

When the Far Hills
Bloom

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WATERBROOK
PRESS

WHEN THE FAR HILLS BLOOM
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
2375 Telstar Drive, Suite 160
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80920
A division of Random House, Inc.

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ISBN 1-57856-140-X

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Noble, Diane. 1945-

When the far hills bloom / Diane Noble. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-57856-140-X (pbk.)

I. Title.

PS3563.A3179765W5 1999
813'.54—dc21

99-22462
CIP

Printed in the United States of America
2003

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Though the fig tree may not blossom,
Nor fruit be on the vines;
Though the labor of the olive may fail,
And the fields yield no food;
Though the flock may be cut off from the fold,
And there be no herd in the stalls—

Yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.

The LORD God is my strength;
He will make my feet like deer's feet,
And He will make me walk on my high hills.

HABAKKUK 3:17-19
(New King James Version)

ONE

Rancho de la Paloma

May 1861

Winds from the east were already kicking up a wild warmth, clearing the air of mist and dust, etching the skyline against the rays of the rising sun. Another day of scorching heat was in store, fed by the desert winds, and if many such days followed, the already pale green grass would soon turn golden, then brown. Days like today matched Aislin D’Ary Byrne’s spirits.

In the distance, a rider approached from the direction of a neighboring rancho, and Aislin stood as she recognized Jamie Dearbourne. Tall in the saddle, shoulders broad and proud. He kicked his dark stallion to a gallop, yanked off his hat, and waved to her as he rode.

The sun slipped over the San Jacintos, bathing the windswept lands of the Big Valley in light. Aislin caught glimpses of Jamie through the cottonwood branches as he rode, and the sounds of falling dirt clods and rocks told her the sorrel was climbing the final and steepest part of the trail.

Minutes later, Jamie swung one leg over his saddle and dismounted with a soft thud of boots on the ground. Aislin watched him from where she’d perched atop the stone wall around the fort they had built as children.

He swept off his hat and gave her a mock bow. “M’lady,” he said. His eyes crinkled at the corners when he again lifted his gaze to hers and a slow and crooked grin took hold of his face. A grin she couldn’t resist. Had never been able to resist.

“Jamie, this is serious.” But she found it difficult to remain solemn; it was always that way in the presence of Jamie Dearbourne. She smiled in spite of herself. “Oh, Jamie...” she murmured, shaking her head

slowly. “Can’t you understand how difficult this is for those who love you? You act as if you’re leaving on a holiday—not a journey of twenty-five hundred miles.”

He sat down easily beside her on the rock wall, stretching out his lanky legs, crossing his feet at the ankles. “Can it be that I’m finally hearing that you might miss me?”

Her heart was about to break, but she bit her lip to keep the tears from spilling. “It’s not our war. Not your war. I don’t understand your reasons for going.”

“But you didn’t answer my question.” He was grinning at her, and the way the morning sunlight hit his face caused her heart to catch. “About missing me, I mean.”

He glanced at her hand, which rested in her lap. She imagined what it would feel like to have the comfort of his rough, warm hand wrapped around hers. But he hadn’t held her hand since they were children when the gesture held no more meaning than sweet friendship.

“Your family and mine will be praying for your swift journey back to us,” she said, still not willing to answer his question. “You know that.”

His eyes seemed almost merry as he beheld her. “The war is my duty, sweet Aislin. The duty of every red-blooded Southerner. My mother’s family lives in Tennessee. If you’re about to argue with me about my being a Reb...” He laughed heartily.

She saw the spirited gleam in his eye. He’d been caught up in the jubilant rush to arms and glory, and especially the honor of the battle, just as so many young men in the East had been. How it had reached all the way to California, she couldn’t guess. But it was so like him. He’d fight the Federals single-handed if he had the chance. It always had been that way with Jamie, and probably always would be. But that was part of his charm, part of what she loved about him. Some people, including her sisters, thought him cocky. She saw him as strong.

“I’ll be coming back for you, my sweet, if that’s your worry.” His eyes twinkled.

“Jamie, you’re heading into grave danger,” she reminded him, “and you seem to be paying it no mind.”

He laughed. “And you’re no different than when we were children. Always reminding me of my place. Reminding me God hasn’t placed me in charge of his creation and all the people in it.” He laughed again.

“I wish you would see that this is no laughing matter.” But even as she spoke, Aislin knew Jamie’s feelings about duty. He would not turn his back on a fight. He would see it to an honorable end—though she suspected that duty came second to proving himself through his triumph.

She stood abruptly and walked to an outcropping of boulders nestled among some scrub pines, buckthorn, and manzanita. Before her spread a view of her father’s rancho, stretching to the jagged peaks of the San Jacintos like a pale green-gold sea. When she spoke, she didn’t turn back to him. “I thought life would always go on the way it is now.”

“Nothing can stay the same forever, Aislin.”

She turned toward him again. Though he was a man of twenty-two, his expression was as playfully roguish as it had been at twelve. His shock of unruly wheat-colored hair, ears that stuck out slightly, and the glint in his dark eyes only added to the illusion.

Aislin’s heart caught; she turned away from him. “I will miss you, Jamie.”

Behind her, a low chuckle rumbled from Jamie’s throat. “Aha. There it is at last. I never thought I’d live to hear those words.” There was a soft crunch of boots on stones as he moved toward her, and a moment later, he reached for her shoulder and turned her toward him. She raised her eyes to meet his.

“Is there something more you’ve been wanting to say, Ceallach?”

His use of her nickname caused the back of her throat to sting. When she was eight and he was ten they had set about building this fort, pretending it was an ancient Celtic ruin in the heart of Ireland. Jamie found the name in a Gaelic book belonging to Aislin’s father, read its meaning—warrior maid—and said if she had to have a Gaelic name, she needed one that fit her better than Aislin, which meant flower. She always wondered if he’d chosen it because he didn’t think her pretty or if he simply valued strength more than beauty.

“How long will you be away?”

“From all reports, the war will not last long. The Yanks may think they can crush the Rebs.” He laughed. “But everyone knows the South will enjoy a swift and decisive victory.”

“That’s what folks here say, but...”

He placed a fingertip on her lips to shush her. “I’ll be coming back, Ceallach, I promise.” It was the first time Jamie had touched her with such intimacy, and she blinked in surprise. He stepped closer again. His dark eyes had lost their boyish look.

This was a Jamie she had never seen.

He touched her cheek. So light. So loving. He was closer now. He nodded again, slowly. “There’s so much I want to tell you, Ceallach.”

She cleared her throat and swallowed hard. “You do?” she managed, hoarsely.

“I want to speak to your father before I leave...about asking for your hand in marriage.”

She stared at him. She had loved Jamie for as long as she could remember and had dreamed of the day he might tell her he loved her too.

“Ceallach, I want to marry you. I mean, if you’ll have me.” His words rushed out as if he had been planning them for an eternity, holding them inside for nearly as long. He raised a brow as if asking a silent question.

“Oh, Jamie!” She caught both hands to her face and, speechless for once in her life, felt her eyes fill with tears. “Oh, Jamie!” she repeated. When she recovered her breath, she said, “You know my father will say yes. He’s always said that we should marry. Our families have counted on it.”

He touched his fingers to her lips again and looked almost shy as he beheld her. “I love you, Ceallach,” he said quietly, still gazing into her eyes. “It doesn’t matter what our fathers planned...or what our coming together will cause for both ranchos. All that matters is our love.”

Aislin bit her lip, not trusting her voice. She looked up into his face, that face filled with quiet confidence. Sighing deeply, she smiled into his eyes.

“But you haven’t said whether you love me, Ceallach.” He let the question hang. And then he raised her hands and brushed them lightly

with his lips. “Do you love me enough to spend a lifetime with me?”

She touched his face. “I love you enough to spend all the days of my life with you! But...”

“Do you have doubts, Aislin?” He didn’t look worried.

“I don’t want to wait,” she said. He smiled, almost as if he expected her words. She went on. “Let’s marry now, Jamie. Before you leave.”

He dropped her hands and turned to look toward the distant hills. He didn’t speak, as if considering her request. She moved to stand beside him, circling his waist with her arm. “I’m afraid for you, Jamie. If I let you go...” Her voice caught and she didn’t finish what was in her heart. That if she let him go, he might not return.

“It isn’t the right time,” he finally said. “For marriage, I mean.”

“Jamie, look at me.” He turned toward her again. “It’s the war, isn’t it, that’s so dangerous after all? I mean, you sense it too?”

His eyes couldn’t lie. He nodded finally. “Yes, Ceallach. I don’t want to make you a widow.”

She caught Jamie’s hands in hers. “My heart will belong to you whether we’re married or not before you leave. And I promise I’ll wait for you, no matter how long.” As she spoke, Jamie’s crooked smile returned.

Jamie reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a small cloth drawstring pouch. He pulled it open and, lifting Aislin’s left hand, slipped a thin gold ring onto her third finger.

“God be with us,” he whispered as he drew her into his arms, “while we are parted and bless us when we meet again.”

She stood on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his neck as he kissed her.

“I love you, Jamie Dearbourne,” she whispered when she could breathe again.

August 1861

Jamie arrived in St. Louis, trail-dirty and bone-tired, planning to be in the lively riverside town just long enough for a bath and a haircut and a decent night’s sleep in a real bed. He took a room above a saloon just off the boardwalk for one night only.

After a soak in a bathtub he'd ordered brought to his room, he headed down the stairs and into the saloon for the biggest slab of buffalo steak the cook could fit in his frying pan.

Even before he entered the dining room, Jamie could hear laughter and the sounds of raucous voices. Three rough but friendly looking men sat in one corner near the door. He heard snatches of bragging about life on the Santa Fe Trail as he stepped past their table and gave them a friendly nod, knowing what trail life was like.

"Sit yerself down, boy," said the oldest of the three, a man with coarse gray hair and bad teeth. He gave a nearby chair a short kick in Jamie's direction.

"Don't mind if I do," Jamie said as he sat.

"Name's Madden," said the man, reaching across the table to shake Jamie's hand.

"Jamie Dearbourne. Glad to make your acquaintance."

"This here's Dwyer," he nodded to a somber-looking man with leathery skin and thin lips. "And the kid there goes by Neal." He grunted a laugh. "Long as I've known him, he's never said whether it's his first or last name."

"Doesn't matter, does it?" said the young man, sounding surly. He was sandy-haired and as leathery-skinned as the other two.

"Where you headed?" Madden asked.

"Plan to join the Confederacy. Soon as I cross the Mississippi."

"Do you now?" Madden said, though not in an unfriendly way. "Me and my partners here talked about it once..." He laughed. "For about a half-minute. Then decided just about anything is better'n being shot at."

Jamie grinned. "Can't say as I blame you. Some are called...some aren't."

"Some might take offense at your attitude," said Neal, with something that looked like a sneer. "There're some who think everyone's called, whether they agree or not."

"I guess they've got a right to their opinion," Jamie countered. The other three men didn't smile.

“You better mind yourself, son,” said Madden, looking around the room.

“What do you mean?”

Dwyer leaned back in his chair, studying Jamie. “I hear tell there’re those buying and selling folks to the military.”

Jamie laughed, though now slightly nervous. Suddenly none of the three looked as friendly as before. “What do you mean?”

“They come across young men, traveling alone usually. No kin in sight. Nobody who’ll miss ’em. Might hit ’em over the head. Hogtie ’em. Ship ’em down the ol’ Mississipp’ and sell ’em to the highest bidder.”

Jamie narrowed his eyes. He didn’t want to jump to conclusions, but it was clear he needed to get away from these men. He rose to his feet, only to find there was someone else standing behind him. A hand as big as a hamhock pushed him back into his chair.

“Now, you do as we tell you, and you won’t get hurt,” said Madden.

Jamie felt the barrel of a gun in his ribs, obviously coming from Dwyer, sitting to his right. He sat up straighter and glanced around the room. No one was paying the least attention to him, to the men at the table, or to the gun in his ribs, for that matter. The whiskey flowed and the men around the bar were laughing and talking. Someone was playing a tinny piano in the corner, and several of the men nearby were singing, their voices loud and slurred.

Even so, Jamie figured, these thugs wouldn’t try anything here in front of everyone.

“What’s the matter?” Madden said with a grin that showed his brown teeth. “Cat got yer tongue?”

The others laughed.

“I need to be going,” Jamie stood again, only to be slammed into his chair once more by the hulking presence standing behind him.

“You’ll leave with us, son,” said Madden. “When we’re ready to go. And we ain’t ready. Not yet.”

Jamie watched for a chance to make his move. He planned to drop and roll to the floor, hoping to draw attention to his plight before the

gun in his ribs was fired. He waited for the piano player to stop, even for a moment. That would be his signal.

The men appeared to have let down their guard and were laughing with each other, seeming to pay no mind to Jamie. The piano stopped. Jamie dropped to the floor, just as he had planned.

He held his breath, waiting for the explosion of gunfire. There was none.

He scrambled to standing, ready to lunge. But Madden, blocking his path, gave him a slow smile, then nodded at the other two men. Dwyer grabbed one of Jamie's arms, Neal, the other. The big presence who'd been standing behind him was a giant of a man, towering over the others, greasy hair falling in strands to his shoulders.

"Don't let them take me," he implored the suddenly silent room. All eyes were watching the group. But the expressions were disinterested. "Don't let them take me!"

"My son can't seem to keep hisself outa trouble," Madden said with a shrug. "His brothers here are always havin' to haul him outa places he shouldn't be. Usually from too much wine, women, and song..."

Some of the men at the bar snickered.

"It's not like that!" Jamie shouted. "These aren't my kin."

"He's also a little tetch'd," said Madden. "Don't even know his own family."

Jamie struggled again, kicking and howling, but to no avail. Suddenly he was dragged through the saloon doors, backwards, out into the hot, humid night. The men chuckled as they hauled him, still kicking, down the boardwalk. His boot heels clunked against the wooden planks in rhythm with the men's tapping boots as they walked.

"Looks like we bagged ourselves another'n," said Neal proudly. "Makes ten this month."

An argument ensued over the exact numbers. They showed no more concern for Jamie than if he were a sack of grain they were dragging to the river.

A breeze off the Mississippi carried its odor into Jamie's nostrils long before they reached the wharf. By the time the barge loomed in the dark

night, he had been thrown to the ground, hogtied, and readied to toss into the hold.

Minutes later the heavy door of the hold slammed closed. Utter silence met him.

Jamie was aware only of the darkness and the greatest fear he had ever known.

September 1862

Aislin knelt in the courtyard, clipping spent roses from the bushes near the fountain. By winter it would be time to prune the branches, making them look barren and sad for a while, but come spring, they would burst forth with a froth of blossoms, unless the dire predictions of drought came true. She wondered if Jamie might be home in time to see them in full bloom.

She hummed to herself as she worked and pictured meeting him in this very courtyard. He would stride toward her in his Rebel uniform, the gray matching his eyes. The scent of roses would fill the air... She sighed and moved to another rosebush.

"Aislin, lass?" MacQuaid Byrne's voice was solemn when he called out to her. He hesitated on the stone terrace that led into the courtyard, his gaze never leaving her face. "It hurts me to bear such tidings as this."

Frowning, she stood, then brushed off her hands. The look on her father's face nearly caused her heart to stop. "Jamie..." she whispered. "It's Jamie, isn't it?"

He nodded, looking as still and quiet as she ever remembered seeing him, his face lined with sorrow. "Spence has just now come to see you. He'll tell you everything."

"Oh, Papa..." She stood abruptly, letting her hands drop. It had been seven months since Spence rode East to search for his brother. She had never stopped believing that Jamie was safe, even though both families worried when no word reached them of Jamie's arrival. Even when Spence left, she had refused to consider that Jamie was anywhere except with his regiment. He was simply too busy to write. Jamie was courageous...fearless...strong. He was invincible.

MacQuaid drew her into his arms. “Oh, my poor, sweet lass,” he said.

He was still murmuring words of comfort when Spence’s voice broke into her thoughts.

“Aislin?” he said softly. Through a blur of tears, she saw Jamie’s brother striding across the terrace. “I’m so sorry...” he said, once he stood in front of her.

She nodded, but couldn’t speak. Not yet.

Her father gently squeezed her shoulders before letting go. “I’ll leave you two alone. Spence has already given your mother and me the details. But I am certain you will want to hear it firsthand, lass.”

When he left them, Spence took her elbow and they moved to the stone bench beneath the century oak at the far end of the courtyard. “Tell me everything,” she said, once she was seated.

Spence sat across from her on another stone bench. He bent forward earnestly. “I followed Jamie’s trail to St. Louis. I heard from others he’d first gone there.”

Aislin nodded, recalling the trail Jamie had told her he’d take.

“I found those who remembered him, remembered what happened to him.”

A lump formed in Aislin’s throat. “Go on,” she whispered.

“I found the saloon where he stayed for just a short time.” Spence shook his head. “Some dirty business went on there.”

Aislin was almost afraid to ask what business, but she had to know. “And Jamie got caught up in it?”

Spence nodded slowly. “Not of his own accord.” He hesitated as if trying to decide how much to tell her. When he spoke again, his voice was low. “Jamie was accosted.”

“Accosted?” she frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“A group of thugs, an outlaw Rebel band, was being paid so much a head to get folks signed up to fight. Didn’t matter where a victim’s loyalties lay, he was forced into a Reb uniform.”

“Go on,” she whispered.

“They got Jamie. Took him by force. I followed their trail. They were headed to Fort Donelson. That’s where the fighting was—also

where the Reb colonel was camped.” He paused. “It’s also where Jamie escaped. Near the fighting.”

“Escaped?” She leaned forward, her heart pounding. “So there’s a chance he’s alive then?”

Spence shook his head. “No, Aislin. There’s not.” His voice was hard when he went on. “He was shot in the back as a deserter.”

Aislin dropped her face to her hands, letting Spence’s words sink into her heart. But she did not yet weep. Her grief seemed too great, too deep. “No,” she said softly, as if to herself. “It can’t be...”

“I saw his grave.” Then his tone softened. “He wasn’t running away from the fight. He was a Reb at heart, at least he was when he left here. But true to Jamie’s spirit, he was going after the thugs who’d captured him. He wanted to see that justice was done, even if he had to take on the entire Confederate Army to do so. It was a matter of honor.”

She finally looked up at Spence, his face blurred by her tears. “So like him,” she whispered.

Just then, Camila and MacQuaid stepped onto the terrace. Josefa, the maid, stood behind them, holding a silver tray with tea and small cakes. But the thought of taking tea, even though it was her mother’s cure for everything from dyspepsia to melancholy, was more than Aislin could bear.

She took a deep breath and stood. Without a word, she blindly pushed past her mother, her father, and Spence, who’d stood when she did. Her father reached out to grasp her hand, but she brushed it aside. “I need to be alone,” she cried as she hurried up the terrace stairs. “Please...I’ll be all right.”

When she reached the entry hall, her sisters, who’d obviously heard the sad news, stood white-faced. Even Sybil, whose heart often seemed made of stone, was sniffing. Sybil started toward her, but Aislin waved her away. Brigid’s pretty eyes were red-rimmed, and she reached out to give Aislin a hug. But Aislin shook her head. “Please, I must go,” she whispered, and hurried out the front door and down the wide stone stairs.

She ran straight to the eastern corral, saddled Silverheel, and moved the horse into an easy canter as they headed across the fields. The sun

now beat hard on her shoulders, and its heat scorched her face. She nudged the mare lightly in the flanks with her heels, turning her toward the trail leading to the place where Jamie had asked for her hand. Small stones rolled down behind Silverheel's hooves, and clouds of dust rose as the horse worked his way upward.

Minutes later, she dismounted, turning Silverheel loose to graze on the dry grass beneath the scrub oaks. She faced west, looking out over the dry rancho lands.

The drought, just as predicted by the Sobobas, had indeed settled across the region, and now there was little water to quench the land's thirst or bring seeds to life.

A hot wind lifted her hair from her sunburned face. Dry and harsh, it beat through the pines behind her and bent the dusty limbs and leaves of the scrub growth before her.

She thought she heard Jamie's voice in the sound of it. "Ceallach," it murmured. "Ceallach."

But it was only the wind. It would be a long season of suffering.

Spence Dearbourne urged Ruffian, his bronze sorrel, up the small hillside. Moments later he reached the top and saw Aislin standing near the rock wall. She was looking across the valley below, now shimmering with heat in the autumn sun.

If she had seen him ride up the trail behind her, she gave no indication. He dismounted and strode toward her. "Aislin?"

She drew a deep breath and turned. Her eyes were watery and filled with pain. "I came here to be alone," she whispered.

"I started to let you go, then I remembered how it was when I found out Jamie had died. I wanted to talk to someone who knew him...who loved him as much as I did. But I was alone." He walked to the wall, near where she was standing, and leaned against it.

Aislin turned away from him.

"I wanted to talk about Jamie. About his goodness and honesty. His decency."

Her gaze was fixed on some distant spot.

“It might help to tell me your feelings, Aislin. Tell me about times you spent together.”

Now he had her attention.

“It was here Jamie asked me to marry him,” she said. “We played here as children. Pretended this was a castle in Ireland.” She laughed softly, sniffing at the same time. “Though neither of us knew what an Irish castle might look like.”

He gave her his handkerchief. “I remember that you and Jamie wanted the place all to yourselves. Your sisters and I couldn’t decide exactly why. We’d come up here when you two were off riding elsewhere.” He grinned. “We’d nose around, trying to figure out the strange Gaelic words we saw carved here and there.”

“Ceallach...” she whispered.

“Yes,” he said. “That was one.”

“It means warrior maid.”

“I know,” he said. “I looked it up after I found it. I figured it was your name.”

“Jamie gave it to me.”

He nodded.

“We had plans to build our home here, on this hill, when Jamie returned,” she said, now walking toward another of the rock walls. She trailed her fingers along the tops of the granite stones. “We had such dreams...”

“I know,” he said.

She turned to look at him, her gray eyes still shimmering with moisture. “You do?”

“Jamie told me.” He paused. “He loved you, Aislin.”

“It seemed we always loved each other. Even as children.”

He wanted to ease her sorrow, but he didn’t have the words. He could only try. “We all loved Jamie; not the way you did, but we did love him.”

She looked stricken. “Oh, Spence. I’m sorry. You lost your brother,” she said. “I wasn’t thinking. Your parents lost a son...”

He reached for her hand and held it tight. “Don’t apologize. Don’t ever apologize for your grief.”

She was crying openly now, her face wet with tears. “If only I could have stopped him from going.”

“He wouldn’t have listened. You know Jamie. He was as stubborn as they come.”

“Always the hero.”

“Yes, always.” He smiled softly at her. “Do you remember what I used to call him?”

She shook her head, wiping at her nose.

“Saint Jamie.”

She grinned, quiet suddenly. “Saint Jamie? It’s been a long time since I’ve heard you call him that.”

He nodded. “But it fit him. He could do no wrong.”

She drew in a deep breath, wiping her cheeks with her fingers. “Oh yes. He was always first with the answers—even when no one asked the question.”

“Can you imagine what it was like living with a brother who was not only a hero, but a saint?”

“You never seemed bitter,” she said.

“I loved my brother. And he loved me”—he chuckled, and she raised a quizzical brow—“as long as I knew my place.”

“Jamie did have a way about him,” she said, “a way of taking charge.”

He laughed again. “I also called him Little Emperor. That he hated more than he did being called Saint Jamie.”

Her gaze searched his face as if reaching into his thoughts. “It couldn’t have been easy living with a brother who’s both saint and ruler.”

Her words surprised him.

“You didn’t hate Jamie for it?” she continued.

“How could anyone hate Jamie? He might have been more than a wee bit arrogant, as your father would say. Perhaps more willing than the average man to have his own way, but his heart was made of pure gold. He loved fiercely and honestly.”

She was quiet for a moment, and there was the faintest dusting of salt on her cheeks where her tears had dried. “But what about you, Spence? Growing up with Jamie as your older brother?”

“Do you mean, was it hard to live up to Jamie’s example?”

She nodded.

“You grew up around the two of us. What do you think?”

She smiled, and to Spence, it was as if the sun had risen for the second time that day. “You had your own way of going about life, Spence. You were never like Jamie at all.” She frowned, as if calling some distant memory to life. “It seems you’ve always had a different kind of strength...” Her voice fell off as she searched his face, seeming to grasp for something out of reach. “A strength of spirit somehow that far surpassed your brother’s. I think he knew it too.”

No one had ever said such a thing about his brother...about himself. Spence swallowed hard. The moment seemed sacred, and he knew Aislin’s words would long be etched in his soul. He reached for her hand, pressed her fingertips tenderly, then let it go. “Thank you,” he said simply.

She looked down at her ring, and turned it with the fingertips of her opposite hand. His heart went out to her. “Is there any way you could have been mistaken?”

“I talked to a man who saw the shooting. He said there was no mistake. Jamie died in the woods near Fort Donelson. This man wasn’t the only witness to the killing.”

“But are they sure it was Jamie?”

“I gave him Jamie’s description. He knew my brother had come from California, knew too many details about him to have been mistaken. I’m sorry, Aislin. I’d hoped otherwise too. But it was Jamie.”

“Spence?” She was crying again. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“I’m here.” And he was, now standing very near her.

Her eyes caught and held his. He thought his heart would break with the look of her misery. “Would you hold me, please?” Her voice was husky, broken.

Without a word he gathered her into his arms and felt her tremble against his chest. He rested his cheek on the top of her head, and held her while she cried for his brother.

PRAISE FOR *WHEN THE FAR HILLS BLOOM*

“*Far Hills* is a beautiful story of true love, loyalty, and betrayal. It gripped my emotions from the very beginning, and didn’t let them go. Diane Noble is a master storyteller!”

—TERRI BLACKSTOCK



“*When the Far Hills Bloom* has everything I look for in a great novel—high drama, unexpected twists and turns, heart-tugging romance, and genuine, true-to-life conflicts. I not only fell in love with the characters, I fell in love with California in all her untamed glory. This is Diane Noble’s best work yet!”

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“Inside Tip of the Day: If you’re looking for a great excuse to not do any housework, grocery shopping, or anything else for several days (if you can sleep), read *Far Hills*. This irresistible novel has an epic feel that made me think of romantic movies like *Far and Away*. I anxiously await the following two books in the series, as well as anything else that Diane Noble chooses to write.”

—LISA TAWN BERGREN

“An engrossing historical novel, *Far Hills* has it all—love, suspense, heartache, and the triumph of the human spirit when coupled with abiding faith. I was irrevocably drawn into the drama of the Dearbourne and Byrne families, eagerly turning the pages to see what would happen to them next. I’ll definitely be watching for future Diane Noble releases.”

—ROBIN LEE HATCHER



“Diane Noble never fails to speak to the heart of the matter. With spiritual insight, wisdom, and joyous celebration, she leads us to a greater understanding of God—and of ourselves.”

—ANGELA ELWELL HUNT



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