

A Path Worth Taking

By

Mariella Starr

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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EBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-872-6
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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Prologue

February 1863, Barnesville, Maryland [40 miles north of Washington, D.C.]

“Miss Beth! You’ve got to come quick!”

“What is it, Lettie?” Beth asked, darting from the drawing room and looking out the window in fear.

“Bluebellies! They’re coming up the lane. We have to hide!”

“Where’s Joshua?”

“I already saw him going to the barn,” Lettie said, opening the cellar door.

“Take this, Lettie. We don’t have time to spare!” Beth ordered as she shoved a bushel basket of provisions in the hands of her friend. She pushed Lettie Mason in front of her, juggling a second basket and a sack of food in her arms as they scrambled down the stairs. Beth ran ahead of her friend across the empty cellar to open a hidden panel in the wall while Lettie lighted a lantern. They wiggled through the panel and closed it behind them.

“What if they set fire to the house?” Lettie whispered. “I never did like it down here.”

“Go! We don’t have anything to fear,” Beth whispered. “We will be far enough away so even if they burn the house, we won’t be hurt, although pray they don’t!” Beth knew Lettie hated dark places. She pushed and urged her friend down the long stone passageway until they came to a wooden door leading to a second tunnel, which ended in an underground room.

Beth set her basket and sack on a small table and turned down the wick on the lantern. They could hear the hoof beats of the Calvary unit above them. They were three hundred yards from the main house underneath the St. Clair peach orchards where they ran along the opposite side of the farm lane.

Beth’s great-grandfather had built the tunnels fifty years earlier. An abolitionist, he had rerouted a creek that ran through their property to irrigate the orchards and used the old streambed to build escape tunnels. If they continued down the tunnels, they would only be a hundred feet from the railroad water tower where trains would stop to refill their water tanks. Those same trains often resumed their journey with hidden passengers in a desperate bid for freedom.

Beth had known about her family's involvement in the Underground Railroad since she was fourteen years old. Hundreds of runaway slaves had followed a secret route to the St. Claire farm with help from a large network of people holding similar beliefs in freedom for all. These runaways had been spirited away from their southern owners or found their way by word of mouth. Often mistreated, once the runaways arrived at the St. Claire farm, they were given sanctuary; fed and cared for until they were well enough to continue on their northern trek to freedom. When it was safe, the runaways would steal away on a special train car built with hidden compartments big enough to hide a slave. The trains stopped at the water tower on the tracks running through the orchards only a stone's throw away from the tunnels.

The St. Claire's involvement with the Underground Railroad had stopped as the war escalated. The tunnels had only been used in dire personal circumstances over the last four years. It was too dangerous to continue since Beth had been left on her own after her father died in the first year of the war. Now, she only had Lettie and Jacob left to help her.

Maryland was a border state between the North and the South. There were only four slaveholding states that did not secede from the union. With economic and political connections on both neighboring borders, Maryland was not exactly neutral. The state remained in the Union even though many of its citizens sided with the Confederacy, particularly those in the southern counties where slavery was a way of life. As the state was split by the Chesapeake Bay, so was its loyalties to preserve the union.

Caught between two warring armies and ideologies, Maryland was fought over and occupied by both Union and Confederate troops. Parts of the state were captured, surrendered, and then recaptured in the ebb and flow of the war. It was a delicate balancing act for Washington to keep its nearest states allied with the Union. They were so close to the North in Barnesville, Beth had known only a few people who believed in slavery during her lifetime. She knew it was different in the southern counties.

She remembered when slavery used to be an arguable topic of conversation, politely debated among friends with differing views. Not anymore. Four years of war, death, starvation, and brothers killing brothers, had torn families and neighbors apart and pitted them against one another. Any talk of differing opinions now erupted into conflict, usually resulting in gunfire.

Barnesville was a tiny community whose farmers grew corn and planted fruit orchards. The closest the war battles had come to them was five miles away at Sugarloaf Mountain where

the Union had erected an observation post. It was the highest point in the area. On a clear day, troop movements could be seen on the Potomac in Washington, D.C., and signals could be relayed as far as Harpers Ferry in the newly formed state of West Virginia. It was common to see large observational balloons floating in the sky above the mountain. It was also common for southern soldiers to sneak across the lines and conduct violent raids in something the newspapers were calling guerrilla warfare.

Skirmishes had taken place in the area as Sugarloaf Mountain was a valuable post, which changed hands several times as it was fought for repeatedly. Both the Union and the Confederacy were willing to fight for anything to give them an edge against the opposing army.

The war had been raging for two years. Still, there was no end or solution in sight. Not many men were left in the area, only the very young, and the very old. Most civilians hid when troops were around from either side.

In the beginning, everyone believed the conflict would be over in a matter of days, or, at the most, weeks. Local residents had offered food and shelter generously. It had not taken long before the niceties of hospitality had given way to necessity. It no longer mattered if it were Union or Confederate troops. Uniformed men were violent regardless of which color they wore—when they came, they took. Provisions were stolen, cattle were slaughtered, and homes were ransacked and burned. Civilians hid themselves and their meager provisions out of sight.

All Beth had left was the land and her home, which was looking tattered and war torn. They dare not repair anything, as it would indicate occupation of the property.

Her only sibling, Nate, her older brother by four years, was fighting in the war. The last she had heard from him, he was serving at the Siege of Petersburg, Virginia. Beth had not received a letter from him in months. Since she had not been notified of his death, she prayed for his safety every day.

Lettie and Jacob Mason had stayed with Beth through it all. Born free, the brother and sister had worked for her family all their lives. The St. Claire's had no slaves, but rather paid workers, both white and colored. With the Confederates known for mistreating the colored folk and the northern troops not behaving much better, the two stayed close to the farm and out of sight from strangers.

“I’m here, Miss Beth,” Jacob’s voice was heard on the other side of the door, and Lettie opened it to let him in. He had two chickens in his arms, protecting them. “These two were all I had time to grab. The rest will probably be in the soldiers’ gullets by tonight.”

“Hopefully, they won’t find the hogs or the cow,” Beth said, resigned to their fate. “For now, all we can do is wait them out.”

Lieutenant Garret Wakefield directed his men to form an encampment in the field behind the farmhouse. He had seen a colored man in the distance as his troops were approaching, but the man had disappeared before the Calvary unit reached the main house. It was not uncommon. If the man were a runaway slave, he would not want to incur the wrath of his owner by being caught. If he was a free man who had not headed north, he was a target for the southern slave owners who cared very little for freedom papers at this point.

Garret’s men were under his personal orders to leave the coloreds alone unless they were in Confederate uniform and armed. Considering the sworn stance of the Confederacy, it wasn’t likely to happen.

“Sergeant Grayson set up the picket lines and let the men rest. See if you can get a message through to Major Cole,” Garret ordered as he dismounted. He pounded on the door of the farmhouse. There was no answer, and the door was locked. He stepped out of the way as his Sergeant smashed the door open with the butt end of his rifle.

He walked through the rooms, noting they were clean and tidy. Someone was living there or had lived there recently and was in hiding. If it were women, he didn’t blame them. He took the stairs to the second floor of the big old farmhouse. It was not a mansion by any means. Still, it was a large comfortable house.

There was definitely a woman in residence. He found a room with frilly ruffled curtains on the windows and a woman’s things neatly arranged on a vanity. He picked up a bottle of scent, sniffed it, and returned it to the vanity. He opened a chifferobe and gazed at a white nightgown, trimmed with a pale pink ribbon. His imagination took flight for a few seconds of desperate longing before he moved on.

If this damned war ever ended, he was heading west. He’d joined the Union Army on a ninety-day enlistment thinking the war would be over in a matter of months. Instead, he’d been

sent east, made an officer and he'd already seen action against the enemy eight times in battle and countless times in accidental meetings. Either resulted in bloodshed.

If he lived to see it through to the end, he would find himself a well-behaved woman—a pretty one, settle down, and have a passel of children. He hadn't had a woman in a while. The ones who followed the camps or showed up winking and carrying on were well used by the troops. He never minded paying for his pleasures, but he preferred the less bold, and a woman with at least a pretense of decorum. Right now, though, his personal needs had to take a secondary priority to his duties as an officer.

Lieutenant Wakefield searched the rest of the upstairs quarters. If anyone had been there, they were gone.

"Do we set fire to it, sir?" Sergeant Grayson asked when his superior returned downstairs.

"There's no need to destroy everything in our path, Sergeant," Garret said calmly, unsurprised by his subordinate's thirst for destruction. "Whoever was here is not flying the flag of the Confederacy. Remember, there are as many Unionists in these parts as Confederate sympathizers. Order the men to stay in the pastures away from the house and the outbuildings. These people have little enough left. Anything worth confiscating has already been taken. If you need me, I will be billeting here."

Sergeant Grayson gave a nod of his head and went to follow his orders. He looked to the skies, as the clouds let loose with a drenching rain. His commanding officer would not be sleeping in the rain tonight.

Several days later, Garret made his rounds, swore under his breath, and returned to the main house. It was still raining and miserably cold. His unit was stalled, waiting for orders. If he did not receive orders soon, he feared enemy scouts would discover their encampment. Living in thirty-degree temperatures with rain or snow falling nearly every day made for wretched conditions. The men were making the best of it trying to get some rest, and repairing their uniforms and equipment if they could. They were sharing pork from a hog found in an old cellar of a building no longer standing. At least, his men would have food in their stomachs.

Beth pulled on a pair of trousers and tucked in a shirt far too large for her. She jammed a floppy hat on her head and stomped across the cold, damp stones of the cellar as Jacob took off his boots for her to wear. She, Lettie and Jacob had been hiding in the tunnels for almost a week.

“Ain’t no need for you to go,” Jacob said. “I can sneak out and milk Bonnie.”

“No, you can’t,” Beth said firmly. “If I get caught, it will be a boy milking a cow. If it’s you or Lettie, they will assume you’re stealing it. It could get you into a lot of trouble. Some of the Union soldiers dislike coloreds as much as the Confederates. It’s not safe for you to be out.”

“I don’t like it,” Jacob complained.

“If there is any other way, please tell me what it is. Bonnie has been bawling for days. Why they are letting her be miserable instead of milking her, I don’t know. I guess we should be thankful they haven’t butchered her for meat,” Beth said. “I’ll sneak over and use the tunnel to the barn. They won’t see me.”

“What if men are in there?” Lettie demanded. “Any man in any uniform can’t be trusted! They’ve all gone mean.”

“These aren’t,” Beth promised. “I’ve been watching. So far, they’ve been keeping to themselves. The only one staying in the house seems to be the lieutenant. He must be in charge because I haven’t seen any officers of a higher rank. Stay here and don’t come looking for me!”

Beth tried to sound a lot braver than she felt. Using only a candle, she scurried through the tunnels, trying not to trip in Jacob’s oversized boots, until she got to the barn. She poked her head out of the trapdoor to make sure no soldiers were around and went to work milking the only cow they had left.

When she finished, she climbed into the loft and peered through the cracks in the barn siding. The only soldiers she could see were the men on sentry duty, stomping back and forth through the mud and snow. She guessed the rest of them were sheltering inside the tents. She saw the lieutenant who had quartered himself in her house walk across the fields and disappear inside one of the tents.

Beth fed Bonnie an extra large scoop of grain from a supply hidden under the loose straw in the loft and grabbed the bucket of milk. She hurried through the tunnel to the main cellar of the house.

The secret passageways had been forbidden for family use as long as she had known about them. They had been built for the sole purpose of helping slaves escape to the north. It was of paramount importance for her family’s involvement in the network of secret routes and safe houses to remain unknown. Had their secret been discovered, her family members would have been jailed, fined or hung.

She put the bucket down inside the passageway and argued briefly with herself. The cellar tunnels where they were hiding were cold and leaky. She was tired of being damp and cold. While the lieutenant was gone, she would run upstairs and grab extra quilts.

The house was silent when she peered around the cellar door. The lieutenant had not returned. Beth kicked off the loud clomping boots and ran up the stairs barefooted. She gathered quilts and several warm wool-crocheted bed covers. At the last second, she grabbed her little bottle of scent. The damp earthen smell of the cellar and their body odors were becoming sickening. She was at the bottom of the main staircase when the front door knob clicked.

Frozen in fear, Beth heard two men talking outside. She realized the lieutenant had been halted and was speaking to one of his men on the other side of the door. She bolted across the entryway losing her grip on the little bottle of scent. The stopper came out and clattered to the floor as the liquid spilled over her hand. She had no time to stop and ran to the kitchen to slip through the cellar door and down the steps.

Lieutenant Wakefield smelled the scent as soon as he stepped into the foyer. Smelled it and recognized it. He followed it through the house and heard the cellar door close quietly. He stopped long enough to light a lantern before following. Several quilts had been dropped on the stone floor at the bottom of the stairs. He raised the lantern and saw a small figure dart past him, making a run for it. Garret was quicker and caught the culprit by the scruff of his neck, lifting the boy off his feet.

Seconds later Garret was dodging small fists, scratching nails, and biting teeth. Getting a good grip on the boy, Garret gave him a hard shake. "Settle down, youngster!"

The boy went limp for a few seconds and then with a sudden burst of flying fists, he broke free and scampered to the steps. Seconds behind him, Garret grabbed the boy by the back of his jacket only to have him slide out of it, and the chase was on. He caught the boy again and during the scuffle the boy's hat was knocked off. Long brown braids fell out of the hat.

"Stop it," Garret ordered, giving the girl a hard shake and turning her around so he could see her. This was no child. It was a young woman in her late adolescence or early twenties.

"Where have you been hiding?" She didn't answer, and Garret could tell she was furious by the way her small chest was heaving.

"Answer me."

"Go to hell!"

“I have already been there, and you should be ashamed of yourself for using such language.” Garret said calmly. “I won’t hurt you. Is there anyone else hiding here?”

There was a defiant shake of her head.

“Then what are you doing here alone?”

“I live here, why should I leave?”

“Because these are dangerous times, you little idiot. It’s not safe for a young girl on her own. Isn’t there anyone who could take you in and protect you?”

There was another negative shake of her head. “I only have my brother. The last I heard he was in Petersburg, Vicksburg.”

The lieutenant’s eyes narrowed. “Is he a grayback or blue?” he demanded.

“My brother is an officer in the Union Army.”

Garret regarded the girl. “I’m letting you loose. If you fight or scratch at me again, I will put you across my knee. Do we understand each other?”

She swallowed and nodded agreement, and he released his hold on her. She scurried a few feet from him.

“How old are you?” Garret demanded.

Her little chin came up in defiance. “That’s none of your business!”

He smiled at her spirit. “You might as well answer me, if you don’t I’ll dust those boy britches you’re wearing, and you’ll tell me soon enough.”

She sucked in a furious breath of air and her chest heaved again. He waited her out, and she turned her head so as not to face him.

“I’m twenty-one.”

“You’re a little liar. Try again!”

She met his eyes, but then dropped hers. “Eighteen.”

“When was the last time you ate properly?”

“When your troops invaded my property without permission. You killed our hog!”

“Spoils of war,” Garret replied.

“What does that mean?”

“Whoever gets here first, takes what they need. What’s your name?”

“None of your damn business.”

His hand gripped her shoulder, turned her around and he smacked her hard across the bottom, hard enough to elicit a yelp. “Enough with the swearing! Have you been living here since we camped outside?” he asked.

Beth remained silent.

“You wouldn’t happen to know the young colored man I saw when we rode in, would you? Is he a slave?”

“My family may live in Maryland, but we have never believed in slavery!” The answer came swiftly and defiantly with a tilt of a small chin.

“Good,” Garret said. He caught her by the shoulders and propelled her through the house.

“What are you going to do with me?” Beth demanded.

“I’m going to let you clean up, so you look and smell considerably better,” Garret said. “Then I’m going to feed you a decent meal. You can keep me company this evening and be sociable, or you can fight me. If you fight me, I’ll blister your backside. All I want is decent female companionship and not the kind following the army camps.

“I want you to present and behave yourself as the young gentlewoman I believe you to be. My intention is not to hurt you, but to have a decent conversation with a pretty girl sitting across the table from me. My troops will pull out in the morning, and your farm will still be standing when we leave. You have my word.”

Beth swallowed and raised fearful eyes to him. “Do you swear you won’t hurt me?”

“You have my word of honor as an officer.”

“I will shoot you right between the eyes if you’re lying,” Beth threatened.

“So be it,” Garret agreed with a wry smile at her threat.

Beth watched as the men rode off her land in straight line formations. She saw Lieutenant Wakefield glance once over his shoulder at the house. Then he deliberately turned and spurred his horse to take the lead. She had already memorized his tall, lanky body, his blondish-brown hair, and his dark, penetrating blue eyes.

She was standing in her bedroom window, a ruined woman. According to her upbringing, she should feel soiled and defiled. She didn’t feel despoiled.

At the lieutenant’s request, Beth had put on her best dress, fixed her hair, and joined him for dinner in her house at her table. As far as she was aware, none of his company knew she was

in the house. While she bathed and dressed, he had closed the drapes in the two front rooms. Two meals had been delivered to the back door by his troops cook's helper. It wasn't the best meal she had ever eaten, but it was the first time she'd been full in a long time. They talked about their previous lives, of politics, music, and books. She only gave him her first name. Lieutenant Wakefield had been a gentleman and Beth had let down her guard. A small jug of wine had been shared between them.

She remembered the exact moment when the tempo of their evening had changed. The lieutenant had wound one of her mother's music boxes and listened to the song. She had known what he would do long before he kissed her. She had not had a hug or a touch from anyone except Lettie since her father died. It seemed forever since anyone else had touched her.

Beth discovered male contact was warm and seductive, a warm hug was security, and a gentle kiss broke down barriers. One kiss had led to another. She had wanted his kiss, had wanted to be held and to feel safe. She had wanted to feel beautiful in the eyes of a man. He made her feel all those things as she had trembled in his arms. She had not expected to want intimacy. She had not expected to feel passion or to want him as a man. The lieutenant had realized this and had offered to stop. She was the one who wanted to continue. She was the one who wanted to know what it felt like to be desired and cherished by a man.

She looked back to her bed. The dark stain on the sheets was proof of her innocence, although it mattered to no one except her. She had given herself to a stranger.

Beth rubbed a hand over her flat stomach. Lieutenant Garret Wakefield had made her a woman and shown her the delights of her body and his. She had not known such feelings existed. The sudden heat and desire had turned her into a sensuous woman she had not known she could be. He had made love to her several times during their shared hours together, and she wondered if she would be left with a result of his virility. She touched the whisker burns on her face, her tender breasts, and touched her stomach, again. She knew, even if she carried his child, only she would carry the disgrace. She would never see him, again.

She had become Lieutenant Garret Wakefield's spoils of war.

Chapter One

Early March 1868, Independence, Missouri

Beth stood off to the side and out of the way, as the wagon master, Captain Claude Howell, checked their wagon for supplies. His second, Sergeant Joe Braxton, inspected the animals. Most of the men in charge of the wagon trains carried their previous military rank. It signified their ability to lead.

The barrel-chested Captain Claude Howell gave a nod to her brother Nate. "You're short on sorghum."

"I bought the last available from the trading post."

The wagon master glared at Beth. "Your woman?"

"My sister," Nate replied.

"Where's her husband?"

"She isn't married. We are traveling together."

"Get her married off. I don't like unmarried women on my trains," the man growled. "We only have thirty-eight wagons on this train. It won't be big enough to cross safely. I don't need women trouble on top of it."

"She is my responsibility," Nate said.

"I said marry her off. No good will come of her twitching her ass at other men!"

"That's enough! Do we pass muster or not?" Nate demanded.

"You pass," Joe Braxton interrupted. "Move your wagon into the line."

Captain Howell held out his hand, and money was exchanged. Nate signed his part of the contract and exchanged it for a contract from the wagon master.

Beth watched as the last of their money went into the hands of a man she neither liked nor believed they should trust. She had told her brother so, warned him, except he wouldn't listen to her.

Nate believed Captain Howell was their best chance of getting to Oregon. Not many wagon trains followed the famous gateway to the west now. Indian uprisings had increased in the last

several years, although parts of the trail were monitored by the military. Unfortunately, according to the newspapers, most of it was isolated, treacherous lands, overrun by savages who murdered and scalped men, women and children.

Yet, her brother persisted in the idea of going west. He believed getting to the free land of Oregon would be the end of their troubles.

Beth knew Nate blamed her. His homecoming had not been one of glorious victory he thought his due. He had returned home at the end of the war to a worthless inheritance.

She and Lettie had heard the gunfire and the advancing soldiers. After living through four years of war, they were well practiced at knowing how to react. They had run and hidden in the tunnels, without knowing which army was coming. Unfortunately, Jacob had not managed to join them in time. Deep in the tunnels, they heard the gun and cannon fire exploding above ground and it had forced them further underground. They had huddled near the hidden door in case they had to run and hide in the orchards, until they had been forced into another part of the tunnels to escape the smoke. The concussion from the mortar fire shook the very ground above and below them. They knew something was burning and they could hear the screams of pain and death of men and horses.

Much later when it was silent, Beth and Lettie had crawled out of hiding, emerging into a smoking battlefield of burned buildings and orchards. Everything was gone. The house and the barns had been reduced to piles of smoking ashes. The orchards were smoldering ruins. What had survived five generations and the long years of war was now leveled.

Dead and wounded soldiers had been left behind as the conflict moved on. The women had no idea who had won or who had lost as the soldiers wore both uniforms. The moans and cries of the wounded and dying haunted them for days. Beth and Lettie carried water to the men and ripped their petticoats to pieces bandaging those who might have a chance to survive, provided someone came for them. Help came too late for most.

Only a few days later, Robert E. Lee surrendered at some place called Appomattox in Virginia. The war was finally over. The Union's victory was not a victory for the St. Claires. Their farm, that had withstood the raids and the struggles for four long years was gone. In the final days of the war, their home was burned to the ground, and their orchards charred and destroyed. Beth and Lettie moved into one of the few small cabins, that hadn't been burned. The one room cabins

were where the hired help had lived. There was nothing left, but scavengers still came and they hid in the passageways for safety.

Union troops moved through the countryside in wagons gathering their dead and the bodies of those who had been their enemy only days before. Medic wagons carried off the few who lived. What happened on St. Claire land was not even considered a named battle, only an accidental skirmish between opposing forces. Skirmish, battle, or war—whatever name given to it meant little when the life you had known had disappeared in flames.

Beth and Lettie had found Jacob's body in the charred orchards and buried him. They didn't know which side had fired his death bullet. Did it matter? Their dear friend and brother was gone. Several days later, Lettie went out to forage for food and she never returned. Beth searched for her as much as she dared. With so many soldiers moving through the area, heading north or south, it was too dangerous for a woman to be out alone.

She never found Lettie. Grieving for her lost friends, Beth had salvaged what little she could and lived in the small cabin, grateful to have it as shelter.

It took Nate St. Claire several months to make his way home. When he arrived, he was an angry, disillusioned man and he blamed Beth.

Nate was angry and resentful that he had not returned from the war as a decorated hero. He had lost three fingers on his left hand, yet, since he was right-handed, the Army had not considered his injury serious enough to discharge him. He could still pull the trigger of a rifle with his right hand. He had spent so much time in an Army hospital they had accused him of malingering.

He was angry he did not return to his former prosperous life. While he had been gone, he had held onto the belief that when the war was over, he would return home to his rightful station in life as the son of a wealthy farmer. He thought life after the war would conform to his expectations of what he considered his due. However, four years had passed since he had left and there was no indulgent father to work the farm and tend to all the details, which had allowed Nate to live a pampered life. He blamed Beth for his coming home to the ashes of his birthright. His sister was living in what he considered little more than a slave cabin. The orchards were decimated, and the fields were fallow.

Although their family owned no slaves, the farm had been prosperous before the war. Beth had held the farm together for as long as she could following the death of their father. John St. Claire had died from a heart attack not long after Nate had gone to war. Nevertheless, when there

was no money left for her to pay the hired labor, farm laborers moved on. Only her loyal friends, Lettie and Jacob, had remained with her.

In the aftermath of the war with most of the country in ruins, stepping back in time was not possible. Beth might not have fought in the war, but she had lived through it. Nate seemed to think she had had it easy and should have done something to stop the armies from destroying their property. When she had demanded what, what could she have possibly done...Nate had flown into a temper and retreated into silence as he often did since his return.

They had tried for almost three years to resurrect the farm. As it was, they could barely make ends meet and pay the taxes. Nate was not a farmer. He was a young man who had been spoiled by his father.

John St. Claire had envisioned his son a war hero and bought him a commission in the first wave of volunteers for the Army of the Potomac. Her father had used his local influence to secure his son a position where he thought he would be safe and advance in rank.

Nate had spent the first three years of his military career as an aide to General McDonald stationed in Washington, D. C. He organized social parties and banquets for the senior officers. He had spent those years in an office, safe and well quartered until he had been abruptly transferred. His rank had been stripped from him, and he gave Beth no explanation as to why.

Nate had been sent to front lines of the Richmond–Petersburg Campaign. During the last nine months of the war, Union troops dug thirty miles of trench lines and bombarded the city. Their goal was to disrupt the crucial supply lines of the Confederacy. It was there, that Nate had lost his fingers.

Her brother would not discuss his war service but bitterly blamed General McDonald for his change of duty assignment and loss of rank. Beth often felt guilty when she wondered what really happened that made the general transfer Nate directly into a battleground.

Whatever was wrong with Nate, Beth considered it her duty to stay with him even after he had sold their land and not shared any of the proceeds with her. He said until she married, he was responsible for her. If truth be told, Nate had shown little or no responsibility before he had left the farm and even less since his return.

As she watched the exchange of money between the wagon master and her brother, Beth wondered again if she had made the right decision to go west with Nate. She had been offered a job as a governess to a wealthy family who had moved into the Barnesville area. When she had

suggested to her brother she might be interested in the position, he had gone into one of his rages accusing her of deserting him to work for a carpetbagger. He was her brother, and he had been to war. It was her duty to stick by him.

Nate handed Beth the contract and climbed into the wagon. She knew he was lying down on the small cot inside. She read the contract. It was the first she had seen it, and she could not believe what she was reading. For the duration of the journey, they were under the direct orders of Captain Claude Howell. His orders were to be followed without question. She climbed into the wagon and confronted Nate.

“Did you read this?” she demanded. “Is it too late to get our money returned?”

“The deal is signed, Beth. I won’t go back on my word.”

“You have enslaved us to Captain Howell,” Beth exclaimed. “You’ve agreed to follow his orders even if he takes us into hell.”

“There’s no need to be so melodramatic. Every man on the train has agreed to the same terms.”

“Look around you, Nate. These people are mostly immigrants. I doubt half these men can read. Have you read these terms?” Beth exclaimed, pointing to the contract. “Captain Howell has the right to hang a man if his orders aren’t obeyed. This list of disciplinary actions is outrageous. He has listed crimes and the punishments. What happened to guilty until proven innocent?”

“He knows what he’s doing,” Nate said, snatching the contract away from her. “These actions are necessary. Killing is punishable by hanging, rape is sixty lashes, stealing is twenty. Men aren’t stupid, Beth. No one will break these rules knowing the consequences.”

“Did you read the part where men are responsible for controlling and disciplining their wives and children?” Beth demanded. “It’s written right there. Husbands are responsible for disciplining their wife and offspring. If the Captain deems it necessary, punishment will be carried out in public. It’s barbaric!”

“It’s necessary,” Nate disagreed. “Captain Howell is responsible for all our lives. He knows what he is doing. If we don’t break the rules, there won’t be a problem!”

Garret Wakefield knew Bethany St. Claire was a member of the wagon train. He had seen her, and the first thing he had done was ask about her name. He discovered she was traveling with

her brother and still carrying the last name of St. Claire. She had not married, yet. He was not sure why but the news pleased him.

His job as scout kept him riding ahead of the wagons, sometimes he was gone days at a time. He had only seen her from a distance. She was thinner than when he had known her before, frail with the strained look people had when they were perpetually hungry.

He avoided her when he reported to Captain Howell to give his reports and yet he looked for her. He saw her walking alongside the train as most women did to avoid the bone-jarring ride. Sometimes, she drove the wagon or tended to the animals. Those were jobs for a man, not an undersized young woman. The one person Garret had not seen often was her brother. The word in the camp was that he was a lazy and pampered man. Garret tended to have a low opinion of the kind of man who would let a woman do the hard work intended for men.

Captain Howell was openly antagonistic toward Beth. He had mentioned her several times, claiming an unmarried woman was trouble. As far as Garret knew, she had not caused any.

This was Garret's second and last stint as a scout for Captain Claude Howell. He just plain disliked the man. Garret did his job, though, and he was well paid for it. The only reason he had agreed to scout for Howell a second time was because his wagon would be separated from the rest in a couple weeks. He planned to jump off and take a southern route into the Territory of Colorado. Until then, Garret had hired the oldest son of another family on the train to drive his wagon for him. He would continue to scout for Howell until they reached the Denver Trail when a young man he had been training as the new scout would take his place.

Beth rubbed salve into her hands and pulled on thick gloves to cover them. Nate was sick today. The previous evening, he had yelled at her when she tried to enter the wagon. He told her to sleep under the wagon and tossed a quilt out to her. In the morning, he ignored her efforts to make him rise and had stayed in the wagon most of the day. With no choice left her, she had driven the team of horses herself.

When the wagon train stopped for the noontime meal, she fixed fried bread and salt back pork and carried Nate's plate to him. She gagged from the stench and realized her brother was lying in pools of vomit and diarrhea. She moved closer to check on him, shaking him and speaking to him. He made no response to her efforts. His eyes were sunken, and his skin was cold and

clammy. She saw the skin on his hands was wrinkled, meaning he had lost too much fluid from his body.

Beth stumbled away from her brother in shock. He had the symptoms of cholera. She climbed out of the wagon and ran to find the wagon master.

“I need a doctor!”

“What’s wrong?” Captain Howell demanded.

“I think it’s cholera,” Beth announced.

Three men stepped away from her, one being Claude Howell.

“Get Doctor Harper,” he ordered one of his men.

Beth followed the group of men who stopped short of twenty feet from her wagon. None were willing to go inside. When the doctor arrived, he also refused to enter the wagon.

“I’ve told you a dozen times. I am a dentist, not a doctor,” Dr. Wilber Harper complained. “If it’s cholera, I’m not putting myself or my family in danger. You need to separate the wagon from the train and hope it doesn't spread.”

“Where’s the real doctor?” Beth demanded of Captain Howell. “You promised a doctor would be among the members of the train. It was written in the contract.”

“We ain’t got one,” the Captain snapped. He turned to his men. “Cut her wagon out of line and tell everyone to stay clear of it.”

Beth followed on foot as the men moved their wagon to the end of the train and didn’t stop there. They kept going until it was hundreds of feet behind the last wagon.

“What about my brother?” Beth demanded. “He needs a doctor!”

“Watch you mouth, woman,” Captain Howell growled. “You tend him. I’ll move out at a slower pace for three days. It’s on you to keep up. If he ain’t better by then, we are moving on. Whether he lives, or he dies, I’ve got a train to move. No one is going near you or your wagon.”

Beth seethed as she returned to their wagon. Captain Howell was proving to be a liar. How could anyone expect people to live through the hardships of traveling the Oregon Trail without a doctor available to them?

She rolled up her sleeves and nursed her brother. She carried water from the nearest stream and bathed him. She kept him clean and tended, and drove the team of horses. She desperately tried to keep the last wagon in sight. Nate only got worse by the hour. On the evening of the second day, she entered the wagon to find her brother cold. He was gone, dead in less than forty-eight

hours from the onset of the disease. She walked toward the wagon train to tell them the news. However, Captain Howell's men kept her from coming close.

She watched in horror as those same men set fire to her wagon and created a funeral pyre of her brother's body and all of their belongings.

Captain Claude Howell rode across the prairie to talk to her, not bothering to dismount.

"I'll provide a tent for you to sleep in. You can keep your riding horse and follow the train, but keep your distance. A breakout of cholera could wipe out the whole train."

"I don't have cholera," Beth complained.

"Shut up, girl, and do as you're told," Howell growled. "Otherwise, I'll leave you out here stranded! We'll take the draft horses with us and make use of them as needed."

Beth objected to the requisition of her horses, but as the wagon master had burned her wagon and her supplies, she had no grain to care for them. There were not as many teams of horses on the wagon train as there were oxen and mules. Both of the latter were the animals of choice for pulling the heavy wagons. Oxen could survive on the dry prairie grasses. Horses required grain to be brought along as part of the supplies. Most people could not afford either the cost of the feed or the space and weight it took in the wagon. She had tried to explain those actularies to her brother, as it was written in the pamphlets they had been given to read. Still, he had insisted on horses.

Garret met the wagon train and rode alongside the lead wagon as Captain Howell gave orders to stop for the night. He had been in the saddle ten days, and he was tired and hungry. Although he had not meant to check, he noticed right away the St. Claire wagon was missing.

After making his report, he asked. "Where's the St. Claire wagon?"

"She's out there," Captain Howell said with a jerk of his head. "Her fool brother died seven days ago."

"Of what?"

"Cholera."

"Is she sick?" Garret demanded.

"No, she seems healthy," answered Joe Braxton. He had joined them on horseback wanting to hear the report from the scout.

"Then why has she been removed from the train?" Garret demanded.

"She ain't got a wagon or a man to take care of her," the Captain snapped.

“You burned her outfit, Captain,” Joe Braxton said giving Howell a barely disguised look of disgust. “It ain’t right to burn her wagon and cast her out.”

“She’s got the two of you besotted. She’s carrying the disease. Do you want to infect the whole wagon train?”

“How long has it been?” Garret asked Joe.

“We set fire to the wagon and the body three days after you left.”

“Hell!” Garret swore. “You’ve kept her separated from the group since then? What’s wrong with you?”

“I ain’t having no unmarried woman on the train. It’s bad luck, and it’s trouble. We ain’t been on the trail a month, and we already had cholera, broken axels, and several oxen died. She’s a jinx!”

“What kind of nonsense are you talking? If Miss St. Claire were sick, she would have shown signs of it by now. Do you want her killed or carried off by Indians?” Garret demanded.

“She ain’t got no business here if she ain’t got a man to take care of her,” Howell snapped. “I run this train, Wakefield, not you.”

“I have a wagon on this train. Miss St. Claire will be in it and under my protection by nightfall,” Garret snarled in the wagon master’s face before reining his horse to search for her.

Beth had ridden parallel to the train for days sitting astride Nate’s horse. The only dress she had to her name was the one she was wearing. Everything else of what she and Nate owned had been in their wagon when it had been burned.

She heard the hoof beats of a horse coming out to meet her. The wagon train was stopping for the night, and the drivers were positioning their outfits in a large circle. She was keeping her distance as ordered. Every evening someone rode out and provided her with a sack of provisions. They were not overly generous. It was barely enough to keep her going.

This rider came to a stop and sat on his horse. They usually dropped the sack and immediately rode off. She shaded her eyes against the setting sun. The sun was to his back, and she could not make out his face as he dismounted and came toward her.

“Are you ready to let me return to the train?”

“Yes,” the man stepped forward blocking the setting sun behind him with his wide shoulders and Beth gasped.

“Hello, Bethany St. Claire.”

She stepped away from him. “You!”

“Me,” he agreed.

“Where did you come from?”

“I’m a scout for Howell. I’m taking you to my wagon camp,” Garret said. “I have a wagon on this train being driven by a hired man. You can claim it for a while. You need to be back on the train where it’s safe.”

“Captain Howell is the one who put me out here,” Beth said bitterly. “The bastard burned our wagon and my brother’s body.”

“Don’t talk dirty, Beth, you’re still a lady. Some men panic when it’s a disease that spreads. If you were going to get cholera, you would have come down with it by now. You can travel in my wagon. I’m gone most of the time, scouting ahead. I’m sorry about your brother.”

“Thank you,” Beth said as her lower lip trembled and she began to cry. “They set fire to his body and never stopped long enough to say words over his ashes. What kind of a devil is he?”

Garret stepped forward, hauled Beth into his arms, and hugged her. “Come on, Beth, we will sort this out later. You need to get settled in my wagon.”

Garret mounted and pulled Beth into the saddle behind him. He wrapped the reins of her horse around his pommel to lead him as they rode to his wagon. The young man driving his wagon had pulled it into position and was unharnessing the team of oxen. Garret dropped Beth onto the ground gently. “Johnny, see Miss St. Claire gets settled here for the night. Beth, I will talk to you later.”

She introduced herself to the young man driving Garret’s team and setting up camp. Johnny Ross was about seventeen and not much of a talker. He was more concerned with getting his job done. The young man unhitched the oxen and took them off to be watered and hobbled for the night. When he returned, he removed his hat respectfully. “I will be leaving, now, ma’am. I eat with my ma and pa. You can come eat with us, although there are plenty of provisions in the wagon. Mr. Wakefield mostly takes his meals at the chuck wagon.”

“Thank you,” Beth said. She understood the young man was merely trying to be polite. He could not invite her to his family’s fire without his parents’ permission. They were only a few weeks into their journey and provisions were rationed carefully so the families would make it through to their destination without starving.

She climbed over the seat into the wagon and rummaged until she found a slab of salted bacon, a frying pan, and a small barrel of hardtack biscuits.

Garret spent time talking to the second in command, Joe Braxton. Afterward, he went to the chuck wagon and filled two plates, nearly overflowing with beans and cornbread. He smiled when he walked into his campsite. He generally ate with the hired men when he was in camp, so there was never a campfire or food cooking at his campsite. He found it welcoming.

“Should I apologize for using your supplies?” Beth asked.

He shook his head and handed her a plate of food. “No, there’s plenty, and I think you’ve been shorting your own rations in favor of feeding your brother.”

Beth’s eyes flashed instantly in anger at his words and then saddened in sorrow. “It did no good. Nate didn’t do well after he returned from the war. He was well-fed and a little on the chubby side before the war, he returned emaciated.”

“A lot of men suffered, Beth,” Garret said. “You shouldn’t have been doing without to give him more. You’re too thin, and you will make yourself sick.”

“How did you know?”

He shrugged. “I’ve been keeping an eye on you.”

She stared into the fire. In the light of the flames, he saw her grief. “Nate was such a nice young man before he went away.”

Garret went to the wagon, hauled himself inside, and brought out two small crates and a blanket. He wrapped the blanket around Beth’s shoulders and motioned for her to sit. “We need to talk.”

She hesitantly raised her eyes to meet his and then quickly looked away.

“Do you have any family?” Garret asked.

She shook her head no. “My father joined the local militia not long after Nate enlisted. He was too old for such nonsense.” She smiled at her memory of her father. “To hear him tell it, he would win the war singlehandedly. The doctor said the marching and drills were too much for him. He collapsed and never recovered. He died in December of ’61.”

“Is there no one else?” Garret asked.

Again, she shook her head no.

“We have a problem.”

“I have a problem,” Beth corrected him fiercely. “Captain Howell burned my wagon and my supplies. How am I to survive?”

Their conversation was interrupted by a commotion a few wagons ahead, which drew their attention. They saw Captain Howell and several men walk by. Beth and Garret followed the growing procession of people.

Beth watched in disbelief as two men pulled their wives out of their wagons, removed their belts, and began to whip the women.

“Oh no,” Beth exclaimed turning away.

Captain Howell seemed to know she was horrified. He waited until the women were crying and pleading with their husbands to stop when he glared directly at Beth. “Women!” he shouted. “You pay heed. This is what comes of gossiping and not obeying your men. I will not be disobeyed! These women are sentenced to three whippings, one each night for three days. I won’t have meddling women ignoring my orders!”

Beth turned away and closed her eyes. She put her hands over her ears to block out the women’s cries. “Dear God, the man is mad, and so are the fools following him,” she whispered.

The crowd began to disperse. The women looked scared, some of the men looked disgusted. Garret followed Beth back to his campsite.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” Garret said. “Your problem is bigger than...” he stopped and got to his feet as a group of five men entered their camp space.

Beth stood facing Captain Howell, Sergeant Braxton, and three men she did not know. They stopped at the edge of the campfire.

“Ma’am, Wakefield,” Captain Howell said nodding his head slightly. “Miss St. Claire, I told your brother when he signed on, I don’t hold with no single women traveling on my trains. A woman can’t do what’s necessary to handle the wagons or the animals. I told him to get you married off. I won’t have it. This is Jesse Harper, Melvin Hoff, and Levi Flanders. Pick one. You need a husband and they’re willing to take you.

“I don’t even know these men,” Beth protested.

“It doesn’t matter none, a man’s a man. You’ve no way of getting to Oregon unless someone takes you as a wife and agrees to provide for you on the trip. If they’re willing to take you, you should be grateful,” Captain Howell declared. He turned to the three men. “Look her over.”

Captain Howell turned to Beth. "They're all strong men who will see you through to Oregon. Pick a husband, Miss St. Claire, or I'll pick him for you! Either way, you will be married before we set off in the morning." He stomped off.

Beth gasped at his words. "I will not have a husband picked for me," she shouted after the wagon master. "You owe me for destroying my wagon and supplies!"

Garret pulled her aside. "Hush, Beth! If he decides you're the next one he wants to be whipped, I may have to kill him."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Sergeant Braxton said rolling the rim of his hat in his hands nervously. "Captain Howell is a superstitious man. The captain commanded ships and a division in the Army during the war before he started leading wagon trains west. He believes unattached women are bad luck. Your brother promised to find you a husband, yet he didn't. The captain has the authority to marry you to someone and he will."

"That's ridiculous," Beth exclaimed. "He burned my wagon and my supplies! He's the one who put me in this position!"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Joe said dropping his eyes. "The captain's word is law."

Beth glared at the three strangers eyeing her with interest. "Go away! I'll not allow this travesty!" She climbed into the wagon and dropped the rear flaps on the bonnet.

"You heard the lady," Garret said gruffly as he followed the captain.

After heated words and several threats, Garret returned to his wagon. He knocked on the wooden gate and called out for Beth.

She poked her head out between the wagon flaps, glanced around to see if they were alone, and then climbed out.

Garret handed her a fold of greenbacks. "Captain Howell had no right to burn your property or your provisions. I made him return your train fee. If he didn't want you on the train, he shouldn't have allowed you on in the first place."

"Have you managed to talk sense into him?" Beth exclaimed, relieved.

"Partially," Garret agreed. "Walk with me."

Beth followed him as he walked away from the encampment. Once they were out of range of anyone overhearing them, he faced her.

"Beth, the captain is serious about you being under the stewardship of a man."

"What?"

“Listen to me,” Garret implored sternly. “Being the captain of a wagon train is the same as being the captain of a ship or any other group. He’s in charge and what he says goes.”

“He’s an idiot!” Beth snapped.

“Hush,” Garret ordered looking over his shoulder. “I might agree with you, but Captain Howell is in charge. Unless there’s a mutiny of the majority, his word is law.”

“I’m not marrying a stranger!”

“No, you aren’t,” Garret agreed. “You’re marrying me.”

When she took a deep breath to protest, he pulled her to him and kissed her into silence. “Stop complaining and listen to me! You may not like it. Nonetheless, your choices are one of the men the captain has picked or me. You know me.”

“I don’t know you!”

“We’re not exactly strangers, either. In some ways, we know each other very well. In others, we don’t.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “We spent an evening and a night together. I remember every detail of the occasion with fondness and I regret we had to part so soon.”

Beth’s face flushed with embarrassment with his words. Garret continued. “After the surrender, I mustered out as soon as I could and returned to your farm.”

“You didn’t!”

“I did,” Garret admitted. “I spoke to your brother who told me you were engaged to another man.”

“I was not,” she denied.

“Well then, he lied to me. I walked away, Beth. A man does not interfere with a woman who’s already spoken for, but I’m not walking away this time.

“I’ve been crisscrossing this country for years on the Oregon Trail, both before the war and since. Several years ago, I bought land in the Colorado Territory. This trip, I’m going to settle there, and need a wife. You have nothing, Beth. Those greenbacks won’t buy anything until the train reaches the next settlement. You might hold off the captain with begging, but he will make good on his threat to get you married. You don’t have a lot of options. You have no supplies, and you can’t eat greenbacks. Those other three men are willing to share their provisions with you.”

“In exchange for my...for me!” Beth exclaimed indignantly.

“I reckon that’s true. It’s a long journey. One of the reasons the captain insists on no single women is because men usually fight over them. There are a lot of single men traveling west, and once they get there, they need wives. Only, there aren’t a whole lot of them available.

“Jesse Harper’s a good man. He lost his wife in childbirth after only a week on the trail. He has five children and needs another wife. If you like kids, he’ll make a good husband. Melvin Hoffs, from what I know of him, is a hard man. He treats his animals rough and doesn’t get along with many. He offered to wed the Cummings girl, and she’s only thirteen. Her parents turned him down, and I heard he was angry about it. This is his chance to get a wife.

“Eli Flanders is also a good man. I’ve traveled this trail with him before. He’ll split off and follow the Mormon Trail to Utah. He’s a religious man and would make a decent husband, although he already has two wives waiting for him in Salt Lake City. Given a chance, he would probably make you a good husband, if you wouldn’t mind polygamy.

“I’ve laid out your choices, Beth. You can pick any one of the three. Once the captain says the words and signs the contract, you’re married, and it’s legal, whether you agree or not. Or you can marry me.”

Beth took a deep breath and walked away a few feet from Garret. She could not imagine marrying a man she did not know. She had witnessed unhappy marriages, and it was not something she wanted for herself. She didn’t want a forced marriage with a man she might not even like. She would be bound to him for the rest of her life.

“Beth?” Garret’s tone was impatient.

“What about you?” she asked. “What kind of man are you, Garret? Do you have a wife or children already? Would you beat your wife because the captain ordered it? I don’t even know your full name.”

Garret smiled. “William Garret Wakefield. William and Wakefield came from my father. Garret is my mother’s maiden name. I know you’re twenty-three, because five years ago, you were eighteen. I was thirty-three last October. A ten-year difference gives a man time enough to find and know himself, Beth. I’ve never been married, and I would treat my wife with the care and respect she deserves. I won’t mistreat you and, no, I wouldn’t beat you on the captain’s orders. I might spank your behind if I thought your behavior warranted it. I would have to have a good reason. Are you going to marry me?”

With a whirlwind of thoughts and knowing she really didn't much much choice, Beth nodded acquiescence. Then she met his eyes bravely and asked a question that was important to her. "Are you going into this marriage as a convenience to your manly needs or do you want a companionable marriage?"

Garret shook his head. "We will have a real marriage and we will make a life together. I won't deny the needs of being a man. You will be my wife in every way, and you will share my bed." He took her hand. "You have shared your body with me before, Beth. I promised no harm would come to you and then I took your innocence. I will protect you from harm in the future. I am a dependable man"

"What if we grow to hate each other? Marriage is forever."

"We already know we're compatible in one important way," Garret said watching in amusement as her face flushed a bright red again. "I know it was a while ago, yet we spent quite a bit of time together and we liked each other. It was only one evening and one night, yet we spent a whole lot of time getting to know each other with words and later with our bodies. We probably spent as much time together as most couples do before they get hitched. Take a chance on me Beth. Become my wife, and start a new life with me. We will be following a path taken by thousands before us, but we will do it our way. I promise it will be a path worth taking.

"Should the worst come, there are ways of dissolving a marriage. It's not a choice I would take lightly, but it can be done. I wouldn't give permission for an annulment or a divorce, though, unless I thought there was no other way to resolve our differences."

Beth observed Garret carefully. He was a bit more mature looking than he had been when she met him before. Still, he was a handsome man and his words rang true. Most girls she knew married after only a few hours of chaperoned social meetings with their future husbands. Most of the girls she had known in her social circle married men chosen by their parents. Had her father lived, she suspected he would have had a great influence on who she married.

She swallowed nervously and considered the man she had known for one evening and one night of unexpected passion. At least she knew him to be of an even temper, and he had been gentle with her. She believed him to be a decent man and a far better choice than any Captain Howell had offered.

She found her voice, although it sounded a little wobbly. "Yes, Garret Wakefield I will marry you."