

THE
FARMER'S
Bride
COLLECTION

DiAnn Mills

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ONE LITTLE PRAYER

by Kimberley Comeaux



Chapter 1



One minute James Edward Larabee, a former captain of the Confederate Army, was riding on his horse through the woods, the next minute he was flat on his back. Stunned, he could do nothing but lie there for a moment, before his soldier instincts kicked in and he began taking quick inventory of himself and his surroundings.

The first thing he noticed was that his leg was covered in blood. Then, the most horrific pain he'd ever felt in his life exploded throughout his bloody limb, causing him to cry out. He'd been shot, he realized. But that couldn't be. The war was over; it had been over for nearly two and a half years. Why would someone shoot him?

The snap of a twig, then a movement out of the corner of his eye, caught his attention. He looked up and saw a hazy figure running away from him. He could barely make out the blue and black clothing, as the person darted through the trees.

"Hey! Come back! I need some help here!" he called several times, but the person just kept going.

It must have been the person who shot him. But why? It couldn't be an outraged Yankee who decided to use him for target practice. He no longer wore the gray pants trimmed in gold that were a sign of his involvement with the Confederate Army. If only he'd gotten a better look at the person who shot him. What kind of man would leave another to bleed to death? Or maybe it was a woman, he just couldn't tell.

Helplessness poured over him as he struggled to sit up. How was he

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supposed to get help? He had no idea where he was. And to top it all off, his horse had run off with all his belongings and money.

But he'd have to address that problem later. If he didn't get the wound bandaged, they would be finding a dead man instead of a wounded one.

Almost methodically, he took off his jacket, then pulled his shirt off, leaving only his long johns top, and began wrapping the shirt around his thigh, just as he'd done to wounded soldiers in the war. And as he pulled at the sleeves of the shirt, tying it tightly, he thought that it was ironic that he'd managed to escape the bullets during the war, only to be brought down on his way to start a new life. Had God forsaken him again?

The January wind cut through his clothes, and he stared at the sky peeking through the tree branches. He thought briefly of saying a prayer but decided that it wouldn't do any good. Had God listened when he'd prayed that his father and brother would return from the war? Had He listened when he prayed that their plantation would still be intact?

No. His father and brother died in the war and their plantation in Dothan, Alabama, had been burned to the ground. His faith had died along with them.

The one saving grace had been the money that his father had buried in the family cemetery before they went off to fight. Daddy had put ten thousand dollars at the foot of Mama's grave. That cash was going to buy him a brand-new life out West. He'd made plans to purchase a saloon in San Francisco. All he had to do was show up, sign the papers, and hand over the money.

But now here he lay, probably bleeding to death, his horse missing. . . suddenly those plans seemed very far away. And though the pain in his leg seemed to lessen, the pain in his soul became worse. Bitterness ate at his gut as he silently laid one more accusation at God's door. What was next? Was he to die here? All he knew was that he was in the middle of a forest, somewhere in north Louisiana. There might not be anyone for miles.

But the sound of footsteps coming his direction quickly banished that notion. As it came closer, though, he realized it was a horse's gallop that he heard. He breathed a sigh of relief. His horse had obviously come back to him. If he could manage to get on the animal's back, perhaps he could find

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a doctor or at least someone who could remove the bullet.

He raised himself on his elbows and watched as the horse came into view. His eyebrows suddenly lowered and he frowned at what he saw next. Though it was his horse that was coming toward him, it was being ridden by. . . well, he couldn't really tell what was on Rebel's back.

When the horse was reined to a stop, the most strangely dressed little girl he'd ever laid eyes on looked down at him. For a moment, he could do nothing but gape at her attire. On her thin shoulders she had draped an old faded sheet tied at her neck. Her chest was decorated with pieces of tin sewn carefully to her thick brown blouse. But it was what she wore on her head that got his greatest attention. Sitting pertly on her golden curls was a uniquely carved-out. . .gourd!

After studying him for a moment through narrowed, suspicious eyes, she whipped out a wooden stick, holding it like a sword and pointing it at him. "What army are you with, sir?" she demanded in a high, extremely Southern-sounding voice.

He couldn't help but chuckle at her serious face. As if irritated, she jabbed him with the stick, hitting him in the chest. "Are you English or French?" she asked as she went to poke him again.

He quickly grabbed the stick before it reached him and yanked it out of her hand. "Listen, little girl, you've stolen my horse and poked me with sticks and I'm getting a little tired of—"

"How dare you address me as 'little girl'! I am Joan of Arc, and I've seized your horse! Now, give me back my sword so that I may slay you." She lifted her chin and held out her hand so regally that James couldn't help but admire her.

Suddenly the costume made sense—of course Joan of Arc would be dressed as a soldier. He quickly searched his mind, trying to remember whether Joan was French or English. "Uh. . .I'm French?" he tested carefully. He couldn't figure out if the little girl was playing a game or if she actually believed she was Joan of Arc.

She withdrew her hand and put it on her hip. "Well, in that case, I'll let you live."

He moved and then winced as his leg began to throb again. In her

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child's play he'd forgotten all about his wound. "Joan, I'm not going to live if you don't run and get me help. Someone shot me in the leg," he told her gruffly as he adjusted his makeshift bandage.

Suddenly Joan's eyes filled with horror as she noticed all the blood that she seemed to have missed before. "Goodness gracious, Mister! You're bleeding like a stuck pig!" she said, falling out of character.

She jumped down from the horse, her tin clanging as she ran to him and knelt down. He saw that she wore trousers under her skirt, and he put her age to be about nine or ten. Clearly old enough to understand how to get help.

"Yes, Joan, and that's why I need for you to—"

"That bullet's gonna have to come out!" Joan interrupted.

"I know that. I—"

"Someone must have thought that you were a deer! Don't you know not to go traipsing through the woods this time of year?"

James closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then opened them again. "Joan, could you just—"

"And here you are all dressed in brown just like a deer. Nope, that wasn't too smart!"

He narrowed his gaze at her. "If it's too dangerous to be in the woods, what are you doing here?"

She just smiled and pushed the gourd back off of her forehead. "'Cause these are my woods! Ain't nobody gonna shoot me!" she exclaimed, looking at him as if he were the dense one. "And my name's not really Joan."

"Well, whatever it is, could you just—"

"My name's Louanne Wise. But you can call me Victoria."

He knew that he shouldn't ask but. . . "Why do you want me to call you Victoria, if your name is Louanne?"

"Because Louanne is so plain! Victoria is more. . . noble sounding, you know, like Queen Victoria! But it seems I am doomed to live out my existence with the name I was born with." She finished with a long-suffering sigh.

She then looked at him with renewed interest. "What is your name? You're not a robber or outlaw or anything like that, are you? Because if you

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are, I'm not supposed to be talking to you. Actually, I'm not supposed to be talking to anyone who doesn't live in Wiseville. I'm a Wise, you see, and practically everyone around here is kin to me one way or another; so it's all right if I talk to them. But I don't believe that I've ever seen you before!"

It was he that took the breath after that little speech. It made him tired just listening to her.

"My name is James Larabee of the Alabama Larabees, and I promise you that I'm not an outlaw. But I am going to pass out if I don't get this blood stopped," he grumbled, then added, "You know, Joan of Arc wouldn't allow a man to suffer out in the wild."

She thrust her chin up and adjusted the bed sheet around her shoulders. She was back in character. "Of course not. Joan of Arc can do anything!" Then she was quiet for a moment. "Except, of course, she didn't save herself from being burned at the stake. She should have come up with a better plan," she added with a frown.

"Louanne, honey, please. . .," he groaned. "Get help."

"Okay." She jumped up and looked at his horse. "Can I take your horse?"

"If it'll help you get help faster, by all means take him."

With the skill of one who had been raised around horses, Louanne climbed on the back of the brown animal and took off.



As she galloped toward home, she thought about the man she'd left behind. He sure seemed like a nice person, even if he was just a little grumpy. She hoped that his leg would be all right. One of her uncles had come home from the war with one of his legs cut off at the knee. She didn't want that to happen to Mr. Larabee.

It seemed strange to find a man who wasn't kin in her woods. Strangers just didn't pass through Wiseville that often.

Then she got another idea. What if God had brought Mr. Larabee to her? She had been praying for God to send her a daddy, since He had her real daddy in heaven. Mama had told her to make a prayer list, and that was one of the first things she prayed for everyday, though Mama wasn't aware of it.

One of her many uncles was the preacher in town, and he always said

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that God worked in mysterious ways. Well, finding a shot-up stranger in her woods was the most mysterious thing that she'd ever come across! Surely, that must mean that he was the answer to her prayers! It made perfect sense!

As her house came into view, however, she wasn't sure that her mother would go running to help a man that she didn't know. Since Daddy's death, two years before, gentlemen had been flocking around her mama, asking for her hand in marriage. Mama never seemed very interested. She was always telling them that it just wasn't proper to come calling out at her house, since she and Louanne had no menfolk who lived with them to make it proper. She would allow only the cousins and uncles to visit. Louanne wished that her mother would marry someone. The man in the woods was as good as any of the men who'd come calling. If only Louanne could find some way to get her mother to meet him. Suddenly, an idea came to her. It was in the form of a lie. She got off the horse and ran to where her mother was coming out of the chicken coop.

"Mama! Come quick! I just found a man in the woods, and I think he's. . .dead!"



James realized that he had dozed off, when a sound startled him and shook him out of his slumber. He saw that it was a small wagon being pulled by a horse, coming down the wooded trail.

The little soldier had done it! She'd gotten him help. He relaxed and closed his eyes again, waiting for them to reach him. He wondered if she had brought her parents with her. He hoped that she at least had gotten her pa. A woman would have a hard time lifting him into a wagon.

He heard the clatter of the wagon. He opened his eyes and saw a beautiful woman dressed in blue calico, getting down from the wagon. But other than the little girl and the woman, there was no one else. He shifted his weight to sit up but accidentally hit the wound against a rock on the ground. The pain was so intense he couldn't cry out; instead, he felt himself blacking out. He fought it, trying desperately to hold on to consciousness.

"You're right, Louanne. I think he's dead," the woman said.

Dead? He wasn't dead. . .was he?

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“Why don’t you listen to his heart, Mama?”

There was a pause, then the woman said, “Alright.”

He heard a rustle of fabric, then the scent of honeysuckle flooded his senses and the touch of her soft hair brushed against his chin. He opened his eyes and saw her press her ear to his chest.

“My, you smell pretty,” he said in his best Southern drawl, despite himself.

Her head reared and whipped around. Startled blue-green eyes flew to his face. “You’re alive!” she charged and scrambled back. But in doing so, she lost her balance and tumbled to the ground.

He managed to lift himself to his elbows. “Of course, I’m alive. Didn’t Louanne tell you that I needed help?”

The woman pushed herself upright and smoothed her skirts modestly over her ankles, while she sat a small distance from him.

“She said that you were dead!” she told him, sending Louanne a warning glare that future retribution was soon coming her way. Louanne began to play with the tin on her chest.

“Ma’am, please, I’ve been shot, and I need to get this bullet out of my leg. . . .”

“Oh, my goodness! You’re not an outlaw or something, are you?” Her hand was over her heart, a horrified expression on her pretty face.

Was everyone in this family suspicious of outlaws?

“Momma, someone shot him thinking he was a deer,” Louanne chimed in helpfully.

An understanding look came over “Momma’s” face. “Oh, dear. I’ll bet that’s what happened. You are bleeding pretty badly,” she said carefully, as if trying to make up her mind about something.

Suddenly, she hopped up and clapped her hands together. “Well, I guess we need to get you aboard this wagon, don’t we?” She looked at him as if measuring him up, then she glanced at the wagon. A worried expression overtook her face.

James grabbed a stick beside him. “Ma’am, if you can help me, I can lift myself up with this.” He lifted one arm, while gripping the branch with the other. “My name is James Larabee, by the way.”

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The woman reached down to clutch his arm, and together they managed to bring him to his feet. He put his arm around her and leaned heavily on her shoulders. She, struggling to hold his weight, turned toward him. James found himself no more than a half an inch from her face.

As he stared into her eyes, his pain didn't seem nearly as bad. She seemed to feel it, too, because she stared back.

Before the war, James Larabee had courted some of the most beautiful young women around Dothan, but none of those compared to the petite angel who was looking into his eyes at that moment. None had the silky-smooth, soft peach skin nor the long brown eyelashes that framed her ocean-blue eyes. And, though most of her hair was wound loosely in a knot on top of her head, the rich chestnut color gleamed in the soft light of the woods.

"You never told me your name," he said to her, but he wished he hadn't spoken.

As if she'd suddenly become aware of their situation, she blushed hotly and looked away. "My name is Mrs. Tessa Wise," she told him, emphasizing the title.

James's heart sank, and he could feel the pain again in his leg as the euphoric feeling he felt at her nearness began to melt away. She was married. He was ashamed that he'd embarrassed them both.

But as she helped him slide into the back of the wagon, he reminded himself that it didn't matter—he wasn't in the market for a wife. Saloon owners didn't marry. That was no life for a family.

And besides, he had lost too many loved ones. He would not make himself vulnerable to those feelings ever again.

They set off in the wagon. The pain in his leg throbbed as he was jostled about, and he blamed his delirium for making him think of love. Tessa Wise was going to take out his bullet and perhaps let him bunk down a few days in her barn. Then he'd leave.

A whole new life was waiting for him, and he wasn't going to allow anything to stand in the way.

Yet, the whole time he repeated the words to himself, he couldn't get rid of the picture of those beautiful blue-green eyes.

Chapter 2



More than once on the journey back to her house Tessa Wise wondered what she had gotten herself into by offering to help James Larabee. She and her daughter were alone, and having a man at her house, injured or not, just wasn't seemly.

Of course, he'd just have to stay in the barn. But, then again, the barn was so drafty, and it was January, just a week after the New Year. Already this winter was proving to be a rough one and was predicted to be even worse later in the month.

She sighed and chewed on her bottom lip as she worried over her situation. Mr. Larabee was injured and he needed help. What would God think of her if she left an injured man to bleed to death? He was, after all, shot on her property!

That thought caused her to start chewing on her lip again. Who had shot him? Had they really mistaken him for a deer? And if so, why had they not come to him, seen their error, and helped him?

Tessa had the sinking feeling that it was one of her late husband's young cousins or maybe one of their friends. It would be just like them to shoot impulsively, get scared, and run away.

"Isn't he handsome, Mama?"

That little whisper from Louanne broke Tessa out of her fretting in a big hurry! "What did you say?" she demanded, also speaking in a whisper.

Louanne smiled and got closer to her mother's ear. "He is so handsome. Riding up and finding him just lying there in the forest was like something

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out of a fairy tale,” she said dramatically while putting her hand over her heart.

“Oh, Louanne, I don’t want to hear any of your nonsense! This man is not a prince, and if he was, he wouldn’t be tromping through our woods in the dead of winter!”

Actually, her daughter did have a point. The man was quite nice-looking. He had dark, wavy brown hair that was slightly longish and curled at the collar. His nose was straight, but not too long, and his cheekbones were prominent, his jaw square and manly. But that doesn’t matter, she told herself, shaking herself from the picture that she’d just conjured up. The sooner she got him patched up, the sooner he could be on his way!

“But he could be a prince exiled from his country and running from those who want to kill him!” Louanne insisted, getting herself all worked up, her voice growing louder with each word.

“I promise that I’m not a prince,” their rider chimed in from the back of the wagon.

Mortified, Tessa sent her daughter a glare. “Please excuse my daughter, Mr. Larabee. She’s got quite an imagination.”

“Don’t you worry, Mrs. Wise. I find your daughter charming,” James Larabee told her, his lazy Southern drawl drawing out the sentence. Tessa thought his accent was quite nice. Different from the country accents of North Louisiana, there was something else in his voice. She couldn’t quite pin it down.

When she glanced back, she noticed his eyes were squeezed shut in obvious pain and he clutched the make-shift bandage wrapped around his leg.

She quickly looked forward and snapped the reins. She was going to have to get that bullet out before infection set in.



It took them more than a few minutes and a whole lot of effort, but they finally got Mr. Larabee into the house and situated in the spare bedroom. One of her brothers-in-law, J. T. Wise, was a doctor, and Tessa sent Louanne after him. Tessa, having served as a temporary nurse during the war, was well acquainted with digging bullets out of men, but she still

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hoped that J. T. could be found, just in case.

She mixed some laudanum in a glass of water and took it to him. “Here you go, Mr. Larabee. Just drink this, and it should help you not to hurt so bad.”

As he took the glass from her, his fingers brushed against hers and their eyes met. Tessa quickly looked away and tried to hide the blush that she knew must be burning her cheeks. What was wrong with her? Why did this man affect her so strangely?

Tessa was carefully removing the shirt-bandage from around his leg when he spoke. “Uh, have you ever done this before?” There was more than a slight trace of worry in his voice.

Tessa lifted an eyebrow as she looked over at him. “Scared, Mr. Larabee?”

“Cautious, Mrs. Wise,” he countered. Suddenly they both started to chuckle. It went a long way to ease some of the strain in the room.

She flashed him a smile and started cutting the fabric away from the wound. “As a matter of fact, I have done this before, so you don’t have to worry. I patched up quite a few men in the war, both Confederate and Yankee. But if you’re still uneasy, I sent for my brother-in-law, who is a doctor.”

James shook his head. “I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

Tessa gave him a smile that she hoped contained more assurance than she felt. As she examined the wound, she realized that the bullet was lodged pretty deep. She could see part of it, but she wasn’t sure that she could get it out without causing him to start bleeding again.

She looked at her patient to ask him if he could feel the laudanum taking effect yet, but his eyes were closed. She gazed back at the wound, took a deep breath, then grabbed the large tweezers and went to work.



James couldn’t remember when he’d ever felt worse. Though his head was swimming with the medicine she’d given him, he could still feel the pain as the doctor dug out the bullet. He had to wonder: If it hurt this bad with the doctor doing the surgery, what would it have felt like with an amateur like Tessa Wise doing the job? He was just glad the good doctor had arrived in time!

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But, it was all over with now. Doc had sewed him up and wrapped a bandage around his leg and told him that he wasn't to move for two weeks.

Two weeks! He didn't know who took the news worse, Tessa or himself. She had pulled the doctor out of the room in a big hurry, and he could still hear them whispering in the next room. Well, he wasn't happy about it either. Two weeks was going to put him off schedule, mess up his plans! He had a life to get on with and this setback was fouling everything up.

Frustrated, he looked up to the ceiling and railed aloud, "Why me, God!"

"Why are you blaming God?" Louanne said from the doorway, surprising James. He hadn't even heard the door open.

"Why are you eavesdropping?" he countered with a smile.

Louanne, who was now dressed in a pretty green dress with a matching bow in her hair, skipped into the room and sat at the edge of his bed. "How else is a kid supposed to find out things?" she asked with a shrug. She then leaned over and put a hand to his head. "Are you feeling better?"

James squelched a laugh at her motherly action. *She must be imitating Tessa.* "Yes, ma'am," he drawled, playing along. "Doc Wise fixed me up."

"It was such a tragic thing that happened to you out there. I could just imagine that it was me who was injured on the cold, cold ground. . . waiting to die. . . all hope lost," she exclaimed dramatically, clasping her hands together at her chest. "Then, off in the distance a rider approaches upon a pure white steed and rescues me. He would be a prince and he would ask me to marry him!"

This time James did chuckle. "I've never heard anyone take an accident and turn it into a fairy tale. You're something else, Little Lulu!"

Louanne looked at him as though he had just offered her a giant piece of candy. "You called me Lulu! You know, my dad used to call me that," she said in an awed whisper. "It's a sign!"

James opened his mouth to comment then froze. "Used to?" he asked carefully.

"Yeah, my dad was killed in the war."

"I'm sorry," he told her, but his mind was whirling. Why had Tessa led him to believe her husband was still around? An elation he couldn't even begin to understand washed over him, but just as quickly, he squelched it.

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Then he thought about what Louanne had said before that. “What did you mean when you said that it’s a sign?”

“I can’t tell you, right now, because it’s a secret! But I can tell you that I was only kidding when I said that I thought you were a prince, earlier in the wagon. I know you’re just a regular man.” She got closer, as if she wanted to share a secret. “Princes have countries to run and damsels to rescue. They wouldn’t be riding through our woods. Besides, I have another reason for knowing that you’re not a prince, but I can’t tell you that either. I can tell you it has something to do with God, though.”

James sighed inwardly. God sure didn’t make it easy for people to ignore Him. James wanted nothing more than to get on with his life and never think about God, and instead he was saddled for two weeks with what, apparently, was a deeply religious family.

“You sure do have a lot of secrets for such a little girl!” he commented absently, his attention shifting to his throbbing leg. The medication was wearing off and the pain was returning.

Louanne huffed and lifted her chin in the air. “I’m nine years old, Mr. Larabee. I’m hardly little.” He grimaced, and she laid her hand on top of his. “You’re looking ill again, Mr. Larabee. Is it hurting?”

He nodded, and she scooted off the bed. “I’ll run in there and get Uncle J. T.”

Louanne ran into the living room, but not two seconds later, she was back. She sighed a longsuffering breath and informed him, “Mama told me she’d talk to me later then sent me back in here.”

She came around the bed and resumed her place beside him, taking his hand into her own. “I know what will help! I’ll pray for you. Uncle Donald says that Jesus can heal the sick and afflicted, and since you were shot you’re not really sick. I guess we can call you ‘afflicted’ so this should work,” she told him matter-of-factly.

“Lulu, what does your Uncle Donald do?” he asked, though he was afraid that he already knew the answer.

“He’s a preacher!”

With a resigned sigh, he nodded his head and let her pray for him.

No, God surely didn’t make it easy.

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"J. T., just what were you thinking telling that. . .that. . . stranger that he should stay off his leg. . .at my house! I can't have a man stay here! What will people think?" Tessa charged at her brother-in-law. She was upset, not only at J. T. but at herself for the happiness that ran through her at the thought of getting to know James Larabee a little better. That didn't make any sense! She wasn't interested in any man, much less a stranger.

Dr. J. T. Wise just grinned at Tessa, a smile so reminiscent of her late husband that Tessa felt suddenly guilty. "Tess, everyone will think you're doing a poor unfortunate man a favor and doing your Christian duty by nursing him back to health. Besides, he really does need to be watched closely. Infection could easily set into that wound." He picked up his black bag and withdrew a couple of packets. "Give him this if he suffers any pain."

Tessa took the packets but still glared at J. T. "I don't like this, J. T."

"What do you want me to do, Tess? Take him home with me? I already have five kids that I don't hardly have room for! And with Carolyn heavy with the sixth, she wouldn't be too happy if I brought an injured patient for her to care for," he informed her with a pleading expression.

There were seven Wise brothers and every one of them could talk a flea into jumping off a dog. But she knew that he was right. Carolyn was in no condition to care for the stranger. Neither was the rest of the family. It looked like, whether she liked it or not, she was stuck with the man for two weeks.

And despite the butterflies in her stomach, she refused to be excited about it!

"Oh, alright! But it's up to you to explain this to Donald. I don't want him upset at me for having a man in my house!"

J. T. grinned. "You know, Tess, I haven't seen a ring on the man's finger. . . ."

"Don't say it!" she screeched at him then, realizing her volume, lowered her voice. "Don't you dare try to play matchmaker, Jonathon Tyler Wise! We don't know this man from Adam!"

"That's no problem, Tess," he told her as he put on his hat. "You've got two weeks to get to know him better!"

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With a growl, she grabbed his arm and marched him toward the door, grabbing his coat off the hook and stuffing it in his arms as she went. “Leave while you still can. Just don’t forget to talk to Donald!”

He shrugged his coat on, and just before she shut the door, he added, “I’ll tell him he needs to start polishing up on his wedding ser—”

The rest of his sentence was just a mere muffled sound behind Tessa’s door. She chuckled and shook her head. That J. T. was something else! She didn’t know how his wife put up with him.

Her smile faded as she focused on the door that led to the guest bedroom. She didn’t understand why she found it so hard to speak with the man. He was injured and harmless, she reminded herself, but it didn’t seem to help the butterflies that churned in her stomach. She knew that James Larabee was a gentleman—she could hear it in his voice and see it in his mannerisms. He was probably a very rich gentleman.

So what is he doing here?

With a determined tilt of her chin and a fortified breath, she started toward the room.

She was about to find out.

Chapter 3



They were praying. Or, at least, Louanne was praying while James Larabee stared down at his covers. Tessa smiled as her daughter's earnest words went on and on. A talent she, no doubt, inherited from her uncle Donald, who was famous for his lengthy prayers.

Since she hadn't been noticed, Tessa took the opportunity to study James Larabee. Despite the pain etched across his features, he certainly was nice to look at. And those eyes of his...they were a mesmerizing moss-green color. Surely he'd had many a lady vying for his attentions back in Alabama. Had he ever married? Did he have children?

"And we ask all this in Your name, Amen!" Louanne finished off. James looked up about that time and caught Tessa staring at him with what she knew must be a dreamy expression on her face. Tessa quickly looked away.

It seemed she was destined to be embarrassed around this man every time they were together!

Pulling together her remaining shreds of composure, Tessa folded her arms and addressed her daughter. "Louanne, why don't you finish gathering those eggs I'd started earlier. And don't forget to put on your coat!"

Louanne passed Mr. Larabee a look that said she was not happy with the request then stood up. "A daughter's work is never done!" she wailed as she left the room.

Tessa watched the door close then turned back to her guest. "Well," she said nervously, "how are you feeling?"

Mr. Larabee waved a hand at his leg. "It was hurting pretty bad, but

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it seems to have calmed down a bit.” The last part of the sentence was spoken with a touch of bewilderment, Tessa thought.

She nodded and wiped her palms on her skirts. “Mr. Larabee, I . . . uh . . . I hope that you didn’t take my getting upset earlier. . . personal, it’s just that it took me by surprise and. . .”

“It’s alright, Mrs. Wise. You and your daughter live here alone, with your husband dead and all, and I am a stranger. Worse than that, a male stranger. If you can just tell me where I can find a room to rent, I’ll get out of here first thing.”

She felt herself blush again. Louanne must have told him that her father was dead. Now, Tessa not only felt like a bad hostess, she was a liar, too. “No, I’m just trying to apologize, Mr. Larabee. Of course, you must stay here. We have plenty of room and you’re going to need someone to look after you.”

She’d avoided making eye contact with him, until she spoke those last words. Then she looked up at him, and there it was again. That connection that said so much, yet made so little sense. She quickly glanced down.

He looked away, too. “Well, I surely do appreciate the offer, Mrs. Wise.” He paused then spoke again. “Why don’t you pull up a chair and let me tell you about myself. It might make you feel more comfortable if you know who I am.”

She looked back at him and smiled shyly. “I think that’s a good idea. I have to admit that I’ve been curious about why you were riding through our woods,” she replied as she walked over to the corner of the room and pulled the wooden straight-back chair to the side of his bed.

He grinned sheepishly as he watched her get comfortable. “Well, as far as traveling through your woods is concerned, a fellow in Mississippi told me about this trail. Told me it was the best way to get to Oklahoma where I’m supposed to meet up with a wagon train headed out to California.”

Tessa shook her head in bemusement. “And now you’re going to be late because someone shot you in my woods. You know I still don’t know who would have shot you and run away.”

James’s face grew grim. “I don’t know either, but I would like to report it to the sheriff. . .that is, if Wiseville has one.”

THE FARMER'S BRIDE COLLECTION

“Yes, actually. . .”

James groaned and held out a hand. “Don’t tell me it’s another Wise brother!”

Tessa laughed, feeling more and more at ease with the gentleman. “I’m afraid so. And I’m sure he’ll be over here along with the rest of the clan when they find out that you are staying here.” None of them would be able to resist it. They’d been trying to fix Tessa up with every available man in the area and she’d had nothing to do with them. And now having a man living under her roof would definitely get their attention. Wanted or not!

The Wises were good people, but they just didn’t understand why she wasn’t interested in any of the men they’d introduced her to. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to marry again, because she did. In fact, she dreamed of having a husband again and being in the same kind of loving relationship she’d enjoyed with her late husband, Will. She wanted more children, too. But she had yet to meet a man she felt a connection to, someone she wanted to know better.

Until now. . .

“I hope that it won’t cause you trouble, Mrs. Wise. I know how folks can gossip.”

She waved off his concern. “You don’t understand Wiseville, Mr. Larabee. They are like overprotective mama bears to those they consider kin. They will be concerned about my safety, not my reputation. They know that I’m a good Christian woman and would never put my relationship with God in jeopardy by doing anything. . . foolish,” she told him, hoping that he understood her double meaning. She didn’t want him getting any ideas, either!

“But you were going to tell me about yourself,” she prompted, changing the subject.

“I am the eldest son of Andrew and Virginia Larabee of Dothan, Alabama. But I didn’t know my mother very well, only from what my father told me about her. She died giving birth to my brother, Joseph. So it was just the three of us. We lived in a big plantation house.” He smiled reminiscently. “Grew up living the pampered gentleman’s life, I suppose, although Daddy kept his promise to Mama and made sure we were in

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church every Sunday. But that didn't keep us from being a little spoiled. The cotton was plentiful, and we had everything money could buy."

"And you feel guilty about that," she guessed, when he paused.

He stared at her for a moment as if trying to read her thoughts. "Yes, I guess I do," he relented. "That and the fact that we owned slaves. I grew up thinking that it was normal to own other people, but I now know that it's wrong. The system wouldn't have lasted, with or without the war."

He sighed and stared forward as if he were seeing something other than the wall. "When the war began, I immediately enlisted just like all the other men who lived around us. My brother followed. We were patriots, full of enthusiasm to do our part, but reality quickly invaded our zeal. We saw and did things that we never thought we'd have to do. It became a quest for survival and longing for the war to be over and done with.

"Then, I got news that my brother had been killed, and then my father. . . I hadn't even known that he'd enlisted! I just wanted to go home. It didn't matter that I'd been promoted to captain or that I'd managed to come through unscathed. The war had suddenly gotten too close, become too personal. It had taken away my family," he finished gruffly. He closed his eyes for a second then looked at her apologetically.

"Mrs. Wise, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go on like this. I don't know. . ."

Tessa reached out and laid her hand on top of his. "It's alright, Mr. Larabee. I understand."

He shook his head and turned his hand palm up and grasped her fingers. "Of course you do. I'm not the only one who lost loved ones in that war. I didn't mean to drag up memories for you."

Tessa knew she should pull her hand away, but she found that she didn't want to. There was such comfort sitting there holding his hand and sharing his pain. A kindred bond pulled them together, one that she was unable to understand.

"Mr. Larabee, Will has been gone for three years, and I've made my peace with God about it." She noticed that he dropped his gaze when she mentioned God's name, just as she'd seen him do with Louanne, and she wondered about it. But she didn't pry. Perhaps she'd have the opportunity to bring up the subject later in the week.