound, loped in her wake, his tail wagging his rear end. “You’re home!”

Noah slowed the carriage to a halt in the boxwood-lined drive, and when Ana came close enough, he swung her up onto his lap before reaching down to scratch Rascal behind the ears. Ana’s forget-me-not-blue eyes sparkled as she wiggled down between him and Caitlin on the bench.

“Yes, Dear Heart, and I’ve brought a friend. Analiese, this is Miss Caitlin McKae. Miss McKae, this is Analiese. My daughter.”

Caitlin’s gaze flashed over his bare ring finger, but mercifully, she did not ask for an explanation.

“Pleased to meet you. I am seven years old and I am missing two things. Can you guess what they are?” Ana grinned broadly.

“Let me see now.” Caitlin tapped her finger to her chin.

“I’ll give you a hint. It rhymes with ‘beeth’!”

“Oh!” Caitlin threw her hands in the air. “Then it *must* be . . . a wreath!”

“No . . .” Ana shook her head.

“No? How about a sheath?”

Ana giggled.

“Not a sheath, then. Hmm. What else rhymes with beeth . . . Meeth? Seeth? Leeth? Why, do you know, Analiese, that I am missing all of those things myself? I have no idea what they even are!”

Laughter bubbled out of Ana as she rocked back against Noah. “Teeth! Teeth! See?”

Caitlin’s eyes widened as she studied the gap-toothed smile. “I do see! One smile minus two teeth. Now if only you were missing an eye as well, you could wear a patch and look just like a pirate.”

Ana squeezed one eye shut and grimaced. “Like the pirates in *Robinson Crusoe*? Like this?”

Caitlin’s eyebrows lifted. She raised her eyes to meet Noah’s gaze and said: “Yes.” Her smile hitched in his throat. She had given him her answer.

He planted a kiss on Ana’s pecan-colored hair and without turning to face him, she patted his knee while chattering on to Caitlin. She smelled of sunshine and magnolia petals and innocence. She was the best part of his life.

And he was leaving her.