

The Christmas Parting

By Sherry Shindelar

December 24, 1864

Liza Mitchell drove the knife through the rutabaga and listened for horses. But not the one she most wanted to hear. The entire core band of Parker's Raiders should be there by nightfall.

Captain Duncan Parker would likely be with them, charming and persistent as always, with one goal in mind. Marriage. And slowly, he was wearing her down. She didn't love him, but his proposal had redeemed her tarnished reputation, opened doors and shelter to her where she would have otherwise been shunned, and offered her hope. Hope that the abandoned house and charred barn she'd left behind in the Shenandoah Valley would one day be a home again.

The man her heart yearned to see was the exact opposite. Her association with him had almost cost her everything.

Liza swiped her forearm across her damp brow. Evergreen boughs swung from the ceiling intermixing with bundles of sage, mint, and other herbs. The aroma of chicken boiling in the iron kettle on the hearth above a well-kindled fire blended with that of the apple pies baking in the brick oven built into the fireplace wall. Ladles dangled from hooks. Crockery of various sizes filled the work table. Abundance compared to her own barren kitchen. But it wasn't home. And the pies weren't her mother's. Her dear sweet mother. Christmases had been hard since her passing, and this year, Liza wouldn't spend the holiday with any family unless her younger brother Silas showed up with the raiders.

Fanny Blackwell sat across the scarred table grinding dried thyme leaves with a mortar and pestle. Ringlets of brown hair slipped from her snood. Rosy-cheeked, she hummed as she worked. Her husband, Lieutenant Edward Blackwell, second in command of the raiders, was coming home for the first time in three weeks.

Fanny stilled and placed a hand on her extended stomach. “The baby just kicked. Come feel.” She waved her fingers.

Liza hurried over and placed her palm against Fanny’s taut linen dress. A thump. The first baby she’d ever felt. Movement, life.

Aglow, Fanny pressed her pale hand on top of Liza’s. “This time next year, maybe you’ll be expecting, too.”

Liza jerked her hand away. Her have a baby with Duncan? *Dear God, no.* Her legs wobbled beneath the possibility.

Fanny blinked. “That troubles you?” A frown dampened her cheer. “You’re healthy and strong. I’m sure you’ll have no trouble with childbirth. You’ll make a fine mother.”

Liza drifted back to her side of the table and picked up her knife. “I just hadn’t thought about it. That’s all.”

Fanny dawdled the pestle against the ground spice, her voice gentle. “You haven’t quite forgotten that Yankee captain, have you? I heard the rumors.”

The whole lower part of the valley and half of northern Virginia had likely heard the rumors. Miss Liza Mitchell entertaining a Yankee cavalry captain, allowing him to call on her at all hours. Indecent. Only there hadn’t been anything indecent about it. Captain Ethan Cooper had never been anything but a gentleman, and he almost always brought one of his fellow officers as

a chaperone, but try telling that to the gossips or even her own kin. The fact that Ethan was a Yankee was enough for them to brand him a devil.

Dark hair, gray eyes, and a smile that warmed her through and through. In another time and another place, they might have... “That was months ago. My association with that man ended when the Yankees torched my barn and fields.”

“Surely, your captain had nothing to do with the destruction of *your* property.”

“No, but he had his hand in the burning of half a dozen barns up and down the Valley Pike. When he came calling a week later, I told him to get on his horse and never come back.”

“But?” The word dragged between them.

Laughter and carols echoed in from the parlor at the front of the house where Lieutenant Blackwell’s younger cousins were decorating the Christmas tree.

Liza studied the woman across from her. Fanny had welcomed Liza into her home and treated her like a sister. “A body’s heart doesn’t always listen to common sense, Fanny.” Her voice dipped to a strained whisper barely audible above the clunk of the blade on the wood as she sliced the carrots.

Fanny reached across the table. “I’m sure you did the right thing. Even if it doesn’t feel like it at the moment.” She smiled. “Major Parker’s a fine man. His eye is set on you. That Yankee would have taken you away from everything and everyone you’ve ever known.”

If only he’d offered to take her away. What would she have said? She probably wouldn’t have had sense enough to hop on her horse and go with him.

A bell clanged from the front yard.

“They’re here.” Fanny flew off the bench and scurried to the door.

Liza paused in mid-chop, the knife blade halfway through a carrot. Her arms tensed.

“Aren’t you coming?” Fanny beamed over her shoulder as she tugged her cloak around her belly. “I’m sure Major Parker will be anxious to see his betrothed.”

“You go on.” Liza wiped her damp hands on her apron. “I’ll finish and be out in a few minutes.”

“I bet he’s got a surprise for you.” Liza’s voice twinkled as she hurried out.

A frigid breeze wafted in as the door shut.

Surprise? Liza’s throat tightened. Fanny and Sergeant Taylor’s wife, Lydia, had been whispering about something ever since the raiders’ last visit. They’d redoubled their efforts to sew Liza a trousseau. She’d been drawn into the stitching of sheets, dish cloths, and more. Each needle prick further binding her to a path she’d not intended to complete.

Liza scooped up the chopped vegetables and added them to the kettle. They swirled around pieces of chicken before descending into the simmering broth. Happily married and barely a year older than Liza, Fanny thought every groom would love his bride like her Edward did. If only that was so.

If she could put Duncan off until the end of the war...

The door opened slightly then closed. She lifted the ladle off of its iron hook and stirred. The floor creaked behind her. Her shoulders tensed. She slowed her spoon but didn’t turn. Duncan came up alongside and rested a shoulder against the wall by the hearth. His heavy, mud-spattered coat hung open to reveal a clean shell jacket beneath with the added flourish of a red sash. Conscious of making a good impression, he’d likely stopped to change on the trail, despite the bluster and cold.

A twinge of warmth trickled through her. Since when had she become susceptible to his presence? She reached for the salt. “I hope you stomped your boots on the rug by the door.”

“I sense less than a warm welcome.” He picked up a leftover slice of carrot.

She glanced up into blue eyes and wind-burned cheeks. His blond hair fell off to the side of his forehead. Dangerous eyes, like a fox’s, full of charm but not to be trusted. “You sense right.”

“You’re as bristly as a porcupine.” He chuckled.

She rolled her eyes. “A smart man would take notice and run.”

“A smart man bides his time.” He chomped on the carrot, then nudged a strand of hair from her shoulder. A crisp scent of fresh air and pine emanated from him. “I’ve come here to claim my bride.”

The ladle slipped into the soup with a splash. “I am not your bride. I’m your betrothed.”

“I have something for you.” He patted a lump in his breast pocket.

Her mouth went dry. Surely, not a ring. She scurried to the work table to survey the scraps. With all the men here, they’d need more vegetables. She reached for an onion.

“I’ve been a patient man.” His voice dipped low as he stepped over to her. His fingertips grazed her shoulder as he caressed another strand of hair.

She flicked it away from him. “I’m trying to concentrate on your dinner.”

“Dinner can wait.” He set the onion aside, took her hand, and led her to the wooden bench on the other side of the table.

Her stomach clenched.

With a whistle under his breath, he shrugged off his outercoat and tossed it on a stool, then settled next to her. Too close. She squirmed over a couple of inches and tucked her skirt in. Her elbow bumped against the handle of the butter churn.

The corner of his mouth crooked up as he dug a small sack out of his breast pocket. It jingled as he lay the hard lump on her lap. "Open it."

Her throat tightened as she tugged on the leather drawstring and dug her fingers inside. Coins. She pulled one out. Gold. "Where? How?"

"A finder's fee." He grinned. "My men and I found a Yankee paymaster wagon. Confiscated it in the name of the Confederacy."

"The Confederacy doesn't mean you personally."

"Of course not." He shrugged, his smirk safely in place. "I only allowed each man one bag that could fit in the palms of two hands combined. The rest we took to Richmond. That's where I've been the last three weeks. I didn't want news of our success to leak out before we had the coins safely at headquarters."

"What did they have to say about your finder's fee?"

"We didn't discuss it." He puffed out his chest. "And by the way, what you have in your hand is only a sampling from my share. I have more than enough to cover your father's debt on your family's estate at Cedar Hill and restore the house and property to what they were before the war. We can even add a stone fence if you like."

She didn't dare look up. Her home. The foundation had been laid by her great-grandfather, held by her family since before the Revolutionary War. She would not be the one to lose it. If she married Duncan.

He picked up the sack and shook the coins onto her apron. Shimmering gold. Weighing against her lap. All she had to pay was her future, and her heart.

"I'm done waiting, Liza." Duncan's voice grew husky as he placed his hand over hers on top of the coins. "Every time I ride out on a mission, there's no guarantee I'll live to return."

No, not yet. Beneath her dress, sweat dampened her chemise.

His fingers clasped hers. “We share family connections, traditions, a love for the land, loyalty to Virginia, a heart for adventure. You intrigue me like no woman ever has. We are friends. Many people marry with much less cause.”

“If we are friends, you’ll wait until I’m ready.”

“I’m a man.” He touched his other hand to her trembling lips. “And men cannot live forever on maybe-somedays and tidbits of kisses.”

How had he managed to cinch the chain of betrothal around her so tight?

“And you.” He bent closer to her ear. His warm breath smelled of mint. “You think more highly of me, and are far more attracted to me than you care to admit.”

“You flatter yourself.” She tugged on her hand.

But he held it firm. “The color of your cheeks, the rapid rise and fall of your bosom say differently.”

“A blush or a bit of nervousness doesn’t imply undying devotion.”

He cocked an eyebrow. The windburn on his cheeks and the crinkles at his lids intensified the cold blue of his irises. “I’m not looking for undying devotion yet. Attraction and commitment will do for now.” His voice turned sharp, his lips inches from hers. “If you try to put off this wedding, there is only one reason. Are you willing to turn your back on everything and everyone you’ve ever known for a ghost?”

Behind them, the soup bubbled in the kettle. Too much heat. She needed to stir the broth.

His breath sounded in her ear as he drew her closer. “I will be faithful to you.”

If only she could believe that. If only he was the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. She pressed lightly against his chest. “I can’t—”

His lips conquered her words, her breath. Her strength melted as his palm shifted beneath her hair, and his other arm moved to the middle of her back, pressing her tight against him.

Her lips became his— an image of dark hair, not blond, and gray eyes not blue flickered through her mind— for one long, insane moment, and then another before she reeled in her senses, jabbed her elbows between them and broke away, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth.

The soup was boiling. She turned and grabbed two potholders, dropped one, picked it up and prayed her trembling hands could manage the kettle as she moved it from the flame.

He stepped behind her. “We’ll have a Christmas wedding. The preacher will be here tomorrow evening to marry us. The following day, we’ll travel to a cabin I found for us. After the war, we’ll live at Cedar Hill. We’ll fix it up finer than ever. I welcome the day we can climb Blue Mountain and look down on what is ours without a Yankee locust in sight.”

The heat of the kettle handles soaked through the worn pot holders and stung her hands.

He kneaded the top of her shoulders. His lips brushed the back of her head. “Either you’re at the altar on Christmas, or you’ll never see me again.”

His hands dropped away, and his footsteps clomped on the hard stone as he headed out the door.

The striking of his soles to the rock sounded like a drumbeat calling her, not to a marriage of love, but to a funeral for hope.

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Captain Ethan Cooper paced the length of the requisitioned cabin. Two cots, one for him and one for Lieutenant Nick Samson, lined the walls. A crude table with two chairs, a small stove, a portable writing desk, and a few hardtack crates completed the furnishings. A bugle call blared across the fields where the brigade had set up winter quarters on the outskirts of Winchester.

Ethan halted. The Christmas Eve service would start soon.

Christmas without Liza. In the spring as he'd secretly courted her, he'd dreamed of her sitting by his hearth someday, that they'd share Christmas and every day for the rest of their lives once the war ended. Foolish dream. She was rooted to her home with the tenacity of an oak, a home in a valley where he'd be more likely to receive a bullet in the back than be welcomed even after the war.

Goodness knows Liza hadn't wasted any time finding another fellow to keep company with. Ethan snatched the informant's scribbled note off the table and crunched it in his fist. Liza Mitchell was engaged to Captain Duncan Parker of the infamous Parker's Rangers. The man was a burr in the backside of every Federal cavalryman in the Shenandoah Valley. Nothing more than a glorified pirate.

Ethan jerked open the stove and threw the paper in. Early in their courtship, Liza had mentioned she'd known the scoundrel since childhood, but she'd said she wanted nothing to do with the prideful, arrogant braggart. Obviously, something had changed since she'd parted company with Ethan. Was she doing it out of revenge? Or perhaps desperation? What if she'd genuinely given her heart to the man? Ethan's throat tightened.

The cabin door burst open. Kepi scrunched down on his head, Nick stomped in. Moisture dripped from his boots. His upturned shell jacket collar scraped against his ears and the three-day-old stubble which covered his cheeks.

“What are you still doing here, Cooper? I agreed to attend a church service for the first time in a year, and you’re dragging your feet?” Nick dug a rolled cigarette from his pocket. “Don’t tell me you’re still moping around about Liza. If she’s willing to settle for that two-bit renegade, she deserves her fate.”

Ethan glared at his best friend. “When I need your advice, Samson, I’ll ask for it. After all, your namesake from the Bible wasn’t exactly the wisest gent when it came to womenfolk.”

Nick rolled his eyes and crossed to the stove, leaving muddy slush in his wake. “Thankfully, I wasn’t named for that long-haired muscle man.” He lowered the end of his cigarette to the flame. “But if it makes you feel any better, and if you can win the major’s approval, I’d be happy to ride out of here the morning after Christmas to find Parker and end his raiding days.”

“That’d suit me fine.” Ethan scrubbed his hand over his face. The major should be pleased with their eagerness to capture one of the most wanted men in northern Virginia. What would Miss Liza Mitchell have to say about that?

Another bugle call. The service was starting.

“We’re going to be late.” Ethan snatched the cigarette from Nick’s hand

“You’re treading on dangerous ground, Captain.” Nick narrowed his eyes.

Ethan mashed the end into an ash-filled metal lid. “Just helping you get ready for the service.”

The wall tent, the size of two hospital tents hooked together, exuded light and warmth as Ethan and Nick stepped beneath the canvas. Evergreen boughs decorated the poles and the ceiling. Lanterns swung from ropes. Candles flicked around the podium where a civilian dressed in a black frock coat waved his arms and directed the singing. Four or five hundred voices of battle-hardened men picked up the notes of “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.” Ethan, followed by Nick, shuffled to a row near the middle with a couple of empty spots. Standing room only, no seating available, except for the lucky ones in the front where someone had brought in logs.

The aromas of wood smoke, lamp oil, and cedar mingled with the less favorable odors of damp wool and unwashed bodies.

Ethan removed his slouch hat and dug his New Testament out of his great coat pocket. He lifted his voice with the others for “The First Noel,” “O Holy Night,” and “Silent Night.” The country’s fourth Christmas at war. So many who had taken up arms or manned the home front had not lived to see this one. Surely, it would be the last.

Where was Liza on this cold winter night? The memory of her charred barn and fields plagued his dreams. The hate in her eyes— no, not hate— anger the last time he saw her. Other memories tortured his sleep on occasion as well, but he wouldn’t think of those this evening. Surely, the Lord understood what a man had to do in war, didn’t He?

The Lord came to earth as a baby. He left the heavenly realms for a manger. To bring grace, mercy, and forgiveness, undeserved and so badly needed. *Because He loved us.* Ethan’s swallow stuck in his throat. *Hope.* He closed his eyes as the light of it brightened his soul.

The trumpets struck up “Joy to the World.” Beside him, Nick crumpled his forage cap and stumbled through the words. Ethan’s lips moved, but a shadow fell across his heart.

A month or maybe even a week from now, Liza could marry that pirate without ever knowing Ethan still loved her. She had been the one to end their association, not him. Her heart was likely frozen toward him still. But tonight of all nights, wasn't there a chance she might soften? In the almost three months since their parting, other than paying an informant for gossip, he hadn't searched for her or sought to mend the divide between them.

He needed to find her and tell her how he felt. Now, not days from now. The thought throbbed through him.

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Liza shivered and tugged her wool cloak tighter as she guided her mare onward. A sliver of a waning moon accompanied by a host of stars lit the Valley Pike at this late hour. Duncan would have a fit when he discovered her gone in the morning, but she'd left a note in her room telling him not to worry and that she'd be back by the afternoon, hours before the wedding.

Would she be back? What choice did she have if she wanted to preserve Cedar Hill and all that it meant to her? Besides, if she ran out on Duncan, she'd be shunned out of the valley.

But she'd had to get out of the Blackwell place for a few hours before she suffocated. She'd hardly touched her dinner and had done her best to remain in the shadows during the evening's festivities. Duncan had dominated the gathering of raiders and womenfolk. Silas was there, charmed by the gallant leader of the raiders. Her brother had even hugged her, a complete

change from his months of not speaking to her during her friendship with Ethan. Friendship? Who was she fooling? It'd been so much more.

She shouldn't be going anywhere, but she had to see her home one more time before she sacrificed her heart and her freedom for it.

On the ridge of leafless trees interspersed with an occasional pine, a coyote howled. The macadamized road with its bits of broken stones cemented together passed by the North Fork of the Shenandoah River. The soft gurgle of the water had been the lullaby of her childhood. A world away.

She nudged her horse to a canter and cut down the side trail. They were almost there. What if the house was in worse shape than when she'd left it?

Her stomach clenched as she turned onto the dirt lane flanked by barren oaks and maples. Not a fence post left standing. The Yankees had used every scrap of it for firewood or cabins. On the left, blackened fields lay frosted beneath a thin layer of flurries. She rounded the bend at a walk as the house came into view.

The two-story limestone home stood firm, but the front shutters hung loose, and the door stood ajar. Her shoulders tensed. What if she wasn't alone? More likely some roving soldiers or vagabonds had broken in and stolen—stolen what? Her cousins had helped her haul away a wagon load of furniture and belongings, but there hadn't been room for everything.

The mare snorted, her breath coming out in a puff of steam. The animal's hooves crunched the frosted leaves. Liza shifted her knee, cramped across the horn of the sidesaddle. The cold bit at her nose and cheeks. She glanced away from the pile of charred rubble that had been the barn. On the far side of the home, the smokehouse had met the same fate, but the springhouse still stood on the slope of the hill.

Silent and dark. No Christmas here, where once light and joy and song had rung out.

Liza drew rein at the hitching post. Marrying Duncan tomorrow evening wouldn't bring back those days. Her legs turned to rubber as she dismounted. What would Cedar Hill be like with Duncan Parker at its helm? Would there be love? If she had children, she'd love them with all of her heart. But what kind of father would he be? She yanked her gloves off and dug her nails into her palms until the pain overshadowed the fearful thoughts. It didn't matter if she broke the skin.

Shaken, she stepped toward the stoop and halted. Her gaze turned to the star-studded sky. *Dear Lord God in Heaven help me know what to do.* She eased to her knees, the frost dampening her skirt. *Thank you for the gift of your Son. For your great love for us. Please help me—*

The door creaked.

She shot up to her feet, half-tripping over her skirt hem. The door opened further. A man stepped from the shadows. Her hands flew over her skirt pocket. Empty. She'd left the revolver on the saddle, and her knife was tied to her thigh beneath her skirt. Her heart pounded. She turned and lunged for the saddlebag.

“Liza?”

The voice. *His voice.* She froze. Goosebumps swept across her arms. She pivoted. Her heart thundered in her chest.

Ethan.

“It's you.” He gaped at her. “You're really here?” A few locks of his chestnut hair fell onto his forehead as he removed his slouch hat. Clean-shaven where once he'd sported a beard, he wore his cavalry uniform beneath his open great coat.

Her stomach fluttered as if someone had yanked the lid off a kettle of butterflies. “Wha... What are you...?”

“Looking for you.” His voice dipped. A smile tugged at his lips. “Came here on a long shot and a prayer. Hoping against hope you might show up here for Christmas. Or that I might find a clue to your whereabouts.” He touched a hand to his holster. “You are alone, aren’t you?”

Bereft of words, she nodded, then glanced around the yard. “And you?”

“Alone.” His saber tapped against his knee-high cavalry boots as he clamored down the steps. “My horse is in the trees behind the house. A trick I learned from the previous occupants here. In case any enemies happen by.” He stopped within three feet of her.

The world spun. Ethan... *here*.

His gray eyes drank her in. “How have you been? I’ve been concerned about you.” He lifted his hand as if he might touch her, but then let it fall back to his side.

Lost in the winter of my heart without you. She shrugged. “I’ve been all right. Cousins, friends”—*in league with the raiders you hate*—“took me in, gave me a place to stay.”

“I’m relieved to hear you’ve been provided for.” He rubbed his thumb over his saber handle. His wrist rested against the rich crimson sash which encircled his waist beneath his cartridge belt. “I’ve heard rumors.” His Adam’s apple bobbed. “That you...”

She bit her lip. “Joined the raiders?”

“Worse than that.”

The wind rushed through the yard, swaying the barren branches, and billowing the folds of her cloak. She shivered. He must have heard something about her betrothal. What else would he consider worse than her assisting the raiders?

He shifted his glance to the house. “Why don’t we talk inside? I started a small fire in the hearth. I can tether your horse next to mine. I have a feed sack and a bucket of water back there.”

Alone with Ethan in the parlor in front of the fire? Other than their walks, it had been the site of some of the sweetest moments of their courtship. She should say no, but she mutely nodded and motioned for him to take her horse. He’d always been a gentleman. By tomorrow night, she’d be a married woman, wouldn’t she? And never see Ethan Cooper again. Her throat felt as if it constricted to the width of a reed.

He took the mare’s lead rope and walked toward the side of the house.

Would hiding the horse be enough? She should warn him. “I left a note at the place where I’m staying. I don’t believe anyone will see it until breakfast, but if they do—”

“Someone might come looking for you?” He pivoted.

“Yes.”

“How far away is the place?”

She pressed her lips together. The less the Yankee cavalry captain knew about her location the better.

His expression hardened. “So let me put it to you this way. *Who* would come looking for you?” The fingers of his free hand curled into a fist at his side. “Parker?”

Her tongue scrapped the roof of her mouth like sandpaper. “Yes.”

He scowled as if he’d just smelled a dead animal. “As your betrothed or your husband?”

She sputtered. “We...we’re not married. Yet.” The word scraped her gut.

He muttered something undecipherable and threw his shoulders back. “I hope he doesn’t show up here, being it’s Christmas and all, but if he does, my Colt is loaded, and my carbine is in the parlor.” He tapped his hand to his holster and marched around the corner.

She swallowed hard. If Duncan came here and saw her alone with Ethan, there'd be bloodshed. But she'd left the Blackwells' at midnight, and no one should notice until six or seven in the morning. That'd give her six hours by the time anyone could ride here. *Dear Lord, please don't let anyone find the note.*

Ethan had put himself at risk traveling outside of the Federal lines at Winchester and into raider territory alone to see her. Something he'd made a habit of back when his visits were welcomed. Her cheeks burned to think of the words she'd spoken to him when they'd last parted. As if he bore partial blame for General Sheridan and thousands of cavalrymen and infantry devastating the valley.

Nothing had changed since then. Her barn and fields were still cinders. Folks up and down the valley were going hungry...some had abandoned what was left of their homes...some had gone out of their minds.

But in her heart of hearts she knew. Regardless of the color of Ethan's uniform, it wasn't his fault.

She glanced at the sky. The Lord, not happenstance, had brought about this meeting tonight. Why? A test? An escape option? Or a final closing of the door on her relationship with the Yankee captain so she could move forward with her future?

The way her pulse strummed in her temples and in her wrists, it didn't feel like a shut door.

An animal scurried from the trees and toward the brush, a raccoon followed by half a dozen young ones. Cute as long as they didn't take up residence in her house.

She nudged her hood from her head and flipped her hair down her back, smoothing it along its length, tempted to retie the ribbon that held a few strands from her face. Foolishness.

Ethan was still a Yankee, and for all she knew, he'd come to say his final goodbyes before leaving for the siege at Petersburg. Or perhaps he hoped to use her to find the leader of Parker's Raiders.

Her gaze snagged on the blackened timbers of the partial barn wall that still stood as a sentinel to what had been. Ethan couldn't have stopped the destruction, but couldn't he have laid down his gun and refused to be part of it?

She turned away and toward the stone stoop, but her feet were as lead. It was her house for goodness sake. She should go ahead inside, inspect the damage... But she stood there, clasping her ungloved hands in front of her.

Head held high, Ethan strode around the corner toward her as if a bugle had sounded the call to battle.

Her knees wobbled.

He touched her elbow. "Come inside. I ground up beans for coffee, and I brought fruitcake my mother sent from home."

Warmth seeped up her arm. "I'd... like that."

She lifted her skirts and ascended the steps. A crack marred the upper panel of her solid wood door, and the handle hung loose as if someone had broken in.

He pushed the door wide. "I figure soldiers passing through after the Battle of Cedar Creek likely broke in looking for food and other portable treasures."

Unease filled her belly. A musty odor greeted her nose. Dried mud flaked across the wide oak boards of the entryway floor. She glanced toward the barren dining room. Was that a tin can and strips of cloth on the floor?

“Skip the tour.” He steered her toward the parlor with the gentle touch of his elbow.

“There’s debris scattered about in the rooms, but I cleaned out the parlor. Just in case—”

“I came?”

“Precisely.” His hand slipped away, and he strode to the hearth where smoke trickled up from tiny flickers of flame. He tossed off his great coat and knelt to stir the fire. His saber clinked against the floor.

She rubbed her hands over her arms as she glanced about the parlor. Moonlight streamed in through the curtainless windows. The sofa was the only piece of furniture left, except for a wooden chair that someone had dragged in from the kitchen.

This room had once been full of light and love, especially at Christmas. She and her brothers would decorate the tree while her mother finished the pies and the turkey in the kitchen. They’d load the tree with swatches of colored cloth, pine cones, and miniature carvings shaped by her father’s skillful blade.

Tears stung her eyes. Her parents were gone, her mother even before the war, and her older brother at the Battle of Antietam. Silas and she were the only ones left, and he was so distant.

A floorboard creaked.

Ethan stood in front of her. He touched her arm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t bring you in here to make you sad.”

She shuddered. “If you weren’t here, I’d see it anyway, and I wouldn’t stop at the parlor. Only I’d be alone.” *So alone without you. Here and everywhere. Like a piece of me missing.*

Behind him, the fire he’d stirred to life crackled. Intermingling shadows and light leaped across the walls. A glow filled the room.

“I’m sorry about your barn, your fields...” He took her hand and rubbed his thumb over her fingertips. His gaze dropped to his feet. “If there was any way I could have prevented it, I would have. When I think of what I had to do to people’s crops and livestock, barns... it makes me sick to my stomach. I understand why General Sheridan ordered it. He saw it as a way to save lives.”

“Save lives?” She scoffed and withdrew her hand. “I’ve heard of babies, children starving... dying. Families having to leave everything behind.”

He flinched and moved to the window, stuffing his hands into his trouser pockets. “The general’s goal was to rob the Confederate soldiers of the rich bounty they were counting on from the harvested crops in this valley, the breadbasket of Virginia. All I know is that I still have dreams about my part in it.” He scrubbed his hand down his face. “I thought your land would be safe. The officers had orders to not harm the property of orphans. I had no idea Captain Rogers would see it as justified retaliation for your relatives’ allegiance with the bushwhackers. And I couldn’t leave my men. The general assigned my regiment to the other side of the valley, with strict orders to keep to stay west of the Valley Pike.” His shoulders sagged. “To disobey would have meant arrest or worse, and then I would have been no help to my men or you.”

He’d said bits of this before when he’d ridden up covered in soot to check on her, and she’d lashed out at him with the full brunt of her anger and hurt. But this time, she heard it. Maybe because it was Christmas. Maybe because time had passed, but now she saw what she’d been too devastated to see then. A man of honor who’d followed orders, who had no choice, and who regretted it.

A hard knot unraveled in her chest. How many things had she done in this war that she regretted?

She crept to his side.

He turned. Fine lines she hadn't noticed before creased the corners of his eyes. His gaze glistened. "I'm sorry I failed to protect you."

The knot completely dissipated. "You didn't fail. You offered to take me to Winchester and to provide for me. I was angry... But you aren't to blame for what happened in the valley."

He sniffed. A smile lit his face. It was as if a wall had fallen. "Thank you for understanding."

Bay rum and wood smoke filled her nostrils. He touched a fingertip to a strand of hair that had fallen across her cheek and nudged it out of the way. Her breath hitched, his tenderness opening a river of longing.

With a sharp inhale, he took her in his strong, secure arms, radiating love into her depths. She buried her face against his shoulder and latched on to the back of his wool coat, like a climber holding on to a mountain face.

"I've missed you," he whispered in her ear.

How was she ever going to let go and walk out the door?

He kissed her hair. A breath rattled through him, and he withdrew until there was a full foot between them, and their hands were the only point of touch. She clenched her fingers around his calloused ones. *Don't let go of me, please.*

He lifted his chin. "What are you doing engaged to a man you don't love, Liza?" His words struck like a blacksmith's hammer to an anvil.

She crossed her arms. "Cedar Hill is my home." Why did she feel as if she were defending her right to walk up the steps to a gallows? "Duncan Parker is offering me a way to

keep and restore it.” Spoken aloud to this man, it sounded so mercenary. “My great-grandparents built this place. I can’t abandon it to rot. Duncan is willing to help me make it a home—”

“How much of a home can it be if the wife doesn’t love and respect her husband, and if the husband is in love with himself?” His glare sliced through her.

“I... respect him.” She rubbed her collarbone.

His eyebrows shot up to his hairline. “For what? How many Yankees he’s killed?”

“We’re not going down that trail.” She jabbed her finger at him.

“Forgive me.” His boots thudded against the well-trodden floorboards. “We’ll leave the war out of it.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “My real question is what kind of home will it be?”

Her stomach coiled. The room was too hot. Sweat dampened her back and underarms. She yanked her cloak off and tossed it onto the rose-print sofa, now stained and torn with a bit of stuffing leaking out of one cushion. Nothing like when she and Ethan used to sit there. The flame flickering in their eyes, her head on his shoulder, and his arm wrapped around her. Lost in love.

He dropped his hands to his sides. “Liza, I love you. I know the color of my uniform is wrong as far as you’re concerned, but you’re the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

A lifetime with Ethan. Her thirsty heart clamored for the hope of such an oasis. She sank down onto the sofa. Her nails curled inward to her palms. She could not give in to dreams and wishes. Logic and reason must prevail.

With a clunk of his saber, Ethan dropped to his knees in front of her. “I love you. I want you to be my wife.”

She trembled. “I...Everyone would... How could we live here—”

“Liza.” He took her hands in his. “I can’t promise you Cedar Hill. I’d willingly sell my share in my family’s farm in Indiana to my brothers and come live here with you. Turn Cedar Hill into the fine place it used to be. But I can’t guarantee when or if that would happen. There would be no peace in this valley, not for me, not for us, not for a long while.”

A log popped in the fireplace and sizzled. Sparks flew up the chimney.

Her heart stuttered. She’d lose it all. Her home. Her kin, her friends. She’d be an outcast. “Do you have any idea what you’re asking of me?”

One of her hands still in his, he rose to sit beside her. His knees jutted against hers. “I’m asking you to marry me and make your home with me wherever that might be. If coming north with me to Indiana would be too much to bear, we could head west after the war. There’s plenty of land to be had there. We could go to Texas or Minnesota. We’d choose together. A new start for both of us.”

She gaped at him. Texas? Minnesota? She’d never set foot out of Virginia. She’d imagined her children and grandchildren growing up here in the valley. But she’d also dared to imagine sharing a home and a bed with a man she loved, a man who’d be her friend and lover, and who followed the Lord with all of his heart. A man Duncan Parker was not.

Ethan’s gaze searched hers. “If the West is too far, we could find us a place in Pennsylvania or Maryland, somewhere close by where five or ten years from now, we could consider returning to the valley. But I can’t promise when.”

With all of the destruction and loss? Hate would be a long time dying.

She brushed her thumb over the roughened back of his hand, solid and warm with strength that went far beyond muscles. If she walked out of this house alone, headed in a different direction than Ethan, she’d regret it for the rest of her life.

“Liza, I love you with all of my heart. I can’t imagine life without you.” His voice wavered. “If you’re not ready to make the decision tonight, I can be patient. But don’t go back to wherever you’ve been. Don’t return to Parker. Come with me to Winchester. I’ll find a proper place for you to stay, and we’ll figure it out after that. I could pretend to arrest you if you’re worried you’d ruin your reputation by riding into Winchester with me.”

If she accepted Ethan’s proposal, she’d be branded a traitor to the cause by all who knew her. She looked away. Shadows danced along the empty walls. Duncan awaited her at the Blackwells’ and so did Silas. And her friends and companions, striving together to support the men who raided Yankee wagon trains and killed men like Ethan. If she returned there, she’d have no choice but to marry Duncan and share his bed by this time tomorrow night. She shuddered. Not a life she wanted. She loved this house, this land, but it would never be fully home again, not without the Yankee who sat at her side.

She’d prayed for the Lord’s guidance, and the Lord had sent Ethan.

Heart pounding, she turned back to the man who mattered more to her than anyone else in the world.

His fingertips grazed her cheek, her hair. “Liza?”

She lifted her gaze to his smoky gray irises, simmering with fire. Home. In his eyes, in his arms, at his side. A Bible verse came to mind, one she’d dreamed of using at her wedding. “Whither thou goest, I will go... Thy people shall be my people.”

“Ruth?” He cocked his eyebrows, his mouth twitching upward. “I’m not quite Naomi.”

“No.” She trembled as she placed her palms against the strong wall of his chest. “But you are my home. You’re the person I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

A smile burst across his face like the first rays of dawn, crinkling his eyes and even his nose. “You’ve just made me the happiest man in the world.”

He drew her into the depths of his arms. Her hands slipped around the back of his neck. His lips wove their way from her hair to her cheeks, brushing away the tears that had sprung from nowhere. “Merry Christmas, Liza,” he breathed before his mouth overtook hers in a kiss that melted her to the core. She was home.

A Christmas beyond expectation and anything she’d dared dream.