

A Belle Meade Plantation Novel

TAMERA
ALEXANDER

TO
WAGER HER
HEART

 ZONDERVAN®



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To Wager Her Heart

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*In honor of the original Jubilee Singers
of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee.
Your courage and faith inspire us still.*

We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.

2 Corinthians 4:7 NLT

Preface

Much of the novel you're about to read is fictional, though there are plenty of real people and real history woven throughout. For instance, the Fisk University Jubilee Singers and their immensely important and courageous strides in the nineteenth century are true and are woven through the fictional threads of this novel. And there really is a Belle Meade Plantation in Nashville—the Queen of Southern Plantations, as it's still known. Built in 1820, the mansion still stands today and warmly welcomes visitors.

The first time I stepped foot onto the grounds of Belle Meade Plantation and learned of Uncle Bob Green, Susanna Carter, and so many other former slaves who lived and worked at Belle Meade, I knew I wanted to write stories that included them, the magnificent estate they helped to create, and this crucial time in our struggling nation's history.

Tennessee in the 1870s represented a striking dichotomy. The state boasted some of the largest plantations in the South, along with their former slaveholders, as well as a talented and articulate group of educated African American men and women who turned the world upside down and changed the culture of that era. Their contributions and gifts still resonate today.

Tennessee dominated the thoroughbred racing industry in the United States at this time, with Belle Meade Plantation serving as the preeminent stud farm in the nation. Does the name

To Wager Her Heart

Secretariat sound familiar? What about Sunday Silence and American Pharaoh? Those champion thoroughbreds, and countless others, trace their lineage to Belle Meade Plantation.

While this novel is peopled with characters who lived during that time, their overarching personalities and actions as depicted in this story are mostly of my own imagination and should be construed as such.

Thank you for entrusting your time to me. It's a weighty investment—one I treasure and never take for granted. I invite you to join me as we open the door to history and step into another time and place.

Welcome (once again) to Belle Meade,

Lamera

Chapter ONE

Nashville, Tennessee

August 9, 1871

Alexandra Jamison had always wanted a sister. Instead, she had three brothers. All older. Two were the spitting image and temperament of their father. Jacob, the third and her favorite, was not. And as though the world could not abide the anomaly, war had met him on the battlefield—and won. For that alone, if not for a thousand other reasons, she would never forgive that war.

As for the other two brothers, they'd escaped home and the shadow of their father as soon as possible. If only she could do the same.

If the carriage parked in front of her house on Sycamore Lane—the lushly treed thoroughfare home to some of Nashville's finest residences—was any indication, her father's plans for her were hardly “escape.” More along the lines of “out of the frying pan, into the fire.” A man nearly thrice her age waited in the study. She imagined his marble-knobbed cane propped just so against the bookcase beside his chair. To be fair, she'd never actually seen Horace Buford walking with a cane, but she felt certain there must be one looming in his very near future. A future she was determined not to share, no matter her father's opinion.

Which her mother would quietly support, never giving voice to her own thoughts on the matter. If she even had thoughts of her own. Which was another frustration.

Alexandra loved her mother; she simply didn't understand her. At times she felt as if she scarcely knew her.

And all of this, Alexandra thought, as she climbed the steps to the front porch, was what a sister was for. To share all the secrets, the heartaches and fears. The frustrations that came with seeking to honor the two people who had given her life. But how did she do that when her parents' hopes and plans for her life differed so vastly from her own?

At twenty-five, she'd expected to be beyond all this. But life hadn't turned out at all as she'd expected.

The daisies in the pots by the top step looked freshly watered, yet still showed signs of fatigue beneath the blazing August sun. She could commiserate. She felt more than a little worn herself. She'd wanted to forgo the midweek Nashville Women's League meeting that morning, but her mother had insisted she attend—while claiming she herself was too burdened by the heat to accompany her.

"The Jamison name must be represented, Alexandra," she'd said. "After all, we're one of Nashville's founding families, and we must stay abreast of all the latest goings-on. And the gossip there is always so rich."

All that talk of who was marrying whom, of what was best served at high tea, of *Godey's* latest fashions . . . Though the league did routinely undertake a number of worthy pursuits to help the needy, the trappings and topics of high society simply weren't Alexandra's cup of tea anymore.

Not after David. Not after Dutchman's Curve.

She reached for the front doorknob, aware of her defenses rising. This house had long ceased being a safe haven. Especially when she knew her father was home. Did all daughters feel this way about their fathers?

Yet another question for the sister she didn't have.

He hadn't approved of her choice in David. David was a teacher. And a gifted one. But that wasn't prestigious enough for Father.

The handsome brass placard by the front door bearing her father's name shone with a deeper luster than usual. He must have had Melba polish it that morning, which only meant one thing.

A prospective client. Alexandra glanced back at the carriage, heartened that perhaps it wasn't old Mr. Horace Buford waiting inside after all.

She opened the door as the blast of a train whistle split the morning air. Its shrill sound brought her up short and prodded memories best left undisturbed. Images of splintered railway cars and broken bodies. Screaming wheels and grinding steel that was heard over two miles away. She squeezed her eyes tight as the familiar sense of loss flooded back through her.

Tomorrow it would be one year. How could so much time have passed? Especially when a part of her still felt stranded back there on that horrific morning on Dutchman's Curve . . .

"As long as your loved one lives on in your memory, he'll never really be gone," people said. But that was a lie. David *was* gone. And he was never coming back.

The whistle blasted again, sounding closer this time, and she could smell the acrid scent of smoke and cinders in her memory, could feel the unearthly jolt of the train as the car she'd been riding jumped the rails. And she could still see David's broken, partially burned body that had been laid out in the cornfield alongside the others.

She hurried inside and slammed the door behind her, working to shut out the haunting sights and sounds.

"Miss Alexandra . . . you all right?"

Heart racing, Alexandra looked up. "Melba," she whispered, and saw concern swiftly gathering in the older woman's eyes.

"What's wrong, child? You comin' down with somethin'?"

Alexandra shook her head. "I'm fine. Just a little overheated,

that's all." Did anyone else remember what tomorrow was? Surely Melba hadn't forgotten.

"It's hot as blazes out there today, ma'am. You shoulda taken that little parasol with you."

Seeing the hint of a smile on Melba's face, Alexandra attempted to return it. "You know how I *love* parasols, Melba."

The older woman laughed, the melodic sound like home itself. "Even as a child you didn't like them things. But your mama, she sure did. Made you carry one everywhere."

"Don't I remember . . ."

Alexandra set her reticule on a side table and watched as Melba arranged a bouquet of fresh-cut flowers from the garden in the antique vase on the center table. The former slave was as much a part of her life as anyone in this house. More so, in some ways. Because Melba saw things Alexandra knew her parents didn't. Even as a little girl, Alexandra had never been able to fool her.

Much like another slave she'd known as a child. A slave she'd loved with all her heart, but who apparently hadn't loved her in equal part.

She heard voices coming from her father's study. "A prospective client?" she asked softly.

Melba nodded. "Man new to town, your papa said."

Her father had moved his office into their home four months ago. He said it was because the building where he rented space in the center of town was not being properly maintained, but Alexandra secretly suspected it was due to finances. Six years since the war had ended, and business in Nashville appeared to be improving. But the number of attorneys still seemed inordinate to the need.

The door to the study opened and her father peered out. "Alexandra, you're home. Good. Would you join us, please? I could use your assistance."

"Of course."

He pushed the door closed again.

Knowing better than to keep him waiting, she quickly brushed the street dust from the front of her dress.

“Let me help you with that, ma’am.” Melba came up from behind and gave her backside a good hand brushing. “Seein’ what tomorrow is, Miss Alexandra, maybe we could get your blue dress back out. Or that teal one with the white lace collar that looks so pretty with your blond hair. If you’re ready.”

Alexandra turned. “I knew you’d remember.”

Melba sighed. “That’s a day this old woman will never be forgettin’.”

Alexandra hugged her, appreciating the way Melba’s arms came around her shoulders, strong and protective. And the way the woman smelled. Like fresh coffee and bread warm from the oven.

A quick glance in the mirror over the table, and Alexandra entered the office—and confirmed that the carriage out front most definitely did not belong to Horace Buford.

The stranger who rose from his seat rivaled even her father’s height, which was saying something. His impeccably tailored black duster hit him slightly above the knee, and with trousers tucked into dark leather boots, he looked more like an outlaw or a gunslinger than a gentleman from Nashville, Tennessee. The shadow of a day’s growth along his jawline and the Stetson on his head—inside the house, no less, did the man have no manners?—only added to that persona.

Something about him held challenge too. His stance, perhaps. Confident. Almost aloof. The opposite of her David, who could make any person feel at ease. A characteristic that had only enhanced his giftedness at teaching. Open, honest, compassionate—all attributes that had made her fall in love with him from the start.

And reasons that—oddly, tragically—had contributed to his untimely death.

“Mr. Rutledge, allow me to introduce my daughter, Miss

Jamison. Likewise”—her father looked her way—“this is Mr. Syllas Rutledge, owner of the Northeast Line Railroad and recently come East from Colorado.”

Colorado. Well, that part fit. A wild, untamed territory for a wild, untamed sort of man. “Good day to you, Mr. Rutledge.”

He nodded. “Ma’am.”

Ma’am? What kind of proper greeting was that?

It was then she noticed the dog sitting at his feet. A dog! In her father’s study. Which told her the man must be wealthy. Because Barrett Broderick Jamison never allowed animals in his home, much less in his office.

The dog, a full-grown foxhound by the look of him, stared up at her, his big brown eyes exuding a warmth his master’s lacked. It was a beautiful animal—brown and tan with white markings on his face and white socked feet. With tail wagging, he moved toward her. Alexandra reached out to pet him, but at a quick snap of Mr. Rutledge’s fingers, the dog dropped to a sitting position.

Alexandra pulled her hand back. “I’m sorry, sir. I was simply going to pet him.”

Without speaking, Mr. Rutledge looked down at the dog and nodded once, and the dog began inching toward her. Alexandra gave the hound a good rub behind the ears, feeling sorrier for the animal by the minute.

“I need a standard property deed for Mr. Rutledge,” her father said, busy sorting through papers on his desk. “Mr. Rutledge, you can take that with you and review it. Or if you prefer, I can have my daughter fill it out for you right now, and then I can file it for a small fee. That will get the process started nicely.”

“I’ll take it with me.”

Alexandra did as her father asked, sensing that his prospective client wasn’t so much a prospect as he was a prospector. She’d assisted in enough of these meetings through the years to get a swift sense of whether a person was ready to sign. Mr. Rutledge from Colorado had no intention of signing anything today.

Granted, she had just walked into the meeting, but her guess was that the man was on a fact-finding mission and not ready to commit.

She took a step closer to him and held the form between them. “Mr. Rutledge, allow me to briefly review the legalities involved in a Tennessee property deed. This document transfers ownership of real estate, of course, and contains the names of the old and new owners as well as a legal description of the property—which will need to be verified at the county courthouse. Depending on the nature of your land purchase—”

His eyes were fixed on her as she spoke, and the close attention made her a little self-conscious.

“—we may also need to consider drawing up a warranty deed, a grant deed, and perhaps a quitclaim deed. A quitclaim deed releases—or *quits*—any ownership claims a person may have in a piece of property. Mineral or oil deposits, for instance.”

She paused, but he said nothing.

“Does all that make sense, Mr. Rutledge?”

“Completely.”

Guessing they were done, she handed him the form. He folded it and slipped it into the pocket of his duster without so much as a thank-you or even a nod. The man had a lot to learn about Southern gentility and working with the businessmen of this city.

His coat shifted and Alexandra saw that he was wearing a pistol on his hip. Like one of those outlaws described in the dime novels. She could hardly believe it. Did the man not realize he was in civilization now? This was Nashville, Tennessee, not one of those lawless cities out West.

He tugged the brim of his hat. “Mr. Jamison.” He glanced back at Alexandra without the slightest hint of a smile, yet she detected a gleam in his eyes. As though he knew a secret she didn’t. “Ma’am,” he said softly, then strode from the room, the dog following loyally at his heels.

Her father followed him out, but Alexandra stayed in the office

and watched from behind the curtain at the window. Owner of the Northeast Line Railroad. She surmised he was here to bid on the contract for the Belle Meade Station project that Mary Harding had told her about. Per Mary, her father, General William Giles Harding, had called for bids from railroad men around the country.

Alexandra smiled, taking pleasure in the fact that Mr. Sylas Rutledge stood little to no chance of winning said bid. Because she knew General Harding, and the man did not take kindly to outsiders. She turned from the window as Mr. Rutledge's carriage pulled away.

Her father came back into the office. "Good. You're still here, Alexandra." He began straightening the papers on his desk, his manner brusque, which communicated his displeasure. "We have a dinner guest coming tonight, so please take extra care in your appearance and do your best to make him feel welcome."

Alexandra stilled. "A dinner guest?"

Her father looked up. "I believe that's what I just stated. Now let me be. I have another appointment."

She opened her mouth to inquire further, but his dark look dissuaded her.

"So, Miss Jamison . . ." Horace Buford peered at her from across the dining table, studying her as he might a prized cow. "You are looking quite ravishing this evening. That color becomes you, my dear."

She'd chosen the plainest, highest-necked, most unflattering gown in her wardrobe. It being brown, her absolute worst color, was an added benefit.

Feeling her father's stare, she forced a smile. "Thank you, Mr. Buford. You're most . . . kind."

Mr. Buford downed the last of his wine, then snapped his fingers for more, and Alexandra caught the fleeting shadow crossing her mother's face even as she was reminded of Mr. Rutledge and his dog. Thinking of that man while looking at Mr. Buford served

to frame Sylas Rutledge in a significantly better light than she'd viewed him earlier that day. Uncouth as the man may be, he was "a mite easier on the eyes" than what was currently in her line of sight. That's what Mary Harding would say, with that coy smile of hers, and it would be a great understatement.

Sylas Rutledge was darkly handsome. In a mysterious and not quite trustworthy sort of way. But she sensed he knew it, which always lessened such a man's overall appeal.

"Let me offer my congratulations, Horace, on the purchase of your new home." Her father shot Alexandra a look that said she'd best join in the conversation. "The Morrison estate is quite a handsome one."

"Yes, indeed it is. And I got it for a steal!" Mr. Buford laughed, revealing a mouthful of veal. "It's a pity, of course, that another of the once esteemed families of Nashville is no more. But if someone must benefit from the situation, why should it not be me?"

What little appetite Alexandra had quickly dissipated. How was it she was sitting here again in the same situation? Staring across the table at an older colleague of her father's, her mother furtively smiling from one end of the table, her father openly frowning at the other. The unspoken agenda of the evening was written plainly, painfully, between every line of forced conversation.

Dinner dragged, and it finally came time to retire to the central parlor. Alexandra was about to make her excuses not to join them when her father spoke up.

"Alexandra, if you'll escort Mr. Buford into the parlor, your mother and I will be there shortly."

She sensed something pass between them and stiffened. "Actually, I'm quite fatigued, Father. I believe that I'll—"

"That you'll accompany Mr. Buford into the parlor, as I suggested. Thank you, Alexandra. Your mother and I will be there shortly."

The air crackled with dissent.

Alexandra could feel Mr. Buford looking between them, and

though she held not a trace of special feeling for the man, she also didn't consider it fair that he be caught in the midst of this tug-of-war with her parents.

"Mr. Buford—" She gestured. "Won't you join me in the parlor?"
"Nothing would please me more, my dear."

He touched the small of her back as she preceded him into the parlor, and her skin crawled. She chose one of the two wing-back chairs, knowing her father wouldn't be pleased. It was a small victory, but she would take it.

Mr. Buford settled himself on the sofa. He glanced at the empty space beside him, then back at her. "Would you care to join me, Miss Jamison?"

"Actually, I'm fine right here. Thank you."

She looked anywhere but at him. From her peripheral vision she could see the pendulum of the grandfather clock swinging back and forth, back and forth, slicing off the seconds. But not fast enough.

"Miss Jamison, as I'm sure you are aware, I am a man of considerable wealth and well respected in this town. I am also of sound health and possess great vigor for my age. I'm not prone to anger, nor do I drink excessively."

Not wanting to meet his gaze, but unable to be outright rude, Alexandra slowly looked back. He smiled a smile she wished he hadn't.

"Some might say I have a great deal that would recommend me to one of the fairer sex, though I would never assume to say as much on my own behalf. Even if it were unabashedly true."

"Mr. Buford, allow me to interject. I sincerely do not wish to—"

He rose from the sofa with surprising agility and came and knelt before her. "I've spoken with your father, Miss Jamison, and he's of the mind that you and I would make an excellent match. I agree with him wholeheartedly. Hence, I'm here to—"

"Mr. Buford, I must stop you." Alexandra tried to stand, but he grabbed her hand.

"You are such a delightful creature. I find I'm growing more fond of you by the moment."

He brought her hand to his mouth to kiss it, his upper lip glistening with sweat.

Alexandra pulled away before he succeeded and rose to put distance between them. "Mr. Buford, my deepest apologies to you, but my father did not consult with me in this regard. Please forgive me, but I must speak plainly. More so than I usually would."

Using the arm of the chair for support, he stood. "There's no need to be shy, my dear. I realize that while your family no longer possesses the level of wealth it once did, your connections in society and your family name have much to recommend you. And you personally have in abundance assets any man would find desirable in a wife."

"Mr. Buford—" Trembling with anger at her father, at his inconsideration, Alexandra forced out the words. "While I am . . . honored that you would consider me worthy of your affections, I cannot accept your proposal."

"But . . . your father assured me that you—"

The door to the parlor opened and her father entered. She spotted her mother standing in the foyer beyond him, wide-eyed and watchful.

"Mr. Buford, I mean you no ill will, but I'm feeling rather tired. I'll leave you and my parents to your conversation." As she left the room, her father grasped hold of her arm and pulled her aside in the foyer. She saw the sliver of patience he'd possessed evaporate from his expression.

"You ignored my wishes once in this," he whispered. "You will not do so again."

"You cannot force me to do this."

"Oh, but I can." His grip tightened. "I am your father. I have every right to make such decisions for you. You are well of age. This is for your own good and the good of our family."

Alexandra jerked free, and the surprise in her father's

expression gave her unexpected courage. "I'm sorry, Father. But this is my decision." She grabbed her reticule from the table where she'd left it that afternoon. Then heard her mother's voice behind her.

"Please, Alexandra," she whispered. "Listen to your father."

Alexandra turned to see tears running down her mother's cheeks. "Mother, you can't believe this is best."

"He's your father, Alexandra. He's the head of this home, and you must see the wisdom in—"

"No." Alexandra shook her head, her own tears threatening. "I can see it in your eyes. You don't agree with him. Why don't you say something? Why won't you stand up for me?"

Fresh tears rose in her mother's eyes. But hearing footsteps coming from the parlor, Alexandra raced out the front door and down the street.

Chapter TWO

Her chest tight with emotion, Alexandra walked and walked until a stitch in her side finally caused her to slow her pace. The sun had long set, and though she had no destination in mind, she kept going. She only wanted to put distance between herself and her father. And the well-meaning but ill-guided Mr. Horace Buford.

The exchange in the parlor played again and again in her mind, and with each repetition she grew angrier. Yet a part of her knew her father was right. Not that she needed to marry Mr. Buford, but that the time had come for her to do something with her life.

Because here she was . . .

Nearly twenty-six years old and still living in her parents' home. Most friends her age had married years ago and had children now. If David hadn't died in that accident, they, too, would be married and she would be out from beneath the weight of her father's demands.

But even before then she should've found a way to leave after the war, as her older brothers had done—despite the hardships such a decision would have incurred. But those potential hardships were what had kept her in place. She'd been too afraid to venture out on her own.

Then David came along. He was everything she'd ever wanted.

He offered her love, safety, a nice—if modest—home, and she'd accepted his proposal without hesitation. Only to have the life they'd planned together wrenched from her grip without warning, because of a train engineer's careless mistake.

Harrison Kennedy. Would she ever forget that name, and all he'd taken from her?

The image of David's face rose clear in her memory, and she recalled their last exchange before they boarded the train that morning at the Memphis station. And after such an enjoyable two days of searching and finding a place to live that was located near the school's campus.

"The workers I was speaking with earlier can't read, Alexandra, so they don't even know what's in the contract they were given. Yet they're expected to sign it when they get back to Nashville, if they want to keep their jobs. Why don't you and Melba go ahead and ride in the ladies' car. They'll allow her to ride in there since she's with you. And I'll ride up front with those workers."

She smoothed the perpetually crumpled lapel of his suit, which somehow befitted his occupation as a university professor. "Do you think they'll allow it? For you to ride in a freedmen's car?"

"I doubt anyone will say anything. But if they put me out, I'll come find you and Melba before we pull out of the station."

She had nodded, so proud of the man he was. And thankful to Melba, who stood off to the side, the perfect chaperone—and her trusted confidante. "Must you always be the teacher, Mr. Thompson?" she'd teased.

He shrugged. "Any and all who would seek to learn should be allowed to pursue an education."

She smiled at his oft-quoted phrase. "West Tennessee State School is fortunate to have you joining their ranks."

"They're fortunate to have *us* joining their ranks, Alexandra. I couldn't be doing what I'm doing without you. I hope you know that."

She loved this man so much. His generosity and kindness,

his intellect, the way he never allowed social mores to deter his beliefs and purpose in teaching. Being raised in an abolitionist family had shaped his views early on, and he had gently coaxed her to the truth that had resided just under her skin for as long as she could remember.

“I’m so proud of you, David. You’re an excellent teacher.”

“I don’t know about that last part, but at least I can review the contracts and explain what they’re signing. But about that first point . . .” He glanced around them, then winked and kissed her quickly on the forehead. “I feel the same about you. I’ll see you at home!”

I’ll see you at home . . . I’ll see you at home . . . The words echoed toward her from that day.

But she never saw him alive again.

Alexandra wiped the tears from her cheeks as the void inside yawned wide and vicious in the growing darkness around her. It was then that she heard it.

Singing. Somewhere in the distance.

She looked around, then spotted light coming from the windows of a building at the far end of the street. Walking closer, she came to a billboard out front that read *Wednesday, August 9, 7 o’clock, Masonic Hall presents Handel’s Cantata of Esther*. Drawn by the familiar composer and his rendition of the biblical story, as well as the majestic voices, she opened the door and went inside.

The lobby was dimly lit.

Glad she’d brought her reticule along with her, she readied to pay an admission, but the lobby was empty. No one was minding the front table. Piano music swelled, as did a soprano voice so rich and full, so ethereal, goose bumps rose on Alexandra’s arms despite the warmth of the building. A chorus of voices joined in then, and she closed her eyes, letting the beauty of the harmonies soothe the edges of her lingering hurt.

Compelled by the music, she continued down a hallway that opened into a small auditorium. To her surprise, the seats were

only half filled with patrons. Difficult to believe, considering what she was hearing. But when she looked toward the performers on the stage, she stopped stock-still.

Every singer was Negro.

In addition, the audience consisted mostly of Negro men and women. Only a handful of white people were in attendance. And though the discovery didn't leave her discomforted in the least, she couldn't help but acknowledge she'd never been at a concert attended by black and white together.

David would have delighted in it.

A pang of longing hit her again, and she quickly claimed a seat toward the back, wondering if she would ever cease missing him. She knew from losing dear Jacob in the war that time helped heal the wounds of loss. But David had filled her life in ways no one ever had. He'd challenged her to demand more of herself, to see the world in ways she hadn't before. He'd made her a far better person than she'd been before he came along.

And she didn't want to go back to being that other woman ever again. She wanted her life to have meaning. Beyond an arranged marriage she in no way desired.

The tempo of the piano music changed, and the voice of the powerful soprano on stage soared into upper registers. Alexandra found her attention riveted once again, as was everyone else's, and she gave herself fully to the music, grateful for the distraction. Such perfection in a voice—and delivered with seeming ease. The cantata flowed from one piece to the next and finally into the duet Alexandra had been anticipating.

Her eyes watered as she drank in the familiar lyrics, first from Queen Esther as sung by the talented soprano, and then answered by a handsome young tenor in the persona of King Ahasuerus.

Who calls my parting soul from death . . . Awake, my soul, my life, my breath. Hear my suit, or else I die . . . Ask, my queen, can I deny?

Gradually the rest of the troupe joined in again, and far too

soon the last note of the music faded and the audience rose to their feet in applause. Alexandra joined in, filled with gratitude and—

She squinted. What was Mr. Syllas Rutledge doing here?

He'd been seated two rows in front of her on the opposite end. But standing well over six feet tall—and dressed in that dark duster like the gunslinger he apparently considered himself to be—the man was easily distinguished in a crowd.

He certainly had not struck her as the classical-music-loving sort. But at least he'd had the decency to remove his hat this time, so perhaps there was hope for the man after all.

At that moment, one of the singers stepped to the front of the stage, and the patrons sat back down. Alexandra did likewise, turning slightly to the side to lessen the chance that Mr. Rutledge would see her. She was none too eager for a second meeting with the man and whatever business reconnoitering he was conducting. But she needn't have worried.

He didn't return to his seat, but slipped quietly down the side aisle and exited the auditorium.

"Thank you, kind ladies and gentlemen." The young man on stage spoke in a deep register, his voice resonating in the silence. "We appreciate your venturing out on this warm summer eve to hear us perform Handel's *Cantata of Esther*, a most moving oratorio. At least we believe it to be so."

He smiled, and Alexandra laughed along with everyone else. Only then did she notice the minimal scenery on stage and the lack of elaborate costumes. But it hadn't mattered. The voices were everything.

"As part of the student body at Fisk University," the speaker continued, "we appreciate your support and invite you to talk with one of us afterward if you're interested in hearing more about the school and its academic program. And now may I introduce the president of Fisk University . . . Mr. Adam Spence."

Applause rose again as a man made his way from the audience to the stage. "Good evening, friends. As Mr. Green has

already stated, we appreciate your coming out to enjoy this fine concert and supporting Fisk University with your ticket purchases. Customarily, Mr. George White, Fisk's treasurer and this troupe's illustrious leader, would be speaking to you, but he is unable to be here this evening. In addition, our usual pianist finds herself unwell. So allow me to extend a special thank-you to Miss Anderson for her accompaniment tonight."

The audience clapped, showing their appreciation, and the young Negro woman seated at the piano stood and bowed. Alexandra took the opportunity to peer back at the door. Mr. Rutledge had not returned.

"Our students at Fisk are all freedmen," President Spence continued, "by which of course I am referring to both men and women. But Fisk University exists to offer an education to *any* person who would seek to learn, regardless of the color of their skin."

His statement prompted still more applause, and Alexandra joined in, feeling a stirring at the familiar echo of President Spence's statement. So much like what her David had said.

"As president of Fisk University, I can assure you that these fine students possess an extraordinary thirst for learning. We're very proud of their accomplishments and of our school. We're also in need of teachers, so if you're experienced in that regard, please seek me out and I can share with you more about those opportunities."

Following further comments, President Spence invited them to bow their heads as he closed the evening in prayer. Alexandra followed suit, but couldn't keep her eyes closed.

She kept peering up at the stage at the Fisk students, then back down at her hands, trying to account for the fluttering in her stomach and the inexplicable sense of closeness she felt to David in that moment. And to the dreams they'd shared for their life together.



Later that night, Alexandra returned home to a mostly darkened house, save for a lamp burning low in the foyer. She half expected to find the front door locked, based on how abruptly she'd departed, but the knob turned easily in her hand. She locked the door behind her, turned down the lamp, and slipped quietly up the darkened stairway and into her room. As familiar with her childhood bedroom in the dark as she was in the light, she retrieved the matches and lit the lamp on her bedside table.

The flame cast a warm glow across the bed and onto David's photograph on her dressing table. She sat down on the bench, picked up the cherished likeness of him, and stared into his kind, open gaze, her thoughts still racing from her conversation with President Spence.

Had she found what she was supposed to do? Is that why she'd "happened" upon the concert tonight? A thrum of excitement skittered through her, followed swiftly by a flood of uncertainty.

She glanced at David's trunk—full of books and teaching materials—at the foot of her bed, and wished for the hundredth time that she'd made more progress in her studies with him. Despite his insistence that she always caught on quickly and that her mind was like a sponge. But time had seemed limitless back then. She'd thought she had a lifetime to learn from him, to soak up his knowledge.

She'd had a governess growing up, of course, who had seen to her primary education. Later, as a young woman, Alexandra had wanted to attend the Nashville Female Academy with a handful of her friends, but her father refused. Yet she'd done a good amount of tutoring children through the years, so what knowledge she'd acquired she put to good use.

"I wish you could tell me if this is what I'm supposed to do," she whispered, running a finger along the edge of the frame. "And oh, how I wish you were still here."

But in a sense he *had* been there with her tonight, hadn't he? She'd felt his presence. And then that song . . .

After the concert she'd heard the chorus members singing softly in a back hallway. It was a song she hadn't heard since childhood, and the lyrics and depth of feeling in their voices still haunted her.

In the morning when I rise, in the morning when I—

A knock sounded on the bedroom door.

She returned the frame to the dressing table and crossed the room, hoping it wasn't her father.

"Mother." Relieved, she stepped aside and allowed her entrance. Even in the low light she could tell by her mother's red-rimmed eyes that she'd spent the evening crying. Guilt pinched the measure of excitement she felt.

"Darling, I've been waiting for you." Her mother reached back and closed the bedroom door. "I wanted to make certain you returned home all right. Where did you go?"

"I walked. And walked some more." Alexandra offered a smile. "I needed time to think. To . . . clear my head."

Her mother nodded, hands clasped at her waist, then sat down on the edge of the bed. Alexandra joined her.

"Alexandra . . . I know you still miss David very much, and I realize Mr. Buford is not the man you would have chosen. But he is a good match, a practical match. And he'll take care of you. You'll never want for anything."

"Anything except a man I desire to spend my life with. A man I can admire and respect. And who will respect me and my opinions in return."

A shadow pierced her mother's expression. "Alexandra, your father is—" She closed her lips tightly and glanced away. When she looked back, her features were resolute. "Your father has only your best interests at heart. You must believe that."

"I believe he thinks he knows what's best." Alexandra weighed the cost of what she was about to say. "But I simply don't agree. Furthermore, I think it's perfectly acceptable to have opinions that differ from his. And to express them."

Her mother stared, then reached over and covered Alexandra's hand on the bed. "As you know, your grandparents arranged your father's and my marriage. When I married him and pledged to love, honor, and obey him, I scarcely knew him. But that doesn't negate the promise I made in front of family and friends and God that day."

"But it also doesn't negate that you surrender what you think and who you are," Alexandra said softly. "At least, that's how it appears to me."

Her mother offered a weak smile. "The world is changing, my dear. I'm not blind. I see that. And you are changing along with it. And while I believe a time is coming when women will have vastly more opportunities open to them, we must all move within the confines of the world in which we currently reside. And you, my dearest, are caught in an . . . in-between time."

Alexandra searched her mother's expression and glimpsed a depth of understanding that both surprised and heartened her.

"Granted, you're not living in my world," her mother continued, "and yet the world you desire has not yet been fully birthed. I know you have dreams, that you and David had dreams. But the door on those dreams has closed, my dear. And heartbreaking as that is, you must accept it."

"I do accept it, Mother. Truly. I know that the dreams David and I shared are in the past. But that doesn't mean I can't have my own version of those dreams. Women are doing so much more these days than they once did. The war brought so many changes. Women are working in offices and factories now."

Her mother stared. "So you're thinking of going to work in an office? Or a factory? And being what? A seamstress in a mill? Alexandra, you're from one of the finest families in Nashville. As I said, we all must move within the confines of the world we're in. And that, my dearest, is not your world."

Alexandra started to object, then thought better of it.

"It is well past time, Alexandra, for you to marry, to establish

your own home, to have children. And with the war having taken so many of our men”—her mother’s chin trembled—“including our precious Jacob, your choices are greatly narrowed. Even you must agree with me on this . . . A woman can only choose among the options available to her. So consider your decision carefully, dearest. Because despite what happened this evening, Mr. Buford’s designs toward you remain unchanged.” She gave Alexandra’s hand a tight squeeze. “And though I consider you the finest and loveliest daughter I could ever have requested from the Lord, none of us is guaranteed a second chance. You have been given one, my dear. Take it. While there’s still time.”

Her mother rose, pressed a kiss on the crown of Alexandra’s head, and closed the bedroom door behind her as she left.

Long into the night, Alexandra lay awake weighing her mother’s counsel against the urgings of her heart, all while asking for wisdom from above and listening for the slightest whisper in her heart from the Lord.

Or even . . . from David, if heaven allowed such things.

Sleeping little, she rose long before the sun with fresh conviction, knowing without question what she had to do. Gone were the years of acquiescence and blind obedience. The time had come for her to choose her own path. And she was going to do it.

No matter the cost.

Chapter THREE

Dilapidated and rotting, the rows of former Union Army hospital barracks up ahead looked as though they might collapse with the slightest breeze. But Alexandra continued down the street, chin slightly tucked and eyes averted. Not ashamed of where she was going . . . and yet she knew how people could talk. Foot traffic was busy for a Thursday morning, and she didn't want to give anyone fodder for conversation that might find its way back to her parents.

With high hopes and taut nerves, she focused instead on the events of last night and on what—and *who*—had led her to this place, to this moment. She thought, too, about all that was happening behind those ramshackle, decaying walls ahead. New lives were being built, futures forged with fresh direction—and she intended to be part of it.

Though she'd left the house later than planned, she still managed to leave before her father had awakened. Yet another sign that God was on her side in this decision, because the man rarely overslept. Now if she could only hold to the unwavering courage she'd had upon first awakening, instead of listening to the questioning murmurs within.

The whistle blast of an approaching train jarred her thoughts, and she looked in the direction of the train tracks—some fifteen yards away—as the iron beast churned toward her, bound for the Nashville station.

Her pulse edged up a notch.

She regretted now that she'd told Mary Harding she would meet her at the train station later, despite her friend's kind invitation to attend General Harding's special unveiling. Alexandra knew Mary remembered the significance of this day and was attempting to lift her spirits. And since Mary Harding never took no for an answer . . .

As the train drew closer, Alexandra made out the name along the side—Northeast Line Railroad. Mr. Rutledge, yet again. For saying so little, the man certainly had a way of making his presence known. She wondered if he'd enjoyed the concert last night as much as she had, and if such a pastime was typical for him. It still seemed hard to believe, based on what little she knew of the man.

The line of passenger cars came into view, and even through the dirt-smudged windows, she could see the people within—talking, reading their newspapers, some of them likely dozing to the rhythmic rocking of the cars on the rails. Oblivious to what could happen in the space of a single, solitary breath.

The first few passenger cars thundered by, and she forced herself to watch even as, in a blink, the rush of the train pulled her back, and she was back in the ladies' railcar as it left the tracks that day on Dutchman's Curve. She relived that sickly feeling of being airborne, her stomach twisting as her body, weightless, hung in space for what had to have been only seconds—though it felt like an eternity—before the passenger car slammed onto its side in the cornfield.

Alexandra drew in a shaky breath. *You are not on that train. You are not on that train. You are not on that train . . .*

And she hadn't stepped foot on another train since.

She loathed the fear that still gripped her, this weakness in herself, yet she couldn't make herself climb on board. She'd tried. Mary had even enticed her with the gift of a trip to New York City. Alexandra had politely declined. Someday . . . In time. At least that's what she kept telling herself.

She continued down the street and didn't look back.

The relentless August sun sweltered in the cloudless blue overhead. Regardless that the watch pinned to her shirtwaist read half past nine, a trickle of perspiration inched its way down her back. And her feet, how they ached. Especially after all the walking last night.

The distance from home had proven farther than she'd calculated. A little over two miles, which customarily wasn't too far to walk. But in these boots and in this heat and humidity . . .

She'd decided against taking one of the family carriages, knowing that if he were asked, Dockery, their driver, would tell her father where she'd gone. And her father would most definitely ask. This was a decision she wanted to keep to herself until she was certain that what President Spence had said was correct.

And until she'd had time to lay the proper groundwork with her parents. Though precisely how to do that hadn't yet come to her.

She passed storefront after storefront, some businesses still solvent with doors open, but many long closed, their shingles left to hang at odd angles, the names of the abandoned shops barely legible. Broken panes of glass and cracked windows bore testament to better times. But one shingle in particular drew her eye, and she slowed her steps.

The last building on the opposite side of the street.

The sign's weathered wood was cracked and dried, but the painted-on letters, faded with time, were still readable. *Porter's Slave Pen*. Reading the name, even silently, felt like someone slipping a dagger between her ribs.

Her gaze trailed to the yard adjacent to the building, to the rotting auction stand leaning to one side, half caved in from time . . . and long-delayed justice. An image rose, vivid in her memory. An occurrence she'd witnessed only once, by mistake—if her mother's hand covering her eyes had been any indication—as the family carriage paused in the street traffic.

Yet it was an image she would never forget.

Alexandra squeezed her eyes tight, the mental picture a marker in her young life, one that had shaped her far more than her parents realized at the time. Far more than *she'd* realized.

Then, as if bookending that event, she'd read an article in the *Nashville Banner* shortly before the end of the war that announced the closing of this . . . establishment. And told how Porter, the owner, had buried piles of manacles and chains in the yard, as though he could simply cover up what he'd done and forget his part in the buying and selling of human life.

She averted her gaze and continued on, renewed purpose in her step and a vigor in her chest that all but dared to be challenged.

No grand signage marked the entrance. Only a dirt road leading to the rows of one-story framed buildings that once made up the Union Army compound of Fort Sill, but that now housed the nation's first school dedicated to the higher education of freed people.

A continuous front porch connected this particular row of barracks, and Alexandra realized after a moment what was missing. She'd expected to see students milling about, visiting between classes. But to her disappointment, the porch and surrounding common areas were empty.

She hurried up the steps leading to the barracks marked *Administration*, her grip tightening on her teaching satchel.

In her conversation with President Spence following the concert last night, he'd instructed her to ask for a Mr. George White, whose offices were located in this building. He'd assured her she didn't need an appointment.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and was met by the sharp tang of sweat and stale cigar smoke—and something else she couldn't place but somehow knew was distinctly male. She discreetly pressed a forefinger beneath her nose and then heard a feminine chuckle.

"It's pungent. I know," a woman's voice chided, the slightest

Northern accent detectable. "You can thank all the Union soldiers who convalesced here during the war. Thousands of them passed through this compound, we're told."

Alexandra's gaze quickly adjusted to the dimmer lighting, and she spotted a middle-aged Negro woman seated behind an old farm table now serving as a desk. The woman's gaze was as sharp and discerning as her smile was welcoming.

"The smell's always worse in the deep of summer," the woman continued. "Brings all that living out of the wood. And the dying too, I guess," she added softly.

Alexandra lowered her hand to her side and managed a smile. "I suppose one could say that we should be able to withstand the smell . . . considering what the soldiers withstood while they were here."

Understanding deepened in the woman's features. "Yes, ma'am. We often say much the same to each other when it's an especially potent day. Now please, how may I be of service?"

Briefly debating whether or not to use her real surname, Alexandra decided that being forthcoming was best. "I'm Miss Alexandra Jamison, and I'm here to see Mr. George White. About a teaching position," she added quickly. "I spoke with President Spence following the concert last evening. He said Mr. White was the gentleman with whom I needed to speak. I don't have an appointment, but President Spence said that wasn't required. And I'm able to wait. For a while, at least."

The woman rose, her gaze appraising. "I'm Mrs. Chastain, the administrative secretary. Allow me to see if Mr. White has time for an introduction. Have a seat over there if you'd like, Miss Jamison."

Mrs. Chastain disappeared down a hallway, and Alexandra noted the confident, cultured manner in which the woman conducted herself. She was tall and stately, and possessed what some might term "handsome" features for a female.

Alexandra shifted her weight, the soles of her feet beginning to throb, and she decided to accept Mrs. Chastain's invitation. But

after sitting for a moment her nerves got the best of her, and she rose again.

“Miss Jamison?”

Alexandra looked up to see Mrs. Chastain standing in the hallway.

“Follow me, please, Miss Jamison.” Then the woman paused. “By chance, ma’am, did President Spence give you any . . . advice for your meeting today with Mr. White?”

“Advice?” Alexandra studied her expression, unable to decide whether she saw warning in the woman’s features—or amusement. “No, Mrs. Chastain, he didn’t. Is . . . there something you think I should know?”

The secretary’s eyes narrowed. “Have you ever known someone who speaks their mind without fully thinking it through? Or they might think it through, realize they shouldn’t say anything, and then do it anyway? Someone who has no qualms whatsoever about stating the truth even when the truth might be better left unstated?”

A layer of her confidence evaporating, Alexandra nodded.

“Well, that’s Mr. White.” Mrs. Chastain smiled. “On a good day.”

She continued down the hallway, and Alexandra knew she should follow. Yet she couldn’t help but glance behind her at the door through which she’d entered moments earlier. Then she thought of David and the conviction she’d felt in the middle of the night and turned back.

She followed Mrs. Chastain down the narrow, shadowy corridor until the woman paused by an open door backlit with sunlight.

“Mr. White, Miss Alexandra Jamison to see you, sir.”

Inside a cramped office stood a man, book in hand, beside an open window. He was a very tall man. Six foot three at least, his large, lanky frame appearing even more so when backlit by the sun.

“Come in, Miss Jamison.” Intent on his book, Mr. George White did not look up. “I understand you’re here on President Spence’s

recommendation to speak with me about a teaching position. However, he and I have not spoken in recent days, so I was unaware that we had an appointment. Which, of course, we do not actually have because you did not make one. So please come in and swiftly state your business. I have a class to teach shortly.”

Though she'd been warned, Alexandra was still taken aback by the man's direct manner, which sounded even harsher in the clip of his crisp New York accent. She stared at his profile, waiting for him to look at her.

When he didn't, she glanced at Mrs. Chastain, hoping to take a cue from the woman after such a welcome. But the secretary only chuckled, her expression saying she found the man's behavior not the least surprising. Then wordlessly she retreated down the hall.

The overloud *ticktock* of a clock from somewhere inside the office seemed to echo Mr. White's command for swiftness, so Alexandra stepped inside. A straight-back chair waited not two strides from her, yet she dared not presume to sit without invitation.

Based upon President Spence's heartfelt plea for teachers, she'd expected a warm, even exuberant welcome, not this cool reception, and her nerves inched up another degree.

A framed wedding photograph on the wall—of a slightly younger Mr. White along with his wife, Alexandra presumed—gave a hint as to what the man looked like in more congenial moments. Something she wasn't certain she'd ever see.

She cleared her throat. “In speaking with President Spence, I learned about what you're doing here at Fisk University. I'd heard of the school before, of course, but I've never had any personal dealings with the institution.” *Institution* seemed too fancy a word to describe a campus composed of old army barracks gone to rack and ruin, but she tended to exaggerate when she was nervous. “I understand you have nearly two thousand students enrolled here, Mr. White, with more seeking admittance. That's quite impressive.”

His attention remained on his book, and the silence lengthened.

The clock's rhythmic *tick tick tick* sliced away at her confidence. "Something else the president and I discussed last night after the concert was—"

"You attended the concert?" Mr. White looked up at last, his dark bushy eyebrows framing piercing blue eyes. "What was your opinion?"

She hesitated.

"About the singers, Miss Jamison. What did you think?"

"I-I thought they were . . . exquisite. Tremendous."

"And your favorite part of the cantata?"

Her smile came easily. "By far, sir, it was the duet 'Who calls—'"

"—my parting soul from death.' Yes, yes, that's a splendid piece. Handel outdid himself. And Miss Porter is a tremendous talent."

"The soprano? Yes, sir, she is indeed."

He clapped his book shut. "How did you hear about the concert? Did you receive a flyer? A personal invitation?"

"Actually, neither of those, Mr. White. I was out walking and happened upon it."

He eyed her, nodding. "Continue stating your business. Except"—he gestured—"please move ahead to your teaching experience."

The man was precisely as Mrs. Chastain had pegged him, which could actually be considered refreshing, if framed in the right perspective. At least Alexandra didn't have to guess what he was thinking.

"I'm an experienced tutor, Mr. White. I was schooled by my governess until the age of twelve, and from there I studied on my own—"

"Any advanced education? College, perhaps?"

She hesitated. "No, sir. But I am very well read and—"

"Why do you desire to teach at Fisk University, Miss Jamison?"

He crossed to his desk, his eyes never leaving hers, and eased

his generous frame into the worn leather chair, the aging springs squeaking in protest.

“Well, sir . . . I . . .”

“It’s a straightforward question, Miss Jamison. One we ask of every instructor who applies to teach here.”

With thick black hair that joined a coarse, heavy beard and mustache, George White possessed commanding features that made an already tempestuous-looking brow appear more so. Even if she hadn’t known who he was—the treasurer of Fisk University, and the school’s music director—she would have guessed him to be a man who held a position of authority and influence.

She straightened, her damp chemise sticking to her back. “I’m here because I desire to help the freedmen in their new lives. I believe we have a responsibility to teach any and all who would like to learn. Up until recently, the freedmen have not been afforded that opportunity. And I would like to help change that.”

His brow furrowed slightly. “Continue.”

“As I told President Spence, I have an excellent command of a basic education, and even beyond in some subjects. I can teach spelling and reading. I can instruct students in sums and penmanship, in American and European history. And I’m well read in literary works and poetry. I have a fairly good command of French and German. And I know some Latin, though it’s rusty from disuse, I’m sure. But I assure you, my utmost desire in wanting to teach here is to do whatever I can to ease what must still be a difficult transition for new students entering Fisk, and to share what knowledge I possess with them.”

She punctuated her response with a smile, which went unreciprocated.

“Those are altruistic goals, Miss Jamison. Quite noble. But we must be careful when we adopt the view that we are humbling ourselves to help someone less fortunate.”

She swallowed to moisten an overdry throat. “Sir, if I sound as though I’m having to humble myself, it’s only because I’m—”

“Adjusting to this new world. Yes, I’ve heard that explanation before.”

“But, sir, that’s not what—”

He raised his hand in a manner worthy of the most venerated schoolmaster, and she knew better than to interrupt again.

“Regardless of what a great many people in this part of the country believe about the freedmen, Miss Jamison, they possess keen minds and a thirst for knowledge. They want to better themselves, no differently from you or me. And they are worthy of those pursuits, madam, not because you and I deem them so, but because God Almighty does.”

“Yes, Mr. White. I’m attempting to—”

“Allow me to share a bit of wisdom with you, Miss Jamison. And in doing so, to clear up a common misconception among many Southerners, and Nashville society specifically.” Gaze unrelenting, he continued with nary a breath. “Every scholar here at Fisk is educated in multiple branches of study—in languages, science, mathematics, literature, history. Our students, both the very young and older, excel in their educational pursuits, and advance far beyond a basic education. That is why, in fact, we usually do not hire teachers who do not possess some level of formal preparatory education. However, we do make exceptions. And though I commend you, Miss Jamison, for your willingness to teach at Fisk University, it is imperative that our instructors possess the proper motivation behind that desire. For instance, it would not be in Fisk’s best interest to hire someone who feels as though they have a debt to repay. Or who pities the freedmen. Or, for that matter, has something to prove to society . . . or to their closest family members, perhaps.”

His gaze deepened, and Alexandra wondered if he was privy to her personal situation. But . . . no, he couldn’t be. Could he?

“Such ambition would be self-centered,” he continued. “And in the long run would not serve our scholars or Fisk’s reputation well. Would you agree?”

Feeling at once vindicated, yet also guilty as charged, she nodded. "I would wholeheartedly, sir."

He smiled then, and it was a most pleasant expression. "As I have had to tell others who have come with less than honorable intentions—not that I am questioning yours in this manner, mind you—our scholars here have no need of a white deliverer. And they already share a common faith in our Savior." He laughed softly. "And we are not him. All we desire are teachers who are willing to teach people who want to learn and who deserve no less than our very best."

Liking this man more than she would have thought possible awhile earlier, Alexandra smiled. "I appreciate your sharing that with me, Mr. White, and I can assure you—"

"You *cannot* go back there, sir! *Please! Sir!*"

Mrs. Chastain's authoritative voice carried down the hallway, as did the heavy pounding of footsteps.