

Chapter ONE

Nashville, Tennessee

May 4, 1869

Steady, girl," Maggie whispered, peering down from the bluff, leather reins held taut. The thrum of spectators on the field below rose on the cool morning breeze, and she leaned forward to stroke the thoroughbred's neck. "Wait," she gently coaxed, anticipation sparking the air. "It's coming . . ." But even as she said it, her own pulse edged up a notch.

Bourbon Belle pawed the dirt, and Maggie sensed the mare's restraint growing thinner by the—

The gunshot sounded. The horses on the racetrack below bolted from their marks, as did Bourbon Belle, and exhilaration fired through Maggie's veins.

Belle surged to life and Maggie gave the horse her head, allowing the mare to surrender to every instinct the animal's sleek-muscle body commanded. *To run.*

Belle's hooves pounded the smooth dirt path, and Maggie imagined that this was what Willie experienced when he raced Belle around the track below. Except the boy was less than half Maggie's weight, so he and Belle all but flew, just as she expected the pair to do again at the heat later this week.

One and a quarter miles, barely a two-minute race. But the thud of Maggie's heart marked the time as Belle rounded the familiar curve in the path, the mare's powerful stride devouring the distance.

Crouching forward, as she'd trained Willie to do, Maggie felt the wind whipping the pins from her hair, and she relished the freedom

that only this kind of riding could bring. And though she knew the peace was temporary at best, she embraced it.

Belle thundered down the path and Maggie urged her on, the starting point looming just ahead. At that moment a chorus of cheers rose from the field, and Maggie looked to see a thoroughbred flashing across the finish line below. Belle powered onward, slowing only when Maggie tugged the reins.

Breathless, Maggie paused and let the pungent sweetness of the field grass fill her lungs. She reached to scratch the place between Belle's ears. "You did well, girl." Maggie took another needed breath. "I was the one who slowed us down."

Belle whinnied as though acknowledging the fact, and Maggie smiled.

The winnings from the upcoming heat—if Willie and Belle won, which they would, Maggie felt certain—wouldn't come close to paying the back taxes owed on Linden Downs, but she hoped it would be enough to pacify the Tax and Title Office. Again.

Belle had won her last five heats, and considering the number of races scheduled at Burns Island Track, that meant a fairly reliable source of income for the next few months. But what Maggie's sights were set on—if Linden Downs could survive that long—was the inaugural Peyton Stakes to be run that fall, the largest race in the country with the highest earning purse in history. And it would be run right here in Nashville at Burns Island.

And her own Bourbon Belle, the three-year-old she'd raised from a foal, would win that, too, barring any unforeseen competition. The mare's race times demonstrated that without question.

So why did the next few months seem like an insurmountable hurdle? She couldn't bear to imagine that, after holding on for so long, she and her father might lose the only home either one of them had ever known.

Maggie dismounted, welcoming the chance to stretch her legs and let Belle cool down before starting for home. But as the moments passed and the excitement of the race ebbed in the field below, the reality of her situation returned.

How had it come to this? Such a jagged end to something she'd worked so hard to hold together. Yet she refused to give in to the despairing thoughts. Not while she still had breath . . .

And a jockey ready to race only four days hence.

She would succeed. With Belle, and with Linden Downs. She had no other choice. Her father had been her shelter and strong tower for so long; now it was her turn to be his.

Maggie retrieved the pack she'd laid aside earlier, along with her rifle. The pack she stuffed into the saddlebag, and her rifle she secured in the sheath tied to it. Racing and shooting all in the same day. The term *blissful* came to mind, but didn't quite seem befitting of the activities.

She climbed back into the saddle and nudged Belle toward home, but quickly realized Belle wasn't interested in trotting. Or even cantering. The thoroughbred wanted to do what she did best.

And Maggie happily obliged.



Kneeling on the riverbank, Cullen McGrath stared into the murky waters of the Cumberland, yet saw only shadows of the briny deep that had swallowed his world whole. Never a man to question his own judgment, he'd been bested by doubt more times than he cared to admit since he'd first planted a sodden boot on this country's soil a year ago.

Regret had proven to be an equally brutal companion. But of one thing he was certain . . .

"I'll be keepin' my promise to you," he whispered in the humid morning air, "no matter what the cost." Were vows spoken aloud in this earthly realm heard in the next? He hoped so. In this moment, at least. His grandfather, who had spoken oft of such things, had assured him of it.

Aye, Cullen, me boy. 'Tis naught but fools who believe this life is all there be. The world comin' after 'tis far greater. And the secret of livin' this life to the full is to do it in light of the next. Never forget that you're—

"Hey! You over there. The horse is ready."

Cullen grimaced at the sharp rein to his thoughts, his grandfather's brogue still thick within him like mist on the heathlands. People used to tell him as a lad that he sounded like the man, but not until recent years had he fully appreciated the comparison.

He rose to full height, but as he turned, movement in the field across the river caught his eye. A horse and rider passing in a flash. Nay, more like a streak of lightning. But was it really a—

He squinted. Surely not . . .

Yet the skirts flapping behind the slip of a girl—or was it a woman, hard to tell at this distance—left no doubt. She rode with a freedom and passion that reminded him wistfully of another lifetime. And she rode astraddle to boot. He felt the start of a smile. He hadn't seen that kind of speed and grace in a horse's stride since watching Bonnie Scotland race the wind back in—

“Hey! Are you listenin' to me, boy?”

Boy? Bristling, Cullen looked back and directed his gaze to the tree trunk of a man who stood waiting, reins in hand.

It wasn't the blacksmith, the owner of the livery, who had accepted his offer earlier—begrudgingly, if the blacksmith's reluctance to shake his hand indicated anything. But Cullen remembered this fellow all the same. Younger than Cullen by a few years, and cocky, from the looks of him. He'd come in shortly after the blacksmith had agreed to the deal and had stood off to the side watching and listening.

Cullen crossed the distance, sensing challenge roll off the man in waves. Back in the day he would've planted a fist upside the fellow's head just for looking at him sideways, much less for doing so with such disdain. But Cullen doubted that a blow, even square on, would take down a man this size.

Yet with his own stature and strength being a fair match, he gauged that one well-placed jab would at least shake a few bolts loose. And considering the anger that had been building inside him in recent months, it would feel good to knock the fool's head clean off his shoulders. Along with that silly smirk.

But he needed what he'd come here for today, so instead of giving in to old instincts, he met the man's stare straight on. He withdrew a wad of bills from his shirt pocket and counted them out, reaching for a civility that had been all but stripped clean in his months of working on the docks at Brooklyn harbor.

He held out the bills.

The man shook his head. “This horse is worth two hundred dollars.”

Cullen eyed him. “And yet I'll be payin' a hundred and fifty, like the blacksmith agreed upon not an hour back.”

A dark look hooded the man's eyes. “Dixon's changed his mind. Guess he decided he don't want to sell this horse for that amount. Leastwise, not to you.”

From his peripheral view Cullen caught the blacksmith peering from inside the doorway, and he quickly gained the truth of the situation.

He'd been in Nashville only two days, but already he'd faced the less than enthusiastic reception most Southerners extended to people from his homeland. And if by some miracle he'd managed to miss that, the countless HELP WANTED: NO IRISH NEED APPLY shingles hanging outside nearly every blasted shop he'd seen thus far told the story well enough.

It would seem the tales of hospitality he'd heard told back in Ireland weren't quite on the mark. But this was the New World, and a free one. He had every right to be here. And he'd come too far to turn back.

Cullen looked at the money in his grip, then at the man. "If this is to be the way of it, then you best tell Dixon he's decided to lose the sale."

"He don't care about the sale."

Cullen feigned surprise. "He sure enough seemed to care when he shook my hand on the deal." With effort he averted his eyes from the magnificent animal he'd spent the last two days scouring Nashville's liveries to find. A Percheron, one of many fine specimens he'd seen. But none like this. A black stallion standing nineteen hands, with a sharpness to his gaze that betrayed a keen mind with strength enough to build a dream. Or so Cullen hoped.

"Or maybe," Cullen continued, further testing the waters, "a handshake doesn't mean anythin' to you Southern gents."

"Oh, it means somethin' to us. We just don't like bein' cheated."

"Cheated?" Cullen gave a sharp laugh. "That's a mighty stout word to be bandyin' about, friend. 'Specially when you're the one shiftin' the deal here."

"I ain't your friend. And we ain't got no deal. Not with you. Not with your kind."

Again Cullen bristled. "And exactly what 'kind' would you be referrin' to?"

A sneer lifted one side of the fellow's mouth. "The way I see it, you're just like them darkies. 'Cept lighter. Out to cheat and steal, to take whatever you can. But we're teachin' them a thing or two. Same as we'll do with you."

"Like them darkies, you say?" Cullen blew out a breath and tucked the money safely back into his pocket. "So, in addition to bein' blind

as a beggar, you're also dumb as a cockeyed post, is that it? Or do you really think you can tell the make of a man by the color of his arse?"

Cullen managed to dodge the fellow's first swing—and the spooked Percheron's nervous sidestep. But the second blow landed like an anvil to his gut, and his breath left in a rush. The punch reminded him of his older brother's, only Ethan's blows packed twice the wallop.

Winded, but still steady, Cullen managed to drive his fist square onto its mark, and the man teetered—Ethan would've been so proud—and a trickle of blood edged down his chin. He blinked as if dazed not only by the blow but by the one who'd delivered it.

On the street passersby slowed their pace to gawk, children among them. A tiny girl, her expression stricken, stared wide-eyed, and Cullen—his fist still stinging—swiftly soured on the fight. He saw the moment for what it was—the chance to end it, and perhaps knock some sense into one of these hayseed hoopleheads.

A swift right hook, lightning fast with nothing held back—just as Ethan had taught him—and the tree trunk fell with a thud.

Cullen spied the blacksmith backing farther into the shadows. "I've no desire to quarrel with you, Dixon," Cullen called out, flexing his hand, "but I do aim to have this horse. And for what we shook on. A man's word is his bond. If you don't have that," he said, more to himself than to the other man, "then you've got nothin'." He took a deep breath, and the ache in his side told of soreness that would set in by morning. He looked back again. "So tell me, are you comin' out? Or am I comin' in?"

The blacksmith, a short boulder of a man, came bustling out faster than his trim height would have portended. "It weren't my idea, McGrath. Y-you—" Stammering, he glanced down at his friend, who was still out cold. "You gotta know that."

"All I know is that you and I shook hands." Cullen tugged the bills from his pocket again. "Now in my book, that means we have us a deal. What say you?"

Dixon hesitated. His gaze flitted about, first to his friend, then up and down the street. Finally he snatched the money and stuffed it into his grimy apron pocket. "The horse is yours. But don't come 'round here no more." His gaze ventured past Cullen a second time. "I won't sell to you again."

Cullen glanced over his shoulder to see what was of interest, but spied nothing in particular. Even the curious onlookers had moved

past. “And why won’t you be sellin’ to me again, Dixon? My money’s as good as the next.”

“It ain’t about your money.”

“If that’s the case, then why won’t you—”

“Cuz buyin’ a horse like that—” The blacksmith gestured toward the Percheron, frustration outweighing the hesitance in his voice. “It says you aim to stay here, get yourself some land, maybe start up a farm.”

“So?” Cullen shrugged. “What if I do? It’s nobody’s business but my own.”

Huffing, Dixon peered up at him. “That’s where you’re wrong, Irishman. You’re in the South now, boy. There ain’t no such thing as your own business. Not for me, and ’specially not for the likes of you. Now take the horse and go, before I change my mind. And if anybody asks”—Dixon moved to help his friend, who was finally coming to—“you didn’t buy that horse from me.”

The man’s warning sat ill within Cullen, and was only made worse by the dismal prospect of future business dealings in this town. But having learned the importance of timing—be it in a physical confrontation or otherwise—Cullen did as he asked, and gathered the Percheron’s lead rein to guide the draft horse down the street. The effort took some coaxing, and he quickly added *strong-headed* to the animal’s admirable qualities.

He made his way toward a saddlery shop he’d passed earlier. He only hoped the owner of that establishment would prove to be more open-minded than the others.

He held a similar hope for at least one of this city’s landowners. Although, up to now, that hadn’t been his experience. Without exception, every farm he’d visited yesterday with an inquiry about land advertised for sale had earned him the same response: Irish need not inquire. But he’d inquired anyway. Determination had given him no choice.

But determined or not, he’d come up empty-handed and had twice been threatened at rifle point for trespassing. He gave a frustrated sigh.

His pockets held the same currency as theirs, yet his apparently wasn’t good enough. At least he didn’t need a loan. No bank would loan “to the likes of him,” as Dixon had put it. But no matter. Cullen had funds enough to purchase one of the smaller properties he’d seen listed in the newspapers—if only they would sell to him.

Several were set to go up for auction within a fortnight, but his visit to the courthouse yesterday morning had provided a swift answer to the question about whether or not a bid from him would be accepted. No, he would have to find someone willing to sell to him outright. Which at this point seemed next to impossible.

But perhaps one of the property owners close to going to auction, if desperate enough, might be persuaded to take less than the asking price.

Cullen slowed his steps, his attention snagged by the distant roar of cheering and by another sound he could never mistake, not in a thousand lifetimes . . .

The telling, rhythmic pounding of hooves.

As though guided by some unseen hand, his gaze trailed the length of the street to a field at the far end. Seeing the twentysome-foot banner stretched across the entrance, he felt a wake of memories break inside him, and he paused on the sunbaked road.

BURNS ISLAND TRACK, the banner proclaimed, with the smaller title NASHVILLE THOROUGHBRED SOCIETY printed beneath.

Merely reading the words tempted him to turn and run while he still could, even as the tug of the familiar baited him closer. But he knew better. And besides, he'd already chosen to run. That's why he'd left England to come to America. To start over.

A question occurred to him then that was neither new nor kind, but he still wished he knew the answer. Was what had happened on the voyage across the Atlantic his punishment for what he had—and hadn't—done in London? Had the Almighty been paying him back?

If so, God was crueler than he'd imagined. Could heaven not see that he'd had no other choice?

Cullen's grip tightened on the lead rein. If he had come forward with the truth, it wouldn't have made any difference. People had already made up their minds. Much as they'd done here, in this town, as soon as he opened his mouth.

He'd never been ashamed of his heritage, and he wasn't now. But he *was* ashamed for having believed, for so many years, in the goodness of the Father God his grandfather had spoken of so many times. Turned out, maybe God the Father was more like his own *da* instead of the just and benevolent being Grandfather Ian had followed with such allegiance and affection.

From down the street, cheers swelled to a roar, and Cullen felt a thirst begging to be slaked inside him. But that part of his life was

dead and gone now. As surely as were his precious Moira and their wee Katie . . .

A needlelike sharpness pricked the back of his throat.

If he could have given his life for theirs that day, he would have. He swallowed with effort. But God hadn't listened to his pleas. Not in the small hours of that morning, and not in the dark, empty hours that followed that night when the precious life he'd cradled in his arms reached out into eternity for the comfort of her *ma*. With heart ripped open and laid bare, Cullen had petitioned heaven for help. But God had turned a deaf ear.

The last time he'd attended Mass seemed a lifetime ago. On one of his first nights in Brooklyn he stumbled upon a church, heard the familiar prayers, and ventured in, something within already telling him it would be futile. He sat in the pew and gazed up at the blurry form of the crucified Christ and asked—nay, begged—God again to tell him *why*. To show him the way to go, tell him what to do next.

But no still small voice answered. No whisper, not even a wisp had heaven spared for him. So he'd left, vowing never to return again. The Almighty wanted to remain silent? Fine by him. He'd return the favor.

The Percheron shifted beside him and pawed the ground.

"Easy, boy," Cullen whispered, reaching up to give him a rub. If he had any hope of a future in this town, or any other, it was up to him alone, and his past must stay buried.

But was an ocean vast enough to keep hidden the weight of his sins? Especially when one of the men Ethan had wronged was an American. Cullen had been told the scandal was reported in the papers here as well. No surprise, considering what horse had been involved, and what it had cost the American businessman. Cullen exhaled, exchanging the stale air in his lungs for fresh.

Surely his past demons—and those that likely still hounded Ethan, wherever his brother was—had grown weary and given up the hunt. If not, Cullen knew that if they caught up with him, they would eat him alive, gnawing on his bones 'til there was nothing left but dust.

Determined to keep running, he continued in the opposite direction down the street toward the saddlery shop. He was a long way from the rule and reach of London's Thoroughbred Society, and he intended to keep it that way. That, and stay as far away from thoroughbreds—and that racetrack—as possible.

He knew just how to do it too. Tuck himself away on some quiet little farm on the outskirts of town. A world away. Alone. That's what he wanted. Maybe then he'd find the peace he sought.

Once in the saddlery shop, he made his selections, choosing the finer but simpler leatherwork from among pieces more ornate yet not as well crafted. A fancy saddle caught his eye, and he knew which one Ethan would have chosen if there.

Ready to pay, he approached the counter, nodding to the young woman watching him attentively.

"Good day, sir," she said softly, smiling at him, her eyes sparkling. "Perhaps you need help finding something else?"

Checking his gear, Cullen ignored the invitation in her tone and shook his head. "I believe I've got everythin' I need, miss. But thank you just the same."

Like snuffing out a candle, the light fled the woman's eyes. She looked at him as though he'd grown a second head, one she found significantly less attractive.

And as she silently, stoically summed up his receipt, Cullen thought back to a night with Ethan in an English pub when a tavern wench had reacted much the same.

Cullen, you sorry bugger. Ethan had lifted his ale, laughing. *If only you'd taken after our father like I did and had the mark of the Irish atop your head for all to see, that wouldn't happen. As it is—*Ethan let out a hearty burp—*you can thank our mother, God rest her, for those pale green eyes and dark curls atop your head that draw the ladies . . . least-wise 'til you open your mouth!* More raucous laughter had followed.

Cullen smiled to himself, remembering. But apparently Southern women held the same opinion of Irishmen as did English barmaids. Through the years, Ethan had ribbed him mercilessly about not having "the look of the Irish." But for that distinction alone, he and Ethan could've passed for twins. Aye, Ethan had slightly more brawn to him, but in countenance they were brothers through and through.

Half an hour later, Cullen had the horse nearly saddled and ready when he sensed, rather than heard, someone behind him. And he knew who it was. Wishing now that he'd finished the fight while he'd held the advantage, Cullen turned at the ready.

But the person he came face to face with wasn't the one he expected.

Chapter TWO

The gent, a real dandy from the looks of him, eyed the Percheron. “That’s quite an animal you’ve got there. But are you certain you wouldn’t prefer one of our fine Tennessee thoroughbreds to this . . . Goliath of a beast?”

Cullen regarded the finely tailored suit and fancy top hat. And the fellow’s boots—so shiny and ornate in detail, they looked better suited to a maiden than a man. The gent’s smile was slick, much like his dark hair combed back in neat, even waves. It took Cullen all of two seconds to form a first opinion. And his first opinions, once set, rarely budged.

He managed an obligatory nod then returned to tightening the stirrup straps. He had three more farms to visit this afternoon, and he needed to get a move on.

“You may not know it, being new to the area as you are,” the man continued, and Cullen stilled. “But unlike other cities, Nashville didn’t lose all its blood horses to the war. So . . . in case you’re interested, there are others from which to choose.”

The stranger ran an assuming hand over the Percheron’s quarters, and the horse’s muscles contracted in response. Cullen straightened and turned back a second time. Was the man foolhardy—or just a fool? Either one, a swift kick from this beast would be the end of him.

Yet the man didn’t strike him as the foolish sort. Not with his keenness of manner and the hint of cruelty about his eyes. Cocky? Aye. Pushy? Without question. But foolish? Nay, not a wit’s chance of that, as his grandfather would’ve said.

Cullen faced him, their gazes almost level. "Thank you for takin' such an interest in my affairs," he said evenly. "But I purchased the exact horse I wanted."

The man's smile widened. How did these Southerners do it? Smile so nicely when their true feelings, written so plainly for all to see, were quite the opposite.

"And where did you purchase him, I wonder? I've been looking for such an animal myself now for some time."

Cullen knew when he was being baited. Dixon's parting warning returned to him, and though he felt no loyalty to the blacksmith, the man had sold the horse to him in the end. "Several liveries in town have Percherons. I'm sure you won't have any problem findin' one to suit your needs."

The man stepped toward him, and his eyes narrowed. "Speaking of needs, I'm curious. For what purpose did you purchase this animal? Surely you don't plan to run him at Burns Island Track. Now that"—his hearty laugh wasn't the least convincing—"I'd pay good money to see."

Four men standing off to the side laughed beneath their breath, and Cullen met each of their stares, not missing the one whose hand rested on the gun at his hip. Cullen focused again on the gent before him. For not liking the Irish, these folks sure went out of their way to start a conversation.

Cullen smoothed a hand over the massive neck of the Percheron. "I'm not lookin' for speed, or for one of your fine thoroughbreds." He tried for a touch of humor. "Don't tell me you Southerners haven't heard of the tortoise and the hare? It's not always the swiftest that wins the race."

"It is around here," the man answered, his voice gaining an edge. "But I wouldn't expect a simple . . . potato farmer like yourself to know that. Isn't that what you people are?" Polite facade gone, cruel intent sharpened his features. "Though not quite successful at it, I'd say, considering the curse you suffered."

Cullen heard laughter off to the side again but didn't acknowledge it. "The curse?" he asked, wondering if the man would take the bait. "And what curse might that be?"

"The blight the Almighty sent to your country two decades back. Your people's punishment for not accepting him when you had the chance."

“Ah . . .” Cullen nodded slowly, as though he hadn’t heard the conjecture a hundred times before. “So you believe God’s a Protestant then.”

“What I believe”—the stranger’s look held venom—“is that God is not a pagan lover. Nor is he fond of white niggers.” He spat out the term. “So you would do best to move on. There’s plenty of land east of here yet to be settled. In the Carolinas, perhaps, or south on into Georgia. It matters not to me where you go, as long as you don’t stay here. Am I making myself clear? Or do I need to speak in plainer terms?”

Cullen met his stare unblinking, half wishing Ethan were there. Five-to-two odds would be just about even, with his brother in the thick. If not for the gun. “I understand perfectly what you’re saying.”

“Good, then.” The man clapped him on the shoulder in the manner of old friends. “I’m glad we had this conversation, Mr . . . ?”

“McGrath is my name,” Cullen said, wanting him to remember it. “Cullen McGrath. And you are?”

Challenge flickered in the man’s expression. “Stephen Drake. A name you’d do well to put to memory. And a word to the wise, McGrath. The quicker you leave town, the better. We’ve had our share of unfortunate occurrences lately, and I’d hate it if you got caught up in any of that ruckus. Believe it or not,” Drake said, shaking his head, “there are those who, sadly, might wish to do you harm. And we wouldn’t want that, now would we?”

A sheen of friendliness, beguiling though it was, lit the man’s expression, and anyone looking on would have thought they were the finest of friends.

Cullen watched the men walk away, wondering if Drake had the least inkling of how ineffective his little speech had been. He heard his mother’s sharply teasing voice clearly in his memory. *Whatever it is you want to get an Irishman to do, just tell him that he can’t.*

He gathered the reins and swung up into the saddle—no small feat—more determined than ever to buy land and make a way for himself. He could scarcely remember a time when his heritage or religious upbringing—no matter how far he’d strayed from it—hadn’t invited trouble. When his family moved to England when he was fifteen, he’d daily been reminded that his people weren’t welcome there any more than they seemed to be in this city.

But he had a reason for being here, as well as a right.

He flicked the reins, and the Percheron plodded on. If there was one thing he'd learned in his near thirty years, it was that no matter how desperate the circumstances, there was usually someone else worse off.

He just needed to find that someone.



Where was Willie?

Maggie looked out the open double doors of the stable again. Already half past twelve, and still no sign of him. They'd agreed to work here at Linden Downs today, so her father could see the progress Willie and Belle were making together. The boy was never late. Perhaps he had forgotten.

Belle whinnied and nudged Maggie's hand, and Maggie leaned close, recalling what she'd overheard at the racetrack last week despite Belle's recent wins. "Don't you listen to them, girl," she whispered. "Some say you can't do it. But they're wrong. You were born for this, I know it."

Just as she knew what she was born for. Even if people said it couldn't be done by a woman. Or *shouldn't* be. Which is what her mother, God rest her soul, had said more times than Maggie could recall, and with a sharpness to her tone that stung even now. It was a hurtful thing for a mother not to be proud of her only daughter.

Footsteps from behind drew her attention.

"Thought I'd save you a trip, Maggie." Her father carried in a bale of hay, Bucket padding loyally along beside him.

How was it that she'd rescued the black-and-white collie, had nursed the sickly little pup back to health, only to have the dog bond with her father instead of her? Yet seeing them together, and knowing how much Bucket had helped ease Papa's pain when Mother had passed, Maggie wouldn't have wished it otherwise.

Her father hefted the bale into one of the stalls then paused, his breath coming hard. He braced a hand against the stable wall. Despite the cool air, sweat glistened on his forehead. He rubbed his left arm, the muscles apparently complaining from use.

Maggie felt a tug of concern, especially after what had happened last week. "I've told you, Papa. I can do that. I don't mind."

"I know you don't. But neither do I." He swabbed his forehead with a handkerchief then quickly looked away. He reached for the pitchfork. "Did you have a good ride this morning?"

Recognizing avoidance when she saw it, Maggie moved to take the pitchfork from him, but he held fast.

"I'm fine, Margaret."

Maggie started to press the issue; then, recognizing the accustomed determination and gentleness in her father's expression, she reluctantly acquiesced.

"I know I can't do what I once did . . ." Frustration—or was it worry—shadowed his faint smile. "But I can still heft a bale of hay for my daughter."

He held her gaze, unblinking. At his feet, Bucket stood stock still, as if sensing the change in temperament.

Her father had always been more than able-bodied. Of average height, he had especially broad shoulders, which made him appear larger somehow. Maggie had ridden on those shoulders as a little girl and oh, the view from that perch. The world had looked so different. Bigger somehow, and wilder.

Yet she'd known that nothing could hurt her because her father would never have allowed it. Her strong tower. Whatever bad was coming would have to get past him first, and that could never happen.

At least, not in the mind of that little girl.

But time had a way of eroding such innocence. And as she'd grown, Maggie had often wished that the world were more like the one she'd viewed from that lofty height.

She eyed her father as he spread the hay. As strong as he'd always been, he was equally kind and good-natured. Her four brothers, all of them older than she, had been just like him—perhaps a bit more rowdy—God rest them all. Not a day went by that she didn't miss them.

And while she *could* well imagine her world without her father, she didn't like to. He was all she had left.

"When Dr. Daniels was here to see you yesterday, Papa . . . You're certain he told you everything was fine."

"Like I said. Nothing to worry about." Her father shoved the pitchfork into the hay and gave the load a toss then repeated the process.

"When you see the doctor next, please remind him to keep his regular appointment. He's been showing up at odd times, and I want to be here for his visits."

"You and Willie were over at Belle Meade working with Uncle Bob. I know how important that time is to you, especially with a heat coming up this week. I saw no need to disturb you."

"Disturb me?" She scoffed playfully, but touched his arm, letting him see she was serious. "Next time send Cletus for me. Or Onnie. All right?"

He chuckled her gently beneath the chin the way he'd done as far back as she could remember.

"I will, sweetheart. Next time." He glanced out the open door. "I thought you said Willie was coming."

"I did. But I'm wondering now if he's forgotten."

"Do you have appointments later today?"

Maggie resisted the urge to sigh. "Yes, three. And all new students."

"That's a good thing."

She nodded. "Yes, it is."

"And yet . . . it's not what you wish to be doing."

It wasn't a question, she knew. Still, she shook her head. "But we need the money, so I'm grateful." As soon as she said it, regret moved into his eyes, and she wished she could take back the remark. "Papa, I—"

He lifted a gentle hand. "If Belle doesn't win the heat later this week—"

"She *will* win. I know it."

"But if she doesn't"—he lowered his head briefly before looking back at her—"then you know what we must do. We'll have no choice, Maggie. Stephen Drake was very clear on that point."

Stephen Drake . . . at the Tax and Title Office.

Maggie would have thought the childhood friend of her eldest brother would be more understanding. Yes, Mr. Drake had granted them an extension—two, actually—but couldn't he offer to do so again, under the circumstances?

She remembered his coming to the house when she was younger. Twelve years her senior, he was now as he'd been then—handsome, successful, and well thought of by all who knew him. And no wonder, when the Drake family owned so many businesses in Nashville. He was now the object of pursuit of nearly every unmarried woman in town, especially the wealthy ones. These women were regularly seen on Mr. Drake's arm at social gatherings.

Not that Maggie attended such events. Those invitations had ceased coming over three years ago. Which was about the time she'd

given up the girlish dreams that no longer fit with her lowered place in society.

Most of the young men her age had been taken by the war, and those who had not had their pick of either wealthy widows or women younger than she, with far more promising assets.

“If the worst happens,” her father continued, pulling her back to the moment, “if Bourbon Belle doesn’t win . . . everything we have is scheduled to be sold at auction two weeks hence.” His gaze moved beyond her to Belle. “Everything,” he repeated quietly, as his focus trailed out the open double doors to their family home—a shadow of what it had once been.

“We’ll need every penny we can manage in order to”—his voice broke, his composure faltering—“to secure a place in town.”

In his eyes Maggie saw years of pain and disappointment well up. Her own throat tightened.

“I’m sorry it’s come to this, Maggie.” Hollowness filled his voice. “I wish I could change it. I’ve searched, I’ve prayed, I—”

“We’re going to be fine, Papa. Don’t you worry.” Maggie forced a bright countenance to veil what felt like a lie, even though she wanted to believe it. “Belle will win, and we’ll get another extension. I’ll call on Mr. Drake myself this time.”

Is this how her friend Savannah Darby had felt when she’d lost her family’s land only months ago? Along with their home and the majority of their belongings? And Savannah was on her own besides, with two younger siblings to care for. Maggie had held her friend as Savannah wept, thinking she understood. But she hadn’t.

Until now.

So many fine families, once landed gentry, first families of Nashville’s settlement nearly a century ago, now near destitute.

Her father leaned down and gave Bucket’s head a gentle rub. “I’ve already spoken with a woman at a boardinghouse. We’ll need to stay there. Only temporarily,” he added, straightening again, “until we find something suitable.”

By suitable Maggie knew he meant affordable. The concern in his expression caused a tightening in her chest. Not wishing to add to his worry, she managed a weak nod. Yet the looming possibility of losing Linden Downs tore at something deep inside her.

It wasn’t that she loved the land itself so much, although she did feel an affinity for it, especially the bluff that overlooked the river in the distance. She appreciated that the near four hundred acres had

been in the Linden family since Nashville's settlement. Land that her grandfather had farmed, along with his only son, and after that her father and his sons. Land that—except for the small garden they still tended—had lain fallow for the past two years.

And yet, her own love for Linden Downs—guilt nipped her conscience—was slightly less altruistic. She wanted to save the family land for her father, yes, because it meant so much to him. But mostly she was fighting to keep it because without Linden Downs, *her* dream was dead.

As was her chance to prove—if not to her mother, then to others, maybe even to herself—that a woman really could ride, race, and win—and still be a lady.

In the past she'd tried to imagine her mother peering down from heaven and smiling as her only daughter rode the fields, jumping fences and creeks and anything else in her path. But Maggie gradually accepted that the daydream was only a foolish attempt to fill a void that could only be filled with a mother's pride. Which was an impossible wish.

But regardless of that, she *had* to keep this land. She couldn't raise thoroughbreds, much less train them to race, while living in a boardinghouse. She needed to be here, near Belle Meade and Uncle Bob. She loved the land because it allowed her to keep Bourbon Belle.

And as it turned out, Bourbon Belle was going to be the answer to keeping both the land and her dream. *If* Belle won the Peyton Stakes.

She looked over to find her father still, his eyes closed, his grip tight on the pitchfork. "Papa . . . are you sure you're all right?"

He blinked. "Yes . . . yes, I'm fine."

A thought occurred to her. "If you don't feel well enough to go to Burns Island for the race this week, then maybe I—"

"I'll be there. I wouldn't miss it." He looked at her as though peering over his reading spectacles. "Besides, you know how the club members feel about women poking around in their business."

"If I made excuses, perhaps—"

"I said I'll be there. Like I always am."

Maggie nodded, grateful, but wishing the all-male members of Nashville's Thoroughbred Society would be more open-minded.

On the ledgers her father was listed as the owner and trainer of Bourbon Belle, and he officially entered Belle in the races. The men in the club had never questioned him about it, and their not knowing the truth didn't bother Maggie. Much. But those closest to her knew.

And while her father was supportive of her aspirations, she wondered deep down if he would've preferred her to have chosen a different path for her life. But she was meant for this.

She'd felt that affirmation yet again as she'd ridden Belle on the outskirts of town that morning.

Her father moved to the next stall, and Bucket followed obediently.

Aware of the hour slipping away, Maggie glanced out the window again, her annoyance slipping into concern. Where was Willie?

The boy loved time with Belle as much as Maggie enjoyed teaching him. He was a natural, as Uncle Bob had said so many times. Thin and wiry of build, Willie, nine years old as of last month, was like a feather astride Bourbon Belle, and together horse and rider sped like a bullet around the track.

Other thoroughbred owners had tried to talk Willie into riding for them, but the boy told them he wouldn't ride any other than Belle, or for anyone other than Miss Maggie. She appreciated his loyalty and rewarded him accordingly.

"I read the most recent letter from Mrs. Watson."

Maggie turned at her father's voice.

"You left it on the table." He offered a shrug. "So I assumed—"

"It's fine." She nodded. "You're always welcome to read them."

"It was kind," he continued, "what she wrote about you. She's grown quite fond of you through the years, you know."

Maggie offered more smile than she felt. "As I have of her."

"I'm proud of you for continuing to keep in touch with her despite her moving to South Carolina. Other young women whose beaux died in the war have quickly forgotten and moved on." He laughed softly. "Hard to believe you were only fifteen at the time."

"Mrs. Watson had no one else here in town, and"—Maggie briefly bowed her head—"I had promised Richard. Now his mother is happily situated with her sister on the beaches of Charleston. He would have liked that."

After a long silence her father returned to his task, and she did likewise.

She drew the curry brush over Belle's coat with smooth, practiced strokes, trying to recall the details of Richard's countenance as she'd seen him that very last time, going on five years ago now, only days before the Battle of Franklin. But all she could recall was the portrait of him Birdette Watson had kept on the mantel.

That, and how he looked as a boy standing by the creek with a fishing pole in his grip.

Mrs. Watson had lost her husband and only son in the same battle. How was it that some women grieved and yet moved on with their lives, while others, like her own mother—Maggie felt a sting at the memory—were weighted down by the severity of it, until they finally succumbed?

Apparently the daughter who remained hadn't been enough to sustain her following the loss of her sons. The thought pricked at an old wound, and for the thousandth time Maggie wondered what she could have done to have been more for her mother.

Or at least to have been enough.

Yet it was a futile thread at which to pick, she knew, so she tucked it back beneath the blanket of memories.

She hoped her new riding students proved promising. One of the girls had apparently not ridden a horse since being thrown some years earlier, which didn't bode well for today's first riding lesson. Yet the best way to beat a fear was to face it.

Maggie had learned that well enough through the years.

She stood back to admire her work. Belle's coat shone a deep reddish brown, the color of the whiskey Maggie's grandfather used to bring out on special occasions. When Belle was born, her father had commented on the likeness of the smooth amber color, and the mare's name had swiftly been decided.

Recalling Belle's birth and what hopes they'd had back then made Maggie think of the land again, and she sighed.

After the war, she'd thought life might gradually take an upward turn. But it hadn't. Another war had simply taken the former's place. One fought not with cannons or guns or bayonets but with bullets just the same, relentless and aimed at the heart.

Empty places at tables, never to be filled again. Fields lying fallow beneath the hot summer sun. Brokenness everywhere a person turned. Northerners soon arrived and started buying up the land, moving into deserted shops to sell their overpriced goods. Foreigners swiftly followed.

When she went into town these days, she scarcely heard English being spoken. She heard German and Italian in abundance. Then there were the Irish, who supposedly used the King's English. But not very well, from what she'd overheard. They were a lazy and violent

lot, given to heavy drink and wantonness. At least that's what she read in the newspapers.

And in what part of heaven was it acceptable for a foreigner to come in and—for only pennies on the dollar—buy up farmland that had been cleared, tamed, and tended by the same family for nearly a hundred years? It wasn't right.

And she determined again not to let that happen to Linden Downs.

Movement from beyond the open barn doorway caught her attention, and Maggie looked up. A sigh of relief escaped. "Finally . . ."

It was Willie, still some distance away. And bless the boy's heart, he was running full out. He probably felt bad about being late and was—

Maggie stilled, squinting, certain that what she thought she saw couldn't be.

But as Willie came closer, the tears streaking his face came into focus, as did the blood soaking his shirt and trousers.

Chapter THREE

Willie!" Maggie called, running to meet him, her father following with Bucket at his heels. "What happened? Are you all right?" She knelt by the corral and touched the boy's head then inspected his face, neck, chest. His breath came staggered. No cuts, no injuries that she could see. Yet blood stained his shirt and pants.

Her father knelt beside them, his breath almost as labored as the boy's.

"They kilt—" Willie hiccuped a sob, fear in his eyes. "They kilt him, Miss Maggie. Strung him up." He bit his lower lip, but a cry still slipped past. "Right there . . . in front of the shanties."

"Who, Willie?" Maggie's voice came out firm, steeled with fear over how the boy might respond. "*Who* was killed?"

"M-Mister Rawl . . . Man who live next door to us." Willie shuddered. "They beat my pa, too, when he tried to stop 'em. Beat him bad."

Maggie's father slipped an arm around the boy's shoulders. "Who did this, Willie? Do you know?"

The boy shook his head. "Ain't got no names. Their heads, they was covered up like ghosts. Mama say Missus Rawl kept screamin'." He closed his eyes as though trying to block out the memory. "Her husband was just hangin' there. Swingin' back and forth."

Maggie cradled his cheek in her palm, and Willie's thin shoulders shook.

"When did this happen?" her father asked, the quiet of his voice belying the anger in his expression.

"Early this mornin', sir. I weren't there. I's gone to the store." Willie drew back, his lips trembling. "To spend the pay you give me last

night, Miss Maggie. I's buyin' the things from Mama's list. But then when I get home I saw—" His face crumpled again.

"Come on into the house," Maggie urged, rising. "We'll get you cleaned up."

Willie resisted. "No, Miss Maggie. I can't. Mama says I got to get right back." He looked first at her father then back at her. "We's leavin' here, ma'am."

The blow of his statement landed square in Maggie's midsection. "What?" she whispered. "Leaving town?"

"I's sorry, ma'am. I am. But my mama says we done had enough of this. Papa said it too. Them men that did it—" Willie sniffed. "They said they's comin' back. They say this town don't want us niggers livin' here no more, Miss Maggie."

He looked up at her with eyes so full of innocence, yet tarnished by evil.

Forcing herself to think of the boy and his family instead of her own situation and the fate of Linden Downs, Maggie felt a jab of shame that it took some effort. "When are you leaving, Willie?"

He bowed his head. When he finally looked up, she saw the answer to her question.

"If Papa's able, they say we goin' first thing come mornin'," he whispered, as if saying it softly might ease the blow. "We headin' north, ma'am. To some place called Chicago. Other families, they goin' with us. I's sorry, Miss Maggie." He grimaced. "I don't want to, but—"

"Shhhh . . ." Seeing his renewed tears, she patted his back then let out a gasp as his thin arms came tight around her waist. She stared down, not knowing what to do. In the past year of working with Willie day in and day out, never once had she touched him. Nor he her. Not like this. And it felt . . . awkward, to say the least.

Yet, hearing his sobs . . .

Maggie gently cradled his head. "You have to do what's right for your family, Willie," she heard herself say. "Do what keeps you all safe."

Based on recent events—the burning of freedmen's schools, the midnight raids on shanties huddled at the edge of town—keeping safe was becoming next to impossible. But this . . . in broad daylight. These acts of violence were growing bolder.

Willie looked up. "Papa says we wouldn't even have money to go if not for you payin' me like you do, Miss Maggie."

The irony wasn't lost on her. "Your parents want what's best for you and your sisters." She met her father's gaze. "That's what Mr. Linden and I want too."

Willie's focus shifted from her to the stable then back again. Understanding his silent request, Maggie nodded, the scene he'd described still crowding her mind. The violence, the hatred.

So much blood had already been spilled over this issue, and yet it only seemed to get worse. Brutality escalating to a degree that made her want to run at the merest mention of it, even as something deep inside her, something she couldn't begin to understand, much less explain, demanded that she not.

She looked over at her father to find him kneeling beside Bucket, staring out across the land as though taking it in for the very last time.

Which, she guessed, was close to the truth.



Passing the entrance to the farm, the last on his list, Cullen glanced at the modest wooden shingle that at one time had likely borne the name of the estate. The rocks from the limestone walls that had once bordered the property, so common in this countryside, lay in ruins in the dirt, weeds long since having made their home in the cracks and crevices.

On a whim he nudged the Percheron off the main road, deciding he wanted to see the land before the house or anything else. Although he doubted this meeting would prove any more successful than the two he'd just come from.

As it turned out, the properties he'd visited earlier—properties listed as being for sale in that very morning's paper—were apparently not available after all. He gave a sharp exhale, knowing what each owner had meant when they'd told him, "I've decided not to sell."

They just wouldn't sell to *him*.

Wondering if he would have to move on after all, to find land in another area, he continued across the grassy meadow until he happened upon a well-worn path tucked alongside a creek. It seemed to beckon, and he nudged the Percheron to follow.

The fine animal needed a name. Goliath was out of the running, to be sure, not only because of what had happened in town earlier, but because Cullen knew the fate of one certain giant who'd borne

that moniker. Defeated by a mere lad, and with a slingshot and stone, no less.

No, this kingly beast deserved a nobler name.

The beauty of the woods—the canopies of oak and pine stretching overhead, the sunlight sneaking past poplars and maples, the trickle of water over smooth rock—was intoxicating, and formed a perfect accompaniment to the quiet of late afternoon.

I have read of a place called Tennessee, Cullen. In the New World. They say its hills are as green as those of home.

Cullen's grip tightened on the reins. It had been Moira's dream to come here, not his. She'd spoken of it oft enough. But he'd told her time and again they could make a life together in England, despite the lack of welcome.

When she finally stopped bringing it up in conversation, she began praying about it, which had worried him far more. Because once Moira McGrath began seeking the Father's face on something, it was pretty much determined. In the end God had listened to his wife, and rightly so. For a godlier woman no man would find. Why she'd loved him, Cullen didn't know. And hadn't questioned. He'd just been grateful.

But when the scandal had broken and Ethan fled, leaving him alone to give answer, Cullen finally listened to her, and they left.

But he wondered . . .

If he'd heeded her advice earlier, if they'd left England before all that happened, would she and Katie still be alive? Would God have still exacted such a price?

Up ahead the woods opened in welcome to another meadow, and through the filtered light Cullen spotted something. A man standing—nay, kneeling—beneath an ancient oak, a dog close beside.

Cullen slowed the Percheron's gait. Surprised to find someone out here, he squinted in the dappled sunlight, and that's when he saw the graves.

Seven in all, lined neatly in a row, roughhewn wooden markers silently, boldly staking their victory.

He reined in, no more than twenty feet away, watching.

The man, his head bowed, shoulders stooped, never turned as he stood, moved a couple of steps, then knelt again, going from one grave to the next. The dog followed suit.

Something about the man's posture felt uncannily familiar, recalling the tang of salt in the air, the lap of angry waves against the hull

of the ship, the heaviness in his own chest. Shaking off the memory, Cullen held the reins taut, not wanting to intrude on the moment, but unable to continue on.

Finally the man rose then went perfectly still, his gaze warily fixed in Cullen's direction.

Cullen urged the horse forward then dismounted. "Good day to you, sir," he said, taking a slow approach.

The older gentleman—well into his sixties, Cullen guessed—gave the dog a pat on the head and whispered something to it, then gave the Percheron a thorough going-over before focusing on Cullen again. "For a moment there, I thought I was seeing Alexander the Great astride his magnificent Bucephalus."

The subtle humor in the man's voice, combined with his deep Southern drawl, coaxed a smile from Cullen. "Not even close to the truth, sir. Just an Irishman enjoying your lovely woods."

"They are most certainly that." The man peered up, his expression absent of judgment. "As my father always told anyone who would listen, that's why he and my mother chose this land. And if you think this is pretty, you should see the meadows by the house. Or the bluff overlooking the river." His humor faded. "In my estimation, it's the finest acreage in all of Tennessee."

Cullen nodded, allowing for bias in the man's opinion while also agreeing with his assessment. "It's fine land, to be sure."

Gauging how to proceed, Cullen's gaze fell upon the assembly of graves tucked beyond the seven he'd already seen, hidden from his earlier vantage point. The family cemetery. Beautiful setting, and neatly tended. Exactly what he would have chosen for Moira and Katie, if God had allowed him a choice.

Feeling the man's attention, he extended a hand. "Cullen McGrath is the name, sir."

The man's grip was firm but lacked the strength Cullen suspected it once had.

"Gilbert Linden, Mr. McGrath. Good to make your acquaintance."

"Fine to meet you, Mr. Linden. I'm sorry if I gave you a start just now."

The man shook his head. "That's what I get for reading the classics before retiring. I see them in my dreams. Both sleeping and waking, apparently."

An educated man, Cullen noted, yet he tried not to attach too much hope to that fact.

Mr. Linden gestured to the collie at his side. "This fine companion of mine is Bucket."

Bucket? Wondering at the name, Cullen leaned down, extended a closed hand, and let the dog sniff him. The collie's brown eyes warmed, and the animal licked his hand. Mr. Linden chuckled, obviously pleased.

Cullen took it as a good sign.

"So tell me, Mr. McGrath . . . What is an Irishman such as yourself doing wandering my lovely woods?"

No accusation weighted the question, only curiosity. "I was on my way to pay the owner of this farm a visit. Which, as it turns out . . ." He gestured then let the sentence fall away.

Gilbert Linden said nothing, holding his gaze and proving himself a patient man, if not a bit intimidating, despite his standing a head shorter. Reminded Cullen of the way his grandfather used to look at him when the man knew he'd done something wrong.

Quickly remembering how he'd found Mr. Linden, Cullen gestured to the graves, able now to read the names and dates carved into the various wooden markers. The marker farthest left bore the name *Laurel Agnes Linden* and the inscription *Heart of my own heart* carved beneath. Looking to the right, Cullen read six names, one after the other, all male, and all with various dates of birth.

But four claimed the same month and year of passing. *December 1864*. "I'm so sorry for your losses, Mr. Linden."

Linden's gaze trailed the grave sites. "Are you well acquainted with grief, Mr. McGrath?" he asked without looking back.

So blunt a question, and intimate, from someone he didn't know. Yet Cullen found himself responding. "Aye, sir, I am. Though . . . not as well as you."

Linden took in a breath, held it, then slowly exhaled, and Cullen would've sworn the woods around them did the same.

"You've lost a child then?" Linden said softly.

"Aye," Cullen whispered.

"A son?"

The memory of Katie's birth resurfaced, as did the first time she'd ever called him da, and it took Cullen a moment to find his voice. He shook his head. "My daughter was three. She died with her ma."

Seconds passed before the older man reached over and placed a hand on Cullen's shoulder.

"I used to think the heart could be broken only once, Mr. McGrath, and that after that it would somehow be easier to bear life's pains. But in truth, losing those you love is a little like falling on the same bruise over and over and over again." Linden swallowed, the sound audible in the quiet. "The pain goes deeper each time. Deeper than you thought it could, and than you ever thought you could bear. And yet"—a flicker of light slipped in behind the sadness—"you can, and you do. And although life is never the same again, you find happiness again too. With the Lord's mercy, of course."

Linden gave his shoulder a fatherly squeeze, but Cullen looked away.

"You don't believe in his mercy?"

"I believe if he were as merciful as people said, he would answer a man's humble question when asked."

Linden nodded slowly, regarding him. "He's disappointed me on that count, too, son. Many a time."

Cullen looked back.

"Don't hear me saying the deficiency is with him, Mr. McGrath. But I do understand what it's like to lay a petition before him only to have it ignored . . . time and again." He looked back at the graves.

The lamenting coo of a mourning dove floated toward them from deep within the dense woods.

"And yet . . . you still choose to trust, sir."

The older man smiled. "Let's just say that as I've gotten older, I've learned that there's always a conversation going on. It's just me who's sometimes stubborn of hearing." His gaze lowered. "Either that or I simply don't like the direction the conversation has taken."

With a somewhat sadder smile, Linden moved away.

Cullen's mind awash in memory, he looked again at the graves and felt a kinship with this man. But not of anything having to do with the Lord's mercy.

Eventually he lifted his face and saw Mr. Linden leaving, Bucket in tow. Then the man paused and looked back. Reading invitation in the gesture, Cullen followed, leading the horse behind him.

He caught up easily and fell into step with the older man. "Mr. Linden, I have a question I'd like to—"

"You're here about the land." Linden didn't look at him when he spoke.

"Aye, sir. I am."

“You read about the auction in the newspaper and figured you might come and offer me a deal beforehand. Hoping to get it at a greatly discounted price, would be my guess.”

Cullen caught the first hint of displeasure in the man’s demeanor and felt the door of opportunity closing. “No, Mr. Linden, that’s not true at all. But I would appreciate the chance to talk with you about—”

The crack of a whip followed by a primal scream tore Cullen’s focus from the man beside him, raising the hair on the back of his neck.

On a road that ran alongside the meadow, two men flanked an enclosed wagon, yelling at each other and at whatever was inside. One of them brandished a whip. A ramp extended from the back of the conveyance, and Cullen had a good idea what the wagon held. Especially seeing the rectangular windows cut out along the top.

The man with the whip cracked it again, and a second scream rent the air. The mares pulling the wagon tried to bolt, but the wheel brake canceled the effort.

“Those foolish, ignorant—” Gilbert Linden firmed his mouth.

But Cullen was already astride the Percheron.