

A BELMONT MANSION NOVEL • 2

*A Beauty
So Rare*

TAMERA
ALEXANDER



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Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, King James Version.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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For my readers, who not only take these journeys with me,
but who add such joy and beauty to my own.



“It is only with the heart that one can see clearly,
for the most essential things are invisible to the eye.”

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Preface

*M*ost of the novel you're about to read is fictional, though there is plenty of real history and people woven throughout. For instance, there really is a Belmont Mansion in Nashville, built in 1853, that still stands today and that welcomes your visit. And Mrs. Adelia Acklen, a character in the novel, is the dynamic, born-before-her-time woman who lived there.

In addition to Adelia Acklen, many of the other characters in the novel were inspired by real people who lived during that time—people who lived and worked at Belmont. But the characters' personalities and actions as depicted in this story are of my own imagination and should be construed as such.

The first time I stepped across the threshold of Belmont Mansion and learned about Adelia and her extraordinary personality and life, I knew I wanted to write stories that included her, her magnificent Belmont estate, and this crucial time in our nation's history. I invite you to join me as we open the door to history once again and step into another time and place.

Thank you for entrusting your time to me. It's a weighty investment, one I treasure, and that I never take for granted.

Tamera

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Prologue

DECEMBER 15, 1864

A CONFEDERATE FIELD HOSPITAL SOME DISTANCE FROM THE
LINE OF BATTLE

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Eleanor Braddock startled when the soldier grabbed her hand, his grip surprisingly strong, his palm slicked with blood, sweat, and war. With eyes clenched tight, he held on to her as though she were the last person on earth. Which for him . . . she was.

From habit, she searched the left pocket of the soldier's uniform for his name, but the material—bloodied gray and soaked clean through—had been ripped to shreds by a cannon blast, much like the rest of him. She was grateful he'd been unconscious moments earlier when the surgeon examined him. He'd been spared the brusque shake of the doctor's head.

“Nurse . . .”

His gaze sought hers, and against the distant barrage of rifle and cannon fire, Eleanor steeled herself for the question she knew was forthcoming. No matter how many times she was forced to answer, it never got any easier to tell a man he was about to die.

And neither did watching it happen.

“Yes?” she said softly, not bothering to correct his misassumption about her medical training, or lack thereof.

“Could you tell me—” He coughed, and his bearded chin shook

from the cold or pain, likely both. A gurgling sound bubbled up inside his throat. “Did we . . . take the hill?”

Surprised that he asked of the battle and not his life, and touched by the strained hope behind his query, a tender knot formed in Eleanor’s throat. “Yes,” she answered without hesitation, having not the least clue which army held the upper hand in the battle. All she knew was that countless men—fathers, sons, husbands . . . *brothers*—were being slaughtered a short distance away. And this man deserved to die with a semblance of peace, believing that his life had counted for something. “Yes . . . you did.” She tried to smile. “And General Lee will be so pleased.”

Traces of pride but mostly relief shone in the soldier’s eyes before they drifted shut. He fought for breath, each one exacting a price, and she prayed that his struggle would soon cease. But she’d seen men with similar wounds linger for hours, drifting in and out of agony.

He was no mere youth—into his thirties, at least—and his feet overhung the cot by several inches. Both boots were worn clean through at the toe. She’d detected the hint of a brogue in his voice, an accent from far away, something she’d always admired.

She studied him, wondering what his life had been like before the war, and how he’d come to be on a bleak battlefield in the middle of Tennessee. His cheekbones were especially prominent, and she wished she had some of the beef tea she’d made for the men last evening, as she did nearly every night. No matter that she watered it down to stretch as far as possible, the men always made quick work of it. “*We ain’t tasted nothin’ this good in months,*” they’d say, draining their cups.

She’d always enjoyed cooking, but seeing her patients eat, even that little bit, did her heart good in ways she couldn’t have imagined before serving injured and dying men.

She shifted her weight, and the soldier’s grip tightened.

He grimaced and clenched his jaw, moaning, as though determined not to cry out like the others.

Empty bottles of laudanum on a nearby table caught her eye. She wished she had something to give him, but the last of the pain medication, including the morphine, chloroform, and ether, had been administered that morning, prior to them learning that the expected shipment of medical supplies wouldn’t be arriving—thanks to the Federal Army.

She could make sense of the interception of ammunition and currency, or even provisions—but medical supplies? Even war should have certain rules.

Cannon fire thundered in the distance, and an icy wind knifed the canvased confines of the hospital tent. The moans and cries of the wounded and dying rent the air, and Eleanor shivered against the chill of it all. Though it was absurd, she was certain she could feel the earth groaning, straining beneath her feet, wondering, as she did, how much longer this insanity could continue. Surely, this was what hell was like. . . .

And yet, as she thought of the dark calamity of madness occurring just over the hill, she knew she'd only seen the outskirts of hell in these tents.

How had she lived for twenty-six years without realizing how precious and fragile life was? And how tenuous its peace. She'd never considered whether she'd squandered her life to that point. But when contrasting the experiences of her whole life with what she'd seen and done in recent months . . . *squandered* seemed a painfully appropriate term.

Her focus moved down the row of soldiers lining both sides of the tent. How many more would die before the two sides determined enough blood had been spilled?

When she'd first read the advertisement in the Murfreesboro newspaper soliciting "plain-looking women between the ages of 35 and 50" to volunteer in field hospitals and surgical tents, she'd wondered whether her age would prevent them from accepting her. But with the need for volunteers so great—and the first requirement met without a doubt—she'd quickly been accepted.

The only other point that had drawn a raised brow from her was the line "no specialized medical training or experience required." But it hadn't taken her long to understand why, and to realize that she'd grossly underestimated the task for which she'd volunteered.

She'd only known that after seeing her brother enlist along with most of her male relatives and friends, she couldn't sit at home and do nothing—especially with their aging father championing the Confederacy as he did.

She briefly closed her eyes, fatigue and worry joining forces. With stinging clarity, she imagined her younger brother lying somewhere on a battlefield, wounded, cold, and alone, the precious lifeblood pouring out of him. And a chill stole through her.

If anything happened to Teddy, she didn't know how she would bear it. Or how their father would hold up beneath the weight of such a loss. Though he possessed the physical strength of a man half his

age and at six foot four—only five inches taller than she—still stood ramrod straight, her father’s mind was slipping. Her mother’s passing, nearly a decade ago—God rest her soul—had been especially difficult for him. He’d endured a long period of grief, mourning her passing. But in the past few months Eleanor had noticed a marked change in his memory and in his ability to recall recent details.

A sudden gust of wind thrashed the tent, and for a second, Eleanor feared the force would uproot it at the stakes.

Above the distant rumble of battle, the stomp of horses’ hooves and the creak of wagon wheels announced the arrival of another ambulance.

The other two volunteers in the tent moved to assist with unloading the wounded men. Eleanor knew she needed to do the same—and would receive a reprimand from Dr. Rankin if he saw her lingering overlong with any one patient. But thinking of Teddy, of the possibility of him being somewhere like this—frightened, wounded, and alone—she couldn’t force herself to leave the soldier’s side.

Even if he were to let go of her hand—which he hadn’t.

“Most of what a person fears never comes to fruition, Eleanor.” Her father’s counsel returned from years past, and she knew if he were there, he would tell her not to be worried about imaginings. *“The mind can be a deceitful thing. You must be sensible, daughter, not given to the worrisome nature that so often befalls your gender. Focus on what you can see, not on what your imagination tells you is there.”*

She knew from experience he was right, but her imaginings were sometimes so powerful they were hard to resist. And knowing a tiny percentage of fears actually *did* come true fed the seed of worry. Surely this makeshift hospital ward bore proof of that.

“The doc . . .” came a gruff whisper.

She looked down to see the soldier watching her again.

“Would you be knowin’ wh—” He gritted his teeth, his already pale complexion growing more so. A moment passed before he spoke. “When will he . . . be comin’ by?”

Dispersing her helplessness, Eleanor forced a steadiness to her voice. The training she and the other women in her group had received had been brief but clear, especially in regard to the dying. *“Don’t ply a soldier with questions when he’s near the end. You’re there to be a solace. And above all, if he asks about his condition, always tell him the truth.”* Eleanor wholeheartedly agreed with that last principle—in theory.

But theory and practice were two very different things.

“Actually . . .” She tried to frame the truth gently. “The doctor already

has been by.” She squeezed his hand. “I’m so sorry, but . . . nothing can be done.”

Slowly the soldier’s gaze narrowed. Then with effort, and a hint of disbelief, he lifted his head and peered down at his battered body. Reality forced the air from his lungs, and Eleanor gently eased his head back down.

A single tear slipped from the corner of his eye, and his shoulders began to shake. Yet he didn’t make a sound.

She wanted to tell him it was all right if he cried out, that there was no shame in it. But something kept the words from forming, told her that whispering such a thing wouldn’t be a comfort to him. And she wanted to be of comfort.

If only there were something she could give him to ease his passing, something to help cut the—

A pitcher of water and a tin cup on the tray beside the empty medicine bottles caught her eye. And an idea formed.

Swiftly, before reason could dissuade her—or her conscience could offer argument—she removed her hand from his, poured some water into the cup, and tipped an empty bottle of laudanum into it as though mixing the two. She made certain the soldier could see her—hoping no one else did—and swirled the contents of the cup, then held it to his mouth.

“Here,” she whispered, summoning a cautious tone. “But only a little. It’s mighty powerful.”

His effort to gulp the contents tugged at her heart. Gasping, he worked to swallow every drop. Too quickly, though, and he coughed some back up. She wiped the residue from his mouth and beard. The cloth came away bloodied.

“Oh, thank you, lass. Thank you,” he whispered, over and over, as though she’d given him the elixir of life.

For the longest time, he stared overhead, his breathing labored, his body racked with shakes. Eleanor stood close beside him, waiting for a telling flicker in his eyes that would reveal he recognized what she’d done. Or had tried to do.

Then gradually . . . the sharp lines of pain in his features began to relax, and to her amazement and disbelief, the tension in his body eased. How right her father had been—the mind could be a deceitful thing.

The soldier took a breath, holding his chest as he did, and emotion glazed his eyes. “I wish . . . I’d done better,” he ground out. “I w-wish that—” His voice broke, and he reached again for her hand.

“Shhh . . .” Eleanor leaned close. “It’s going to be all right.”

“No . . .” The muscles in his neck corded tight. “I need to be sayin’ this, lass . . . while I still have me breath.”

Giving him the silence he needed, she brushed the hair back from his forehead in a manner that would have felt far too intimate months earlier. But war had a way of rewriting etiquette.

“I . . . I wish . . .” Tears traced his temples. His expression grew more intent, purposeful. “I wish I’d . . . done for you . . . like I said I would, Mary girl. Like I promised . . . ’fore I left.” His sigh held longing. “Every day . . . in my mind, I been—”

He choked on a sob and reached out as though trying to touch her face, but Eleanor knew she wasn’t the woman he was seeing anymore. She cradled his hand between hers, and his tears came afresh.

“What?” she gently coaxed, seeing the pain in his features and thinking that if he stated his regret aloud, it might be lessened.

He fumbled with the hem of his coat, and when she realized his intent, she helped him pull a small bundle from his pocket. Carefully, she unwrapped it.

An embroidered handkerchief, damp with blood. A rose pressed between its folds.

“I been carryin’ this with me, my sweet Mary,” he whispered. “Just like you asked.” His lips trembled. His blue eyes smiled. “I still can’t believe you’re mine, darlin’. That you said yes . . . to the likes of me.”

Eleanor blinked, and only then did she feel the moisture on her lashes. She’d never minded the sight of blood. She’d assisted in the surgical tent, where the large wooden table ran red for days on end, and she’d watched wagon after wagon lumber away, loaded with amputated limbs. But this . . .

Listening to final whispers, to the contents of a man’s heart poured out to a stranger . . . this she couldn’t do without crying. Whoever this woman—this *Mary girl*—was, she prayed the woman knew how well she was loved.

Or . . . had been loved.

Not doubting herself at all now, Eleanor leaned close so he would be sure to hear her. “I’m *proud* to be yours, and always have been,” she said, trying to imagine what it would be like to be so loved by a man. But she couldn’t.

She looked again at the handkerchief, thinking about how brief life truly was and about all the things she hadn’t yet done—she’d never been kissed, much less married or given birth to children. She’d never

traveled outside Tennessee or seen the ocean's tide roll in and out. Growing up, she'd never held a boy's hand, other than Teddy's, and she'd never lain awake all night beneath the stars to watch the sun's journey begin again. Countless other *never had's* flitted through her mind, and yet . . . how distant and unimportant they seemed now, in comparison to the world closing in around them.

"You're proud to be mine," he whispered, as if relishing the thought even while struggling to accept it. "It's too late, I know, Mary girl, but . . ." Deep furrows knit his brow. "If I could, I'd . . ." He grimaced and sucked in a breath.

Her chest aching with the weight of this man's regret, Eleanor pressed the handkerchief into his palm. "What?" she whispered, squeezing his hand, feeling him slipping away. "What would you do?"

He peered into her eyes. "Oh, my precious Mary . . . I'd do like I promised you and—"

A blast of winter shook the canvas walls of the tent. Only, Eleanor felt the ground shake this time too, and she realized it wasn't the wind.

"Miss Braddock!"

She turned to see Dr. Rankin racing toward her, chaos in the tent behind him.

"Quickly!" he shouted. "Get to the ambulances! Federal troops have taken the hill!"

A high-pitched whistle pierced the air overhead, and in the brief second it took her to place the sound . . . the world exploded. Dr. Rankin grabbed her shoulder to steady her. Smoke filled the tent. The acrid burn of gunpowder thickened the air.

"Go, Miss Braddock! All volunteers to the ambulances. Now!"

"But . . . we can't leave the men!"

"We're moving those we can." He turned. "But if we don't leave soon, we'll be dead alongside them!"

Only then did she realize . . . the soldier had let go of her hand.

She looked back at him, saw his slack jaw, the dissonant peace in his expression. . . .

Hearing the volley of gunfire, she hastily touched his cheek, hoping his regret over whatever it was he wished he'd done in this life would somehow be lessened in the next. She turned to go—

And remembered.

Frantic, she checked the soldier's hand for the handkerchief. A volley of gunfire made her flinch. His hand was empty. Wanting to keep the handkerchief made no sense, but knowing how much it had meant

to him, it seemed wrong to simply leave it behind to be trampled and forgotten.

Finally, she spotted the bloodstained cloth on the floor and grabbed it. But the rose was gone. Never partial to flowers, she dismissed it at first, but quickly thought again of the soldier having carried his Mary girl's rose into battle.

Heart racing, and hearing the blast of cannon fire explode outside, she knelt in the dirt, feeling foolish as she searched, telling herself it was useless. She needed to be—

There. Her palm closed around the delicate pressed flower, the petals coming loose in her grip. She positioned the flower carefully into the handkerchief and then into her pocket. As she turned to leave, she saw the remaining wounded in the tent.

So many . . .

She spotted a soldier struggling to stand—a man Dr. Rankin had scheduled for surgery—and with strength she didn't know she had, she pulled him to his feet, draped his arm around her shoulders, and half dragged, half carried him to the ambulance. Someone from behind picked her up and shoved her into the wagon beside him just as a second shrill scream sounded overhead.

Eleanor covered her head and braced for the impact, thinking of Teddy and praying he wasn't dead, and promising herself that if she got through this alive—if this wretched war ever ended—she would get as far away from death and dying as she could, and she would do a better job at living than she'd done before. She would make her life count for something.

And she would find that soldier's widow, his Mary girl, whoever she was, and tell her what he'd said. And ask her what he'd meant.



SEPTEMBER 2, 1868
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Eleanor knew in her heart that what she was doing was right—so why was her heart fighting her on it *now*, when the day had finally arrived.

Seated across from her in the carriage, her father stared out the window, solemn, hands clasped in his lap, so different from moments earlier when they'd first entered the city of Nashville. He'd seemed almost childlike in his enthusiasm as the carriage carried them through the heart of town.

She'd asked the driver to stop by the post office first. It wouldn't take her but a moment inside. She preferred to have the signed contract in hand for her *meeting* later that afternoon, and the building owner with whom she'd corresponded in recent weeks had indicated he would leave it for her there.

"I'm going there to rest," her father said softly, his tone bordering more on question than certainty.

Knowing what he meant, Eleanor nodded. "Yes . . . Papa, that's right. And it's only for a short time." She coerced a smile to reinforce the statement, praying the doctor's expectations were correct.

Exactly when her role as daughter had shifted to that of caretaker, she couldn't say. But as she looked across the carriage at the strapping giant of a man—whom she favored in more ways than was likely best for a daughter to do—a place deep inside her yearned to again be that little girl who, when she looked into her father's warm brown eyes, knew that everything in the world would be right. And safe. And would make sense.

But that little girl was gone. And so was her father.

The carriage slowed, and Eleanor spotted the post office ahead. “Papa, I need to run a quick errand. But I won’t be long.”

He glanced out the window. “Perhaps I should come with you. I could help—”

“That’s not necessary,” she said a little too quickly, and regretted it. She reached for his book. “Why not stay here and continue reading where we left off. Then we’ll discuss the passage once we’re on our way again.”

Not looking convinced, he studied the book in his hands, then finally nodded. “You *will* come back . . . won’t you?”

“Of course I’ll come back, Papa.” She squeezed his hand in affirmation, but the guilt already nipping her heels took a firm bite.

The carriage driver opened the door, and Eleanor hurried into the post office. She paused inside and looked back to see her father reading, his lips moving as he did. She hadn’t wanted to risk him coming with her, not when considering the spells that frequently overcame him these days. His temperament was so unpredictable.

Patronage was heavier than she’d imagined, and the queue reached almost to the door. She glanced at the chatelaine watch affixed to her bodice. She had a few moments to spare before her father’s scheduled appointment, and she *needed* that contract in hand.

The line moved more slowly than she would have liked, and after a couple of moments, she glanced out the front window to the carriage and stilled, not seeing her father anymore.

She craned her neck to one side. Perhaps he’d changed seats. He’d insisted on that twice already on their ride from Murfreesboro that morning, saying it was bad luck to ride in one direction for an entire trip. Then she saw the door.

Ajar.

She raced back outside to find the driver still atop the carriage but the carriage—empty. And her father nowhere in sight.

“Armstead!” she called up, searching the street. “My father. He’s gone.”

The driver appeared at her side, bewildered. “I’m sorry, Miss Braddock. Last thing I knew he was in here.”

“You go that way.” She pointed. “And if you find him first, please . . . try not to upset him. We don’t want to cause a scene.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Eleanor started in the opposite direction, peering inside stores and

businesses as she went, trying not to think about her father's recent antics or what might happen if someone attempted to confront him and he became upset.

The high-pitched laughter drew her attention first. Then she saw him. Across the street. Peering in the window of a dry-goods store.

Dodging a freight wagon and another carriage, she managed to reach the other side, but not before her father had entered the store and taken a spool of ribbon from the shelf, along with a pair of scissors.

He spotted her. "Eleanor! Isn't it pretty? I thought you would enjoy this. You like wearing ribbons in your hair?"

She managed to get the scissors from him, but he stuffed the spool into his pocket.

"Papa, it's lovely but . . . I don't wear ribbons anymore, remember?" Eleanor retrieved the spool and returned it to the shelf. Then she glimpsed a man, presumably the proprietor, headed straight for them. Consternation lined the man's face.

He glared at her father, then her. "May I help you?"

Embarrassed, Eleanor tried not to show it. "We were just looking, sir. And now—" She took her father by the arm. "If you'll excuse us, please."

Feeling the proprietor's attention on her back, Eleanor hurried outside, grateful to see Armstead walking toward them. With his assistance, she managed to get her father back to the carriage without further incident.

"I'll watch him this time, Miss Braddock," the driver insisted. "You go on inside, ma'am, if you want."

Considering what awaited her that afternoon, Eleanor felt she had little choice.



In a hurry, Marcus Geoffrey exhaled, questioning yet again his desire to experience the life of the common man. The queue inside the post office nearly reached the door, and he estimated at least a ten-minute wait. It seemed patience was a virtue he was destined to learn.

The door to the post office opened behind him, and an older woman entered, slightly stooped and tottering. At the same time, the wind gusted and blew the door back. The woman reached for it . . . and stumbled. But Marcus caught her and stopped the door before it slammed back against the wall.

“Oh, thank you, sir.” She covered his hand on her arm, regaining her balance. “I’m not as spry as I used to be.”

“Who among us is, madam?”

She gave him an appreciative look, and Marcus—thinking of his own dear mother, gone long before her time—motioned for the woman to move ahead of him in line. He withdrew a pad of paper and pen from his suit-coat pocket and used the opportunity to sketch an idea for the warehouse his crew was renovating. It had come to him earlier that morning and he hadn’t yet had time to—

“Yes, that’s correct. The gentleman said he would leave it here for me,” a female stated from somewhere in front of him. “Would you mind checking again, please?”

Marcus slowly raised his head, curious about the creature to whom the beguiling voice belonged.

“Yes, sir,” she continued. “At least that was my understanding.”

Marcus looked toward the counter and spotted the woman—or rather, the explosion of *pink* with a woman swathed somewhere beneath—speaking with the mail clerk. Her voice bore the accent customary to the people of Nashville but had a satisfying, almost sultry, quality to it. Like the touch of a breeze on the back of one’s neck on a hot summer day. But the woman’s ensemble . . .

Her jacket and skirt, well tailored, stood out in marked contrast to the hues of black, gray, and dark blues worn by most of the other patrons.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but there’s nothing for you here by that description. Nor do we have record of having sent anything like that to Belmont.”

She sighed, shoulders sagging.

Even viewing her only from behind and without benefit of an introduction, Marcus knew who she was. Personal business took him to her aunt’s estate nearly every day, and he’d overheard Mrs. Adelia Acklen Cheatham speaking of the woman’s arrival, expressing an eagerness for her to make everyone’s acquaintance at Belmont.

But having met more than his fair share of wealthy, well-bred, overly eager, husband-seeking women in his life—despite this one being taller than most and the niece of the richest woman in America—he had no intention of pursuing her acquaintance, nor encouraging it in any way.

If she attempted to gain his attention, he would be kind, he decided, even affable—considering Adelia Acklen Cheatham was his benefactress, of sorts. But beyond that, he would firmly, yet gently, rebuff any flirtations on the young woman’s part.

She turned then and headed straight for him.

He summoned an air of practiced nonchalance, the words replaying in his mind . . . *Firmly, but gently.*

The woman didn't so much as *blink* in his direction as she passed.

Feeling aptly put in his place—and not overly fond of the feeling, Marcus watched her exit the post office. He wasn't accustomed to being ignored. Her attention was clearly focused elsewhere. He studied her as she walked toward a waiting carriage, the driver already standing by the door.

Tall and blond, she bore not the slightest resemblance to her aunt, who was a petite brunette. Even at a mature age, Adelia Cheatham was still a striking dark-haired beauty. This woman, on the other hand, while not *unattractive*, possessed less remarkable features, less delicate, to be sure. Hers held more strength. One might even describe her as handsome. And he suspected she was older than he'd first imagined—

“Sir?”

Marcus turned.

The elderly woman he'd assisted earlier was several feet ahead of him in the queue. She smiled and motioned him forward.

Feeling a little foolish, Marcus moved ahead, then chanced another look back at the window in time to see the woman climb into the waiting carriage.

It had been a long time since he'd noticed a woman who—when in such close proximity—hadn't reciprocated his *noticing*. Of course, he hadn't endeavored to gain her attention. If he had been trying, she would have noticed, he assured himself.

It meant nothing, really. After all, he'd had enough of those kind of women. And the woman he had now, he didn't want. But . . . he blew out a breath. Nothing he did would change that.

Minutes later he reached the counter.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Geoffrey.” The mail clerk greeted him, already rising from his stool. “We have something for you, sir. It arrived this morning.”

Satisfied, Marcus waited. But when he saw an envelope instead of a box or crate, his satisfaction waned. “Nothing else?” he asked.

The clerk shook his head. “That's it. I'm sorry, sir.”

Marcus managed a polite response and stepped to the side, fingering the envelope. The handstamp announced the origin of the envelope even before he read the return address. He tore open the flap and found

another envelope inside. When he saw the royal wax-embossed seal, he quickly concealed it, even as he felt an unseen noose tightening about his neck.

Never had Uncle Franz written to him, and Marcus knew only too well who had put him up to it. He started to tuck the letter away to read later but thought of his father's tenuous health, and reconsidered. Moving to a quieter section of the busy post office, he opened the letter.

His gaze fell upon the salutation and first lines of the missive, and he swiftly realized his father's health was not the issue. The letter was about something else.

To the Archduke Gerhard Marcus Gottfried von Habsburg . . .

His uncle's use of his formal name and title didn't bode well for the letter's purpose, and Marcus's gratitude for the ocean separating him from what he'd left behind—at least for a little while longer—grew one hundredfold.

His gaze edged downward, past the formal opening.

Come next June, Gerhard, the reprieve granted to you shall have expired. At that time, you shall return home according to our agreement, in order to fulfill your duties to crown and country. Those born to privilege must bear its responsibilities with integrity and honor, despite one's personal feelings and regardless of their . . .

Marcus folded the letter and slipped it back into the envelope, wishing he could dismiss a decree from his uncle—the emperor of Austria—so easily in person. He knew his uncle's speech by heart. It was one he'd heard countless times as a boy when he was third in line to the Austrian throne, behind his father and older brother.

But he'd heard it even more often in the weeks prior to leaving for America when the Austrian newspapers had reported he'd become second in line “through extenuating circumstances.”

He'd never sought the throne, nor ever considered that it might someday come to him. He still didn't believe it would happen. Not with his uncle healthy and strong, and still trying for that first son. Marcus hoped—even prayed, on occasion—that the Almighty would make fruitful that royal endeavor.

He could scarcely believe close to a year had passed since he'd left his homeland. He was still somewhat surprised his uncle and father

had agreed to his coming to America. But after Rutger's death . . . everything had changed.

He had changed.

Both his uncle and father agreed that time away would be good for him, and good for the House of Habsburg, considering the rumors that were circulating around Rutger's death. "Best you not be seen in public for a while, Gerhard," Uncle Franz had counseled. "Let the scandal calm to a simmer, then slowly dissipate to nothing, as these situations almost always do—given time and something else on which the public can chew. And by all means, if you must sow any last wild oats, do it discreetly. The last thing we need is an *American* scandal on top of this one."

His father's last letter had confirmed that Uncle Franz's prediction had held true. The rumors were subsiding. People were forgetting what had happened.

But forgetting was something Marcus could never do.

If there had been any significant political unrest in the country, his uncle and father would never have allowed him to step foot outside Europe. But with the volatile years of war behind them, and the previous year's compromise of dual monarchy with Hungary accepted, the empire was at peace. The ship was sailing smoothly, as his uncle had stated upon his departure.

Still—Marcus looked at the envelope—apparently Uncle Franz felt the need to remind him of his obligation. As if he could ever forget. He loved his country, and his family, rife with greed and ambition though its members were. It wasn't for lack of affection or honor that he eschewed the crown.

He simply didn't desire to ever rule his country. He'd seen that side of life. Now he wanted to see another.

Out on the street, Marcus breathed in the fresh air, catching a hint of fall on the breeze. He searched the thoroughfare for the carriage—and Mrs. Cheatham's niece—reliving her *snub* and feeling a tug of humor. Perhaps he *was* losing his touch with women.

Or more likely, Adelia's niece bore more resemblance to her aunt than first met the eye. He smiled. Adelia Cheatham was her own woman in every way. He'd seen her when in town before. She held her head high, looking neither to the right nor the left. She seemed impervious to social pressure.

After an appointment, he was headed to Belmont to check on his

plants in the conservatory. Perhaps while there, he would have opportunity to make the acquaintance of Adelia's niece. Purely for social reasons, of course. International relations, some might say.

He made a quick stop by his room at the boardinghouse and stowed the letter from his uncle in the cedar trunk at the foot of the bed. As he closed the lid, his hand lingered on the artfully carved woodwork. He hadn't brought much in the way of furniture when he left Austria, understandably. But leaving the trunk behind hadn't been an option.

His maternal grandfather—a humble, unassuming man—had possessed remarkable skill with a blade, a gift Marcus hadn't inherited. He ran a hand along the edges of the trunk, easily distinguishing the artistic work from the lesser-crafted attempts of a nine-year-old boy, treasuring the memory of the man who had prized spending time with his grandson above perfection.

Marcus rose, glad again that he'd brought the trunk with him. It fit well in this setting.

He'd grown accustomed to, even appreciative of, the sparse surroundings of his current living quarters, which were a far cry from the palace and his family's private residence. He could have leased or even purchased a house upon his arrival in Nashville. But that would have gone contrary to the decision he'd made before coming to this country. . . .

He intended to experience how ordinary people lived, and was learning a lot about himself in the process—not all of which he liked.

His uncle had warned him against causing a scandal in this country, but that was the last thing his uncle needed to worry about. Marcus was done with that part of his life. No more pursuing women and no more liquor—at least not in excess. No more wasting his life, as he'd come to realize he'd been doing.

Cordoning off that vein of thought, he strode in the direction of the city's courthouse, mindful of a distant pounding at the back of his head. Too much work perhaps. He was hopeful his crew renovating the textile warehouse across town would maintain their progress. They were a week ahead of schedule, and he wanted to maintain that lead.

As he walked, he searched the endless wash of cloudless blue overhead, then let his gaze trail the lush rolling hills surrounding this city, even while—in his mind's eye—he saw the snowcapped Alps of home.

Looking back over his life, he realized how much time had slipped past him, and how much of his life had been lived by another's dictate. His had been a privileged upbringing, no question, with ample

opportunities to study and learn. But also with obligations. Always, always obligations.

America's South was far more devastated from the war and its aftermath than he'd imagined, but his skills were being utilized. It was so different and *freeing* that, in rare moments, he could almost forget the life he'd left behind. He'd wanted to come to America since he was a boy, since first learning about the "thirteen brave little colonies" from his tutor. But it was only when a trusted mentor had introduced him to Luther Burbank's publications and then Marcus had met the botanist in person—and later visited his Boston nursery full of thousands of plants—that his dream had been set in motion.

However short-lived that dream might prove to be.