



# *Fragile Dreams*

Karen Cogan

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She stood at her bedroom window and watched the full moon slip between the clouds in an overcast sky. She breathed the comforting scent of the damp earth of her home, shivering in the chilly air as she began to unhook the tiny buttons that closed the back of her dress.

She blinked, staring hard as a dark form moved from the barn toward the pump at the old well. She held her breath as she tried to make out what had collapsed near the well and was now lying still. As the moon made a brief appearance through the layer of clouds, Caroline could see the prostrate figure of a man.



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by

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Fragile Dreams

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**Dedication**

For the Lord





## CHAPTER ONE

*February 3, 1865*

Nate's left side ignited in an explosion of white hot pain. He felt his legs go out from beneath him as he sank to the ground, stunned. For a moment, he could not grasp that the gunshot he'd heard had produced his agony. He could not comprehend the violence that had suddenly shattered his peaceful afternoon. He realized too late that he'd been caught off guard by the morning's success. A troop of rebel soldiers had been captured in the woods just after dawn; Nate and two of his men had trudged back, assigned to make sure there were no stragglers. They didn't expect to find anyone. The quiet woods gave no hint of life, save for the birds and an occasional squirrel that scampered high overhead. Now he was down, and he'd heard enough gunfire to recognize the report of a rifle. His confusion dissolved into the reality that a bullet had knocked him from his feet. He'd seen lots of men shot. He'd watched men die. Nate had felt invincible, as though the protecting hand of God rested over him... until now.

His two companions knelt beside him. "The Lieutenant's been hit."

Private Nelson's words made no sense to Nate. He felt nothing now. Only shock.

Corporal Parker studied the wound with

worried eyes which Nate only barely comprehended. "These woods were supposed to be clear of rebels. Which way did the shot come from?"

The Private shook his head. "I don't know. I didn't see nothing. I just saw the Lieutenant go down."

"We'll lead them away and come back for you," Corporal Parker promised.

Nate nodded. He lay on his side in the scraggly grass and watched the men crouch before they dashed to the cover of the nearest tree. Shots rang from the sheltering ambush of the woods. His men returned fire.

Nate tried to raise himself onto his elbow, but the pain returned, making him dizzy and weak. He parted the grass and found he could see his men. Two horsemen had stolen up behind them. Nate couldn't raise himself high enough to see their faces, only the dark boots that rested in the stirrups.

"Drop your guns," demanded a gruff voice. Nelson and Parker had no choice but to obey. Their weapons landed with a dull thud onto the leaf covered ground. The horsemen edged forward.

"Turn around," commanded the second rider. The men turned slowly.

"You're not soldiers," Parker observed.

"If we were soldiers we'd have to take prisoners," drawled the first captor.

"Thanks to one of your canons, I'm not a soldier anymore," added the second. He squeezed off the trigger of his musket and Nelson hit the ground. The other man fired directly at Parker who fell beside Nelson.

Nate sank onto the earth, weak from shock at the cold-blooded murder of his men. Any moment, they might discover him and finish the job. The bush to his right quivered. He turned to the sound and saw the figure of a child crouched low behind the bush. The boy tensed as the crackle of parting

underbrush brought the men's booted footsteps in Nate's direction.

"Where's the one who went down first?"

"Over there."

Someone parted the bushes. Nate felt consciousness slipping away. He lay still, eyes closed as he offered his soul to God and waited for the shot.

"Not worth a bullet. He's already dead."

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Caroline pulled her faded beige shawl over her shoulders and stepped onto the portico. The chill of late afternoon penetrated the thin cotton of her skirt. She shivered as she scanned the fields that ended at the edge of the woods. The shots she'd heard frightened her. Andrew was out there somewhere. She was responsible now for the safety of her brother. She should never have let him leave the house. But it was so hard to keep a young boy cooped up with two women.

The door opened behind her, and she knew Gran had stepped out. Caroline felt her Grandmother's gnarled old fingers close gently on her forearm.

"Come on in, honey, before you catch your death of a chill."

Caroline looked into Gran's dark eyes. "Didn't you hear the shots?"

Gran frowned. "I guess my hearing isn't what it used to be."

Caroline shivered. "I want to bury myself under my covers and hide my ears. I never want to hear another gun shot. But Andrew is out there somewhere."

Her eyes filled with tears. "What if he's been hurt?"

Gran shook her head. A lock of grizzled grey hair had worked loose from its pin. "I'm sure Andrew's okay. Still, these are dangerous times, especially for young people."

Gran's words failed to assure Caroline. If her

other brother, James, failed to return from war, Andrew and Gran would be the only kin she'd have left. She remembered the way young Andrew patted her hand when Pa died last fall, and how he'd assured her he'd take care of her now. But Andrew was a child of ten, and she was a woman of twenty. It was she who must learn to be firm in protecting and caring for her young sibling.

Though her worn corset could hardly be laced tight enough to restrict her breathing, a tightness filled her chest as she peered into the gathering twilight. Andrew knew better than to worry her like this. Perhaps she should cut a switch off one of the magnolia trees that lined the drive and teach him a lesson. She sighed, knowing she could not force herself to do such a thing. Andrew was usually an obedient child. Perhaps knowing how much he'd worried her would be enough to keep him from repeating this behavior. If she couldn't force herself to punish him physically, she certainly wouldn't mince words.

She clutched at Gran.

"There! Look!" Andrew's tousled blond head appeared, bobbing as he dashed through the stubble of the field.

Gran squinted. "I expect you've got better eyes than me, too, but I told you he'd be coming. I'm going in to finish supper."

Caroline placed her hands on her hips in a gesture she'd seen her mother use when Caroline and James had been naughty. Andrew didn't remember Mama. She'd died giving him birth. So Caroline would have to stand in her place. Andrew reached the porch. His green eyes were wild and wide. His face looked so pale that Caroline hesitated before scolding him.

"Where have you been?"

Andrew placed a dirt encrusted hand atop the porch rail and stared down at his feet while he

caught his breath.

“Did you hear me, Andrew? I’ve been worried sick. Where have you been?”

He didn’t meet her eyes as he said, “Out to get berries. We never have pies any more, and I was hankering for Gran to make a pie. So I went looking to see if there was any early berries.”

“I heard shots in the woods. I was scared sick something had happened to you. Did you hear the shots?”

Andrew nodded. His chin quivered, and his jaw tensed with determination to subdue his emotions.

Caroline studied him. A chill filled her heart. What had this child seen to frighten him so?

Forgetting all about her need to scold, she tugged him toward the entry. “You come in and tell me what’s bothering you.”

She closed the heavy door behind her and faced her brother. “What happened out there?”

Andrew shifted his feet. “Dunno. I didn’t see nothing.”

“Anything,” Caroline corrected. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. “I heard shots so I hurried home.”

“You stay out of the woods for awhile, you hear?”

Andrew nodded.

“Supper’s on,” Gran called.

“Wash up,” Caroline told Andrew. She still had doubts as to whether he’d told her everything, but she knew of no way to pry any more out of him. He was home safe, and that was what mattered most.

Gran set out biscuits and gravy and coffee made from ground yams. Caroline felt her stomach tighten at the smell of food. Though they had not had to go hungry, she steadfastly pushed from her mind the memories of fried chicken, ham and mounds of steaming vegetables. The winter had dragged interminably since Pa died.

Caroline put on a cheerful front. “Won’t be long now until we can plant a vegetable garden. We can

have fresh peas and turnips all summer long.”

“Yes, it’ll be nice to see spring,” Gran agreed.

Caroline cast a worried glance at her brother. Andrew’s appetite usually drove him to devour whatever Gran set on the table. Tonight, he pushed his biscuit about, hardly eating half of what he’d been served. Caroline placed a hand on his cool forehead. “No fever. I guess you’re not sick. What’s bothering you?”

Andrew shrugged. “Guess I’m just not hungry.”

“Then you might as well help clear the table, and then get ready for bed.”

Andrew allowed her to precede him as they carried the dishes to the wash tub. She smiled at his manners. They might end up dirt poor, but no one would take away the fact that she’d make sure Andrew grew up to be every bit a gentleman.

A rap at the front door interrupted the clatter of dishes. Caroline’s hand flew to her throat as her heart set up a staccato beat. Though she received little news about the war, smoke from canons told her there’d been fighting along the river. Sherman’s army was on the march. If James had been in that battle, he could be wounded or dying. Perhaps, someone was bringing her news. She stared at Gran, her muscles frozen with dread.

“Are we expecting anybody tonight?” Gran asked.

Caroline shook her head. “I’ll go see who it is.” She looked at Andrew’s tense face and saw a reflection of their older brother. Andrew was growing to look more and more like James. He had the same green eyes and fair hair James had possessed at the same age. She wondered if his hair would grow darker as time passed, as James’s had.

She opened the door, to see James’s friend, Jed. Jed Mason was the sheriff of this county. Since Jed had returned with an injury from battle, he was one of the few eligible young men in the county to come

calling.

“Why Jed, won’t you come in?”

“I apologize for not asking permission to call. I was in the area and took the liberty of stopping by.”

Caroline breathed a sigh of relief that he was not bringing tragic news.

Andrew was standing in the doorway, so Caroline called to him, “You come ahead and say ‘hi’ to Jed. Then, you go up to bed. I’ll come along in a bit to tuck you in.”

Andrew held back. Caroline felt her frustration mount. “Andrew, I won’t have you being so balky. Now do as I say.”

Andrew took two small steps into the room, and froze. Jed’s eyes rested on Andrew. “Good evening, Andrew. You hurry on to bed. I’ve come to borrow your sister for a while.”

Caroline flinched at the patronizing tone toward her young brother. Jed had returned from war a man changed from the careless youth who had vied for her attention. Those days seemed so far behind them that an unwelcome knot of pain swelled in her throat. Pleasant evenings of balls and parties at other plantations were but memories now.

“Go on up, Andrew,” she said lightly. “I’ll be along soon.”

Andrew backed toward the stairs. The paleness of his face worried Caroline. She would have to get Gran to mix up one of her awful tasting remedies if he didn’t improve soon.

Jed bowed as she re-entered the room. “You look a picture of beauty.”

Caroline flushed. She knew wisps of dark hair had escaped her bun to frame her face. Her dress, once a bold print of tiny red and green flowers, had faded, and the cuffs had frayed. She pushed these thoughts from her mind. It was wrong to entertain vanity when men, perhaps even her brother, were dying in the war. Nonetheless, with a smile, she

thanked him for the compliment.

She sat on the other end of the settee and tried to sort the feelings that his presence always brought. He thought himself a suitor. That much was obvious. And she should be happy to have a beau. On the awful chance that James did not return, they could lose the plantation if they didn't have a man's help to run it.

Yet she felt chilled by the thought of marrying Jed. His eyes held the warmth of two blue marbles. And his often harsh expression belied the smile that curved his lips. The friend she'd once known was gone and she didn't know the man he'd become.

He regarded her with frank interest. "I hope I didn't impose on your hospitality by my unannounced visit."

Truth be told, Caroline would much prefer to have knitted by lamplight in the warm kitchen with Gran. Since it would be rude to admit as much, she shook her head.

"There's not much to do on winter evenings except worry about the war."

Jed shook his head. "My deputy had word the Yanks got past the roadblock at the river. Sherman's men waded downstream behind our troops. Major General McLaws had to retreat toward Branchville."

Caroline sucked in her breath. "It's going badly for our men. We can't hold on much longer, can we?"

"Don't you worry your pretty head. No Yankees are going to come anywhere near here. My men and I will personally see to that."

Caroline had not been truly afraid of the Yankees, at least not yet. She simply wanted the war over in hopes that life would go on the way it had before. It would be harder to plant the crops without the handful of slaves that had worked the land. But if they could raise a good crop themselves for one year, they could afford hired help the next. She brought her thoughts back to hear Jed's bitter

recriminations.

“If I hadn’t got wounded, I’d be helping the effort right now, killing as many Yanks as got in my sight. Whether I’m in uniform or not, I’m still a confederate soldier and proud of it.”

At the tremble in his voice, Caroline laid her hand on his sleeve. “Of course you are.”

With the speed of a hawk catching prey, he clasped her hand beneath his own. His fingers felt cool and clammy. Caroline shivered and longed to withdraw her hand. Yet, he held her so firmly that she could not. He looked into her eyes. The battle scar next to his mouth widened as he smiled, forming a grotesque line down his chin.

“You must have noticed my affection for you, Caroline. It must be hard for you, trying to raise Andrew and run this place all by yourself.”

“Gran is a great help,” Caroline blurted, wanting to stop him from offering a proposal.

“Of course she is,” Jed continued smoothly. “But Gran is getting old. Even with her help you’re carrying a terrible burden. Who will help you put in a crop this spring? You have to be realistic. What will you live on?”

She stiffened, pulling her hand free. “I’ve had no news of James. My hope is that he will return.”

The smile left Jed’s eyes. In its place, cold calculation glittered. He ran a hand along his face. “War often results in damage. I don’t mean to worry you, but if he does return he may be too injured to be of much use. I’m offering to marry you, to take over the plantation and spare James from coming home to a place that has decayed in his absence.”

Caroline’s head pounded. She studied the rich velvet of the settee as she grappled with her feelings. She should marry Jed. She owed it to Magnolia Manor and all that Pa had worked to build. Yet, the rebel in her nature balked at marrying a man she was not truly sure she could learn to love, a man

who even frightened her at times. Still, if she turned him down flat, whom would she marry if times got hard?

Stalling for time, she forced a smile. "I will consider your offer, Jed. It is kind of you to concern yourself with our needs. Still, I'd like to wait a little longer. The war can't last forever, and it would mean so much to me to have James's blessing on our union."

"You're only making things harder on yourself, Caroline. You're not suited for managing a plantation, and you'll blame yourself when you lose everything and come to me desperate and penniless."

The words frightened her. She stared into his eyes, looking for comfort and finding only stern disapproval. The pride born of her English ancestry lit a spark of temper. Circumstances were not so desperate that she would let fear goad her into marriage, not yet, at least.

She rose abruptly. "Thank you for calling. I really must go up and tuck in Andrew as I promised."

"Then I will take my leave and come calling again. Next week, perhaps?"

Caroline nodded curtly. She shivered, unable to convince herself that she enjoyed his attention as he lifted her hand and deposited a kiss. When he had disappeared into the night, Caroline stared at the closed door, unable to make the logic of this marriage submit to her reluctance.

She sighed as she picked up the lamp and started up the stairs. She tiptoed into Andrew's room. She was relieved to find him sleeping. He breathed evenly, his smooth, childish cheeks moving softly with each breath. She was glad she'd escaped hearing his prayers, something they still did out of habit. When she and James were small, her parents had come in every night to hear her prayers.

After Ma died, Pa raised Andrew in the habit of

nightly prayers. It had been months since Caroline had bothered to pray. After all, it was God who had taken Pa and allowed James to go to war. One by one, she was losing the people closest to her and perhaps, her home as well. Appealing to God had seemed about as helpful as whispering to the wind. If God chose to heap problems on her and not lift a finger to ease her distress, she wouldn't give Him the pleasure of hearing her pray. She could look to no one but herself for decisions that would affect her future.

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## CHAPTER TWO

Caroline clutched her shawl about her shoulders as she gathered her courage and forced her leaden feet down the stairs. She reached the front door and paused, longing to go back to her room and bury herself beneath her covers. All that propelled her forward was the knowledge that, with Gran getting older, the responsibility of the household's safety fell squarely upon her shoulders. Besides, she could never fall asleep knowing that a man lay in her yard.

She compelled her shaking fingers to twist the doorknob. The humid night air enveloped her, urging her forward to whatever waited. If Pa was alive or James was home, she would not be out here, shivering in the night. But they were not. So, for the first time, she wished she had married Jed. Then she could have stayed safely inside while he dealt with unexpected events.

She stiffened her spine, annoyed by her cowardice, and reminded herself that the war had robbed many women of the protection of their men. Yet, in spite of her resolve, the cacophony of crickets was hardly noticeable above the sound of her ragged breathing. Nonetheless, she moved ahead, driven by the necessity to discover whether the motionless figure was dead.

She could see him better now. He lay on his side, knees drawn, and hands pressed to his ribs. He moaned softly and Caroline drew a sharp breath at

the sight of his blue uniform. How had a wounded Yankee soldier found his way to her yard?

She crouched beside him, debating what to do. If he died, she and Gran could simply bury him and hope the Yankees didn't discover the grave and shoot them for murder. But if his wounds were not fatal, she could hardly leave him lying in the yard. The Yankees might find him and accuse her of the shooting.

Swiftly, she turned back for the house, her feet flying over the damp grass. She dashed into Gran's bedchamber on the first floor. Her entrance startled the sleeping woman, who sat up and grasped about the nightstand for her spectacles.

Clutching the bed post, Caroline gasped, "Bundle up. You have to help me."

Gran stared at Caroline as though she were a ghost. "Caroline, what are you doing up this time of night?"

"A Yankee soldier is lying wounded in our yard. I don't know how bad he's hurt."

"A Yankee?" Gran lurched out of bed and felt for her slippers. She pulled a wrap about her shoulders and followed Caroline through the dark house and into the night.

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Nate swallowed hard against the pain that threatened to consume him. His side felt like a burning poker had lodged beneath his flesh. Yet, in the midst of his agony, he'd roused from his semi-conscious stupor and seen a woman, an angel perhaps. But she'd gone now, leaving him miserably alone when he'd wanted desperately to ask for a drink. It was only his discomfort that convinced him that she'd not been an angel.

He tried to swallow, but his mouth was dry. Too bad he'd not reached the spigot before his strength failed, and he'd blacked out.

He rolled his head back and studied the