

— A NOVEL BY SHARLENE
MACLAREN

HER *Steadfast*
HEART



WHITAKER
HOUSE

Publisher's Note:

This novel is a work of fiction. References to real events, organizations, or places are used in a fictional context. Any resemblances to actual persons, living or dead, are entirely coincidental.

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

HER STEADFAST HEART

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DEDICATION

I lovingly dedicate this book to Debbie...
friend forever, sister of my heart.

June 1864 • Lebanon, Ohio

Captain Joseph Fuller stepped down from the train, planted his feet on Deerfield Station's wooden platform in South Lebanon, Ohio, and observed the crowd gathered around him, seeking out a familiar face. Seeing none, he gazed upward for a moment, squinting at a wispy cloud creeping slowly past the brilliant sun. The sky could not be bluer, and any normal soul would take joy at the sight of it. However, he hadn't considered himself normal for quite some time, so the azure sky did little to lift his spirits. Someone bumped against him and muttered, "Pardon, soldier," before he realized he stood in the path of another passenger, a burly fellow who'd smoked a cigar the entire time on the last leg of the trip from Cincinnati to Lebanon. He moved to the side, breathed deep of the day's fresh air, and hefted the strap of his knapsack over his shoulder.

"Here's y'r valise, Captain," said the driver, dropping the thing on the ground so that the dust flew. In it were a spare set of trousers and a shirt, some underclothes, and his tooth powder and brush.

"Thank you." Joseph picked up the valise by its worn handle and set off toward the row of waiting stagecoaches, one of which would deliver him to Lebanon House, where he hoped to find one of his brothers

waiting to drive him to the family farm. That old sun seared through the thick fabric of his worn woolen uniform, heating his shoulders till he swore it would burn holes straight through the fabric. Nothing unusual about that though. He'd spent thousands of hours marching up and down trails on hot summer days. Probably sweated buckets too whilst fighting for the Union!

An annoying pebble slipped through the hole in the toe of his scuffed leather boot as he slogged across the gravelly path toward the nearest stage, but he'd ignore it till he got home. He'd have to stop by Ma's house first to visit a spell before heading to his white two-story farmhouse. He knew just the sight of the wide steps leading up to the covered porch would probably put a small spot of warmth at the center of his heart. He wasn't sure if his rowdy bunch of kids would be at the main house with Ma or with his sister-in-law Cristina, but he'd round them up from somewhere and take them home with him.

Before he could speak to the stagecoach driver, who stood at the ready to offer train passengers a ride to their next stop, he heard a male voice call out, "Joey, wait up!" He spun around to find his older brother Jack jogging toward him. Jack reached him with an outstretched arm to shake his hand, but quickly grabbed Joey into a bear hug instead. "Welcome home, brother," Jack said, setting him back and squeezing both his shoulders in a vice-like hold, providing Joey with his first smile of the day. "I've been in town buying supplies, but I timed my errands around the train's arrival from Cincinnati. I see I'm a few minutes late."

"Don't worry about it. I wasn't expecting a welcoming party. Actually, I thought you'd be picking me up over at the Lebanon House Station."

"Naw, I decided the extra drive would be nice. Gives us time to talk before your kids and Ma start monopolizing your time. How long you home for?"

"I was due a two-week furlough, so I'm using it."

The two stood and gazed at each other for a couple moments before Jack slapped Joey on the arm and said, "Well, come on then. My rig's parked over there."

Once at the two-horse wagon, both climbed aboard the high seat and settled in for the six-mile jaunt to the Fuller Family Farm.

"So, Ma told you about my predicament I presume," Joey said after Jack veered onto the main road.

"She did. Both Cristina and I have been doing what we can till you could make it home and see to other arrangements. Isn't this about the fourth or fifth nanny to have quit on you?"

"Fifth, I believe. Even I've lost count." His children were a bit more than a handful, sometimes downright unruly, and he'd had a hard time managing them since his wife Sarah Beth's passing some three and a half years ago. He often wondered if he'd made a big mistake in leaving them for the sake of the Union just months after her passing. In fact, the question haunted him. *Had he joined for the right reasons, or had he looked at the opportunity to serve his country as a means for escaping his family responsibilities?* His kids had grown so much, especially Isaac, and it pained him to think of all that he'd missed. Still, he'd made a commitment to his country, so there'd been little he could do but see that obligation through.

"How's Ma doing with that broken leg?" he asked, wanting to go a different direction with his thoughts.

"She's feisty as ever, trying not to let that wheelchair slow her down, and for the most part, it doesn't. Doc says she's healing well. Maybe another month or so in the cast. She, of course, blames those two last steps on the stairs. She swears they weren't there before." That gave Joey a chuckle. "Ma hates that she couldn't just take over the care of your kids, but that leg..."

"I totally understand. I don't want to make my children her responsibility, never have. It's enough that she and Cristina chip in as much as they do. I appreciate it." He removed his hat and drove his big hand through his fresh-cut hair. He'd had to make himself at least halfway presentable to his mother before walking through her door. Of course, that hot train ride hadn't done much for his sweltering body. "Are my kids at Ma's now?"

"No, they're actually at my house playing with their cousins. You can get them after you've had some time with Ma."

"Sounds good." He took a gander at familiar territory as the wagon bounced along. He placed his hat back on his head. "It's always good to get back home."

"You don't have much longer. Isn't your discharge date coming up?"

"Actually, middle October. Don't recall the exact date. You're right, it's coming up on me."

"You must be looking forward to it."

"It will be good to have fulfilled my commitment with the Army, but life on the field is so hectic, I haven't had time to think about my discharge."

A long-tailed weasel darted in front of them, probably searching out its supper. "War sure is an ugly thing," said Jack. "But despite the death and destruction, this one's been especially necessary."

"True enough. How's Cristina? And when's your baby due?" Joey didn't feel like talking about the war. Too many other things filling his mind.

"She's feeling well now that she's finally stopped retching. These last few months will go fast. Doc says probably early to mid-November, but only God and that little one knows for sure. I've built a crib, and we've converted one of the spare rooms down the hall into a nursery."

Joey gave a wistful nod of the head. "You and Cristina make for a perfect little family."

"I'll admit the Lord has blessed us."

Joey refrained from any further comments. He didn't wish to get into any sort of religious talk with his brother. He'd get enough of that from Ma.

"You got anything in mind for finding your next nanny?" Jack asked. "Haven't you about exhausted your resources around town?"

"Sure have. I'm afraid my kids' reputation precedes them. I got some ideas, one in particular."

Jack stayed focused on the road. They hit another rut in the road, and the two knocked against each other. "Sheesh, can't you see them things coming?" Joey asked.

"You wanna take the reins?" Jack asked.

"I'd probably do a better job."

"Doubt it. I've always been the better handler."

"Just because you're older doesn't make you the expert."

They sparred for a while, each trying to outdo the other with playful insults. Soon they reached the road on which the Fuller property came into view. In the distance, Joey spotted the familiar silos and barns in the distance and knew it wouldn't be long till they reached the narrow, well-driven, two-track road with the customized sign over the entrance reading "Fuller Family Farms." His gut lurched. He thought about the idea he had stored in his head and couldn't help but worry about Ma's reaction to it.

"You mentioned a while back that you got a plan in place for what to do with your kids. Mind if I ask what it is?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Matter of fact, you should probably be sitting close to Ma when I tell her about it. You may need to pick her up off the floor."