

Chapter 1

May 14, 1861

Silver Springs, Maryland

“Papa, don’t leave me.”

Ellie Grace Sinclair wept as she stared at the simple wooden coffin. A mound of dirt sat ready to be shoveled over the grave. Papa’s grave. Gray clouds darkened the sky. Wind, thick with the scent of coming rain, rustled the trees overhead. Late spring’s warmth made the air sticky with unseasonal humidity.

Or perhaps she was smothering.

“Don’t go.” Her whispered plea mingled with the taste of salt pinching her tongue. The coffin was silent. Cold.

Warm hands grasped her shoulders.

“You’re not alone, Ellie. We’re together. We’ll always be together.”

Her brother’s voice was a mellow tonic to her raw soul. She grasped his calloused hand and squeezed.

“But, Daniel, where will we go? Aunt Martha says the property is Uncle Joel’s.” She blinked through her swollen eyes at her brother’s solemn face. “We have no money. No home.”

Why hadn’t Papa ever broken free from his brother’s control? Aunt Hepsibah said it was because Papa was shiftless with money. Aunt Alice declared Papa was blessed to not be driven with a demon lust for money and property like his brother.

The reason didn’t make a difference now. He was gone. The doctor had declared it heart attack. Ellie swallowed down another sob. In truth, his heart had never been the same since Mother left.

The memory of him clutching his chest as he collapsed outside the barn would be forever emblazoned in her mind and branded on her heart. She had run as fast as her feet would carry her, but when she’d fallen at his side, pleading with him to stay with her, he was already gone, the lead rope for their dairy cow still clutched in his left hand.

Her brother lifted his chin. “I’ll figure things out. I always do. One thing’s for certain.” A fierce shadow swept across his jaw, highlighting the faint blonde stubble. “Nothing will separate us.”

She clung tight to his promise and nodded slowly. Thunder grumbled overhead as the small group of black-clad mourners moved away from the graveside. Relatives who had rarely

paid them mind before this horrid day now clogged the road. The dour-faced men, women clutching their tear vials and sniffing into their black-ribbon lined handkerchiefs...the hypocrisy of it made her ill. Where were they when Mother had abandoned them? Where were they when Father barely had enough to feed and clothe them? The only ones who had shown them an ounce of compassion were the Reverend, Aunt Alice and a few of the kind church folks who didn't gossip about them or their wayward mother.

“Come on. Remember what Papa always said? ‘Come now, Ellie-belle. You’ve got pluck. Let’s see it.’”

A bittersweet pang of remorse stabbed, but she pushed herself up from the dirt as the first raindrops began to fall. Daniel draped his arm around her shoulder and tugged her close.

“Whatever comes, we go through it together.”

###

Ellie watched Aunt Hepsibah peer at her through beady eyes. The older woman reminded her of a lace-covered pin-cushion...round and prickly. The genteel trappings of finery and ruffles did little to hide the matron's acid tongue.

Lowering her eye piece, she stared at Daniel, then Ellie. Knobby fingers lifted Ellie's chin and inspected her bone structure as if she were a cow at market. The mourners filling their cabin gave the behavior little notice.

Aunt Hepsibah released Ellie's chin then thumped her cane on the floor with a scowl before stabbing Daniel with a piercing glare.

“Tell me, young man, are you a snollygoster?”

Daniel scratched his blonde hair. “A what, ma'am?”

Aunt Hepsibah's mouth pinched as if she'd bitten into a pickle. “A snollygoster. An unprincipled person.” She jabbed a finger into his chest. “I believe in a robust education and pride myself in my extensive reading practices. To that end, I find my mind has benefited greatly from a rather wide vocabulary.” She sniffed. “A habit you would do well to imitate, young man.”

Ellie watched Daniel's jaw clench, a sure sign of repressed irritation, but he kept his temper in check. “If I were a...snollygoster,” a devilish gleam lit his green eyes, “do you believe I would freely admit it?”

Two red spots stained her aunt's sagging cheeks. Her lips thinned into a hard line.

“Impertinence.” Aunt Hepsibah swung her scolding glare to Ellie and held fast. “What of you, young lady? Do you know the social graces? I have no intention of taking on a charity case. I need someone who can see to my needs and will do so without behaving like a strumpet. Your mother, God rest her soul, was not of high moral character, but your father did alright by you, best as he could, being a man.”

Heat burned Ellie's chest but she dared not snip back at the contentious old woman. Aunt Hepsibah might be their only hope for a future.

Uncle Joel's heavy footsteps approached. "Well, what say you, Hepsie? Fine children, are they not?"

"Children?" Aunt Hepsibah harrumphed. "Nearly grown, and it's a good thing. I have no desire to house wild demons. No. A young lady to take care of my needs and a young man to see to the house and yard is what I desire. They can earn their keep and pay off their debt that way."

Ellie shared a long look with Daniel. Pay off their debt? To this miserable creature? Such an existence seemed to too horrid for words.

Uncle Joel scowled. "Well, they can't stay in the cabin. My brother lived off my charity long enough. I have plans for that property. Time is long past to get his affairs settled."

Ellie's pulse throbbed with heat. Her father's body had only just been laid to rest and Uncle Joel was already descending on their home like a vulture.

The chatter of people, the clink of forks against plates, the occasional laugh scraped her nerves raw.

Uncle Joel could have the cabin. Their belongings. None of it mattered. All she wanted was Papa.

###

May 29th, 1861

Has it only been a fortnight since Papa left us? Sorrow is a strange beast, stamping time frozen in one's heart, yet leaving it to stretch endlessly before the soul while others move and breath as if nothing has happened. As if life has not been ripped apart, scattered and tossed to the wind.

I have discovered the remedy for grief is not found in Aunt Hepsibah. Her tongue scalds the soul and her glowers are most terrible. Worst of all, she is connected to well-respected and established people here in Silver Springs. I fear she is not above manipulation and under-handed tactics to achieve whatever suits her fancy. She never fails to remind me of my mother's many faults and sinful indiscretions, casting them upon me as if any failure on my part means I share a part in her stain. So, I tread lightly. I work hard to gain her favor. . . an impossible task but one I must strive for if Daniel and I are not to be turned out onto the street.

I have oft wondered what prompted my mother to leave. Papa would not speak of it to us, though the sadness never left his eyes after her abandonment. When I was little, I blamed myself, thinking perhaps I was unlovable or performed some horrid infraction. But now I wonder if she chanced to meet Aunt Hepsibah and went running into the night.

Darling Papa, how I miss you. I shall strive to do my best in this dreary situation if for nothing else but to make you proud.

Essie

Chapter 2

May 30, 1861

Ellie stirred the dye pot with the large wooden paddle, watching the bubbles burst in the navy-colored water as she dragged Aunt Hepsibah's gown through the liquid. The stench infiltrated her nose and coated her tongue.

Had it only been weeks since Papa's death? Weeks since she and Daniel had been forced to give up their cozy cabin and slave for an aunt she could never please? Steam rose, stealing her breath in the warmth of the afternoon. Aunt Hepsibah's tidy home was deceptively cheerful-looking from all outward appearances; a marked contrast to its sour mistress.

Fatigue weighed down Ellie's shoulders like a heavy coat. The chores never stopped. Ellie rose before sunrise and was up until late---mending, cleaning, cooking---an ever-growing list of demands that could never be sated. When she and Daniel had first arrived at her aunt's brick home, surrounded by its iron fence and bright, blooming flowers, they'd thought Providence had smiled upon them. Instead, they'd discovered Aunt Hepsibah's bitter disposition and impossible demands had chased away the last servant she'd managed to retain. Her aunt didn't want to take in family, or even have extra hands around the house. She wanted slaves.

A door slammed. Ellie looked up to see her brother stomping across the yard, his face mottled red, jaw tight as he held his hands close to his chest. She dropped the laundry paddle in the grass and ran to his side.

"Daniel! What's wrong?"

"That woman! That infernal, reptilian excuse for a human being!" He muttered under his breath. "There. There's a bit of fancy vocabulary for the high-and-mighty Hepsibah." He tried to move past Ellie but she tugged him to a stop.

"What happened?"

His green eyes flashed. "She accused me of stealing from her. Told me to empty my pockets. When I did and there was nothing to show, she took a horse whip to my hands."

Ellie gasped. "Oh, Daniel, no. Let me see."

He reluctantly held them out for her inspection. Angry red welts crossed his palms. Blood oozed out of one particularly bad cut.

"Come with me." She pulled his elbow and tugged him towards the small crock resting against the shade of the house. "Here. It's goose grease. I always keep some nearby when working the dye pots. It works wonders on burns and cuts."

She scooped out a generous dollop of the greasy gel and spread it carefully across the cut. He sucked in a breath and scowled.

"We have to leave."

She stilled and looked up into his face. “What are you saying?”

He dropped his voice and stepped even closer. “Ellie, we can’t stay. Aunt Hell-spell is trying to kill us.”

Ellie shot him a reproving look. “You ought not say such things.”

“It’s true. You look ready to collapse. And if she is willing to whip me over an imagined infraction, you’ll be next.” He shook his blonde head, expression fierce. “I’ll not let her touch you. So help me, I’ll go mad with rage if she does. And I’ve seen the way Mr. Harrington looks at you.” Daniel frowned, his brows lowering.

Aunt Hepsibah’s next door neighbor was far too attentive to her liking, always finding reasons to stop by, looking for any excuse to touch her shoulder or brush against her in passing. The man left her upended and queasy.

Her stomach knotted as she wiped the remaining goose grease from her fingers with her apron. “Where could we possibly go? We have no funds. No skills of value.”

Daniel’s eyes glowed bright. “Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong. We were raised on a farm. You and I are tough. We can shoot and know how to survive.”

Ellie frowned, not understanding. “What job could possibly utilize such a skill set?”

Daniel smiled. “Why, the Army of the Potomac, of course.”

The blood left her head in a dizzying rush. “Wh-what?”

Her brother whispered, “I say we enlist with the Union.”

###

June 3, 1861

Daniel is speaking “bunkum”, as Aunt would say. Enlist! Such a thing should not be considered. I cannot, would not do it. The very idea sends waves of terror rippling down my spine. To escape our situation here is one thing, but to do so under the pre-text of war--- surely such an idea could not be noble. The very thought smacks of traitorous intent. If not collusion, then a measure of cowardice. . . hiding among the brave.

Yet, if I were a man I would certainly fight for the cause of freedom for the negro and preservation of the Union. Were it not for needing to care for Daniel and I, Papa would have enlisted to do the same.

*So, the question I pose to myself is this: is it wrong to do the right thing with bad motives?
Or is trying to escape an unjust situation pure enough motive to excuse blurred lines of
right and wrong?*

My mind is filled with riddles, and I'm finding no answers.

Ellie

###

“The answer is no.”

Ellie worked the butter churn up and down, up and down until her arms ached. Best she take out her frustration on the churn and not her brother's head. He had badgered her incessantly for the past three days and refused to be placated.

“Come on, Ellie. The plan is sound. We dress you up as a boy, enlist in the Union, do our part for a few weeks, just long enough to get some coinage in our pockets, then leave for a better opportunity.” Daniel tore a chunk of bread from the loaf cooling on the kitchen counter. “Would you rather stay here, in this prison?”

“Of course not, but I have no desire to have my head blown off either, thank you very much.” She glared at him as he chewed slowly, studying her in that thoughtful way he had that always spelled trouble.

“I hear Union privates are paid thirteen dollars a month.”

Ellie stopped churning and stared. “Thirteen?”

He nodded. “More than double what you would make as a house maid, and far more than we'll ever see from Aunt Hell-spell, I guarantee.”

Ellie dropped onto a stool and rubbed her temples. “But the danger...”

“It wouldn't be for long, Ellie-belle.” He tugged a tendril of her hair with affection. “We would barely have time to enlist and begin drilling before escaping. There's no way we would even see battle. Just think...twenty-six dollars between the two of us!”

“I don't know.” She worried her bottom lip. “Surely there must be other ways to find work.”

He shook his head. “Not around here. Everyone knows Aunt Hepsibah. They'll drag both of us back within an hour of leaving. And it takes money to get far enough away from her reach. Money we don't have. And even if I did find work, what would happen to you?” His expression darkened. “I'll not leave you here to face her alone. You're wasting away to nothing. Working yourself to death.”

Ellie sighed. He was right about the exhaustion. She was finding it more difficult to rise each morning. Her body would balk if the pace continued. But enlist? She frowned. “We would have to go to Washington, wouldn't we? How will we get there?”

“We can make it on foot. It's not that far. No worse than those long hikes Papa used to take us on as children. Remember?”

“Ellie!” Aunt Hepsibah’s strident voice sliced through the air. “Come here, girl. I need my dress pressed. And don’t take all day about it!”

Wincing, she rose and thrust the churn’s handle into her brother’s hands, careful of the wrapped cut on his palm. “Care to churn for a spell?”

His eyes darkened. “As long as you’ll think about what I’ve said.”

She swallowed and nodded. “I’ll try.”

But the idea seemed preposterous.

###

“Is the tea ready?”

Ellie bit back an exasperated remark. How was she to clean the dining room drapes, prepare supper, and mend her aunt’s stockings if she was stopped every fifteen minutes for another task?

Instead of venting her frustration, she held her tongue and placed the teapot on the tray, along with a teacup, saucer, spoon, sugar, creamer, and Aunt Hepsibah’s favorite wafer cookies. She smoothed her hands down her apron and carefully carried the burdened tray into the papered parlor. Her aunt barely looked up from the letter in her hand.

“Took you long enough, girl. Put it down there.”

She waved absently towards the table, her mouth pinching as her lips moved silently with the rhythm of the words she read. Ellie gingerly set the tea service on the polished table and turned to leave when her aunt’s “Well, I never!” caused her to whirl back. Aunt Hepsibah slammed the letter down on the table with a mighty thump, causing the cup to rattle in its saucer.

“Your uncle Joel.” The veins in her temple bulged. “A despicable cad of a man.”

Ellie could not disagree, though she despised agreeing with her aunt on any topic of conversation or theory. “What has he done?”

“He sold the cabin and property and refuses to give me one cent towards you or your brother’s keep.”

Ellie’s heart knotted. “Our cabin? But Uncle Joel told me he had plans for it. I thought he intended to farm the property.”

“Oh, he has plans for certain.” Her aunt scowled. “He agreed that if I were to take in you two, he would give me thirty percent of the sale from the land.” She poured her tea, absently stirring in an obscene amount of sugar and cream. “Now he claims the property sold for much too low a price. Says he’ll not be getting his worth out of it.” She grabbed a cookie in her knobby fingers and snapped it in half, as if she wished to do the same to Uncle Joel’s neck. “How am I to afford you now?”

Ellie's nostrils flared. Afford, indeed. As if she and Daniel had not been doing the work of four servants. Her aunt was only enraged her opportunity to gain wealth from their misfortune had slipped through her fingers.

Aunt Hepsibah drummed her fingers on the table. "Fortunately, I have made provisions in case my brother tried something foolish like this."

Cold fear snaked itself around Ellie's throat and squeezed. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing for you to concern yourself about." The older woman lifted her cup and sipped her tea. "Have you finished cleaning the drapes?"

"No, ma'am."

"Get to it then."

Ellie turned to leave, but not before she witnessed the calculating gleam in her aunt's eye.

A cold shiver traversed her spine.

###

June 10, 1861

Ellie squeezed the soapy water from the shirt twisted between her slick fingers and tossed it into the clean wash water to her right. Heat shimmered down, causing her bodice to stick to her skin like glue. Even in the shade of the backyard, the summer warmth was oppressive. At least plunging her wrists into the cool water brought a measure of relief.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

The rhythmic thud of the ax splitting wood was comforting music. Ellie looked up to watch her brother work. Daniel was slim but strong. At seventeen, he was a year away from enlistment age but by then the war would be over. The thought brought a measure of relief. She could not bear to lose Daniel too. He was all she had left.

The back door opened and Aunt Hepsibah's shrill voice grated as she walked out, followed by a burly looking fellow. The man's strong jaw, crooked nose and stature alone caused Ellie to shrink back. His broad shoulders strained against his work shirt.

"There he is, Mr. Bertram. He's yours for the taking."

The stranger folded his beefy arms and scowled, causing his swarthy complexion to darken.

"Looks to be on the thin side. Young too."

Aunt Hepsibah lifted her chin. "He's seventeen. Young and strong. I've seen to his health myself. He's a good worker."

Ellie straightened, alarm sizzling. Who were they speaking of? Surely not---

“Daniel!” Aunt Hepsibah jammed her cane into the ground with a sharp *thump*. “Come here.”

Her brother had been too far away to hear their conversation. Ellie stood on shaking limbs, murmuring, “No, please God, no...”

Daniel dropped the ax to the ground with a dull thud and approached, sweat soaking his shirt and dripping from his chin. He stopped before them, panting.

Mr. Bertram eyed him up and down, then studied the large pile of wood he’d just chopped. “How long did it take you to chop all that?”

“Just under an hour, I’d say.”

A dark brow lifted. “You’re strong. I’ll give you that.” He turned to Aunt Hepsibah. “I’ll take him.”

Smiling smugly, she nodded. “Very well. Come, Daniel. Go into the house and gather your things.”

“No!” Ellie lurched forward, hearing the shout tear from her throat, but feeling as if her mind and body were disconnected. Daniel’s face siphoned of color, fading to chalk.

“What?”

Their aunt fixed them with a thunderous scowl. “Mr. Bertram is buying you from me. Rather, he’s buying your ability to work. The Cumberland Coal and Iron Company wants strong young men, Daniel, and I have decided you will perform this duty to the best of your ability.”

Ellie shoved her way in front of Daniel, blocking him from Mr. Bertram’s reach.

“No! He can’t! Daniel is all I have left. Please, please don’t take him away!”

Aunt Hepsibah’s glare was a foreboding storm, but Ellie didn’t care.

“Impertinent child! You act as if I’m banishing him to his death.” A small, cruel smile twitched her lips. “Mr. Bertram, tell him what he will be doing.”

Bertram glowered. “You would be working for me, boy, doing whatever I say. I’d start you off as a trapper, most likely. A fair job, opening and closing ventilation doors to the mouth of the mine at various times a day. It’s a twelve-hour shift in the dark but the danger is minimal.” He coughed heartily and straightened.

Ellie swallowed and reached for Daniel’s hand. Darkness...for twelve hours at a time?

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Bertram took a step forward, his fists clenched. “If you give me a word of backtalk, it’ll be doing the work of a breaker boy for you. Breaking open pieces of coal with your bare hands to remove the impurities.” He smiled, his teeth resembling yellowed piano keys. “Most breaker boys have a time of it, what with all them

cuts and scrapes. Some even need amputations. Why, just last year, a breaker boy didn't heed the conveyer belt and got crushed under the machinery."

A sob scraped for release. Ellie looked up at her brother. Daniel lifted his chin, refusing to cower under the intimidation. Aunt Hepsibah poked the tip of her cane into the center of Daniel's chest.

"You will cooperate, young man. After stealing my money, you owe me. Mr. Bertram is willing to pay me up to seventy-five cents a day if you work hard."

"I never took your money." Daniel spoke through gritted teeth.

"Balderdash!" She snapped, her blue eyes ablaze. "One more word and I'll march you down to the sheriff's office. Your choice."

Ellie's heart ripped. She looked to Mr. Bertram. "Where will you take him?"

He coughed again. "Eckhart. About a hundred and forty miles away. We'll be leaving town after I finish up a few more errands. Best say your goodbyes now."

A vice choked Ellie's throat. There was nothing to do, nothing she could say to stop this nightmare. She looked up into Daniel's face. A subtle fire lit his eyes. He pulled her in close for a hug. She didn't care about his sweat-soaked body. She clutched his damp shirt, her mind spinning, screaming. Squeezing her tight, he angled his head into her neck and whispered.

"Tonight. This is our only chance. Meet me at the old Miller place. Midnight. I'll get away somehow. When I release you, nod once if you understand."

He released her with a wobbly smile and kissed her forehead. "I love you. You know that?"

She nodded once, her heart hammering a painful staccato against her ribs.

"I love you too."

Bertram yanked her brother away and shoved some bills into her aunt's hands.

"More will come when I'm satisfied with his work."

Aunt Hepsibah nodded. "You will be."

Bertram coughed and pushed Daniel through the door. Her brother caught her gaze and held fast for a long moment before disappearing. Her aunt tisked.

"Don't look so glum. You've got work to do."

Ellie fixed her with a hard stare until her aunt broke eye contact and shuffled back inside. It was then that Ellie realized for the first time in her life, she truly, deeply hated someone.

Chapter 3

Ellie's breath heaved as she tiptoed down the hallway. The ticking of the clock on the fireplace mantle chanted a mocking rhyme.

Hur-ry. Hur-ry. Hur-ry.

Lifting the hem of her skirt, she picked her way carefully down the stairs. One. Two. Three. Four.

Squeak.

She sucked in a breath and froze, waiting. Only the haunting impatience of the clock met her ears. Willing her taut nerves to relax, she attempted another step.

Five. Six. Seven...

She only had an hour to reach the Miller place. Her aunt had retired later than usual, as if she sensed Ellie's restlessness. She prayed whatever nervousness she exhibited would be passed off as concern over Daniel's sudden departure and nothing more.

There. She'd made it to the bottom of the stairs. Tucking her shoes against her chest and her bag in her free hand, she padded on bare feet to the kitchen. In the darkness, she picked her way through the pantry, grabbing a couple of apples, a wrapped loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese before shoving them into her bag. Looking over her shoulder to make sure her aunt still slept, she inhaled a deep breath and slipped her worn shoes on her feet.

The door knob caused shivers to ripple through her middle when her fingers grasped it. Cold. Just like everything in this house. Firming her lips, she pushed the door open and slipped into the night.

Lord willing, she would never step foot inside Aunt Hepsibah's house again.

###

Every muscle in Ellie's body burned, but she exhaled a whoosh of air when a shaft of moonlight illuminated the Miller cabin. Pain stabbed her ribs as she panted. Sweat moistened her body. She licked her lips and studied the abandoned cabin. The chances of anyone moving in of late were slim, not with the disrepair of its sagging roof and crumbling porch, but she had no desire to alert an angry squatter to her presence. But how would she find Daniel?

A twig snapped behind her. Her senses ricocheted before a hand clamped over her mouth. A scream trapped in her throat.

"Shh. It's just me."

The sound of her brother's voice caused her body to sag. She slowly turned and he released her. She slugged him in the arm with an angry scowl.

"What was that?" She hissed. "I almost screamed my head off!"

His teeth flashed white in the moonlight. "I always could sneak up on you."

"How did you get away?"

The faint traces of silver and shifting shadows couldn't hide the somber shift in his expression. He looked away.

"Doesn't matter. I'm here."

Unease curdled. "Please tell me the law isn't going to be hunting us down."

"You worry too much." He reached for her knapsack. "What did you bring? You know you can't waltz into a Federal camp with your dresses, right?"

Ellie frowned. "I never agreed to enlist. I packed food."

"Smart thinking. Here." He tossed her a bundle.

"What's this?"

"A change of clothes."

"I already have clothes."

"Just try them on."

With an irritated sigh, Ellie opened the bundle and rifled through the clothes. Her jaw dropped when she realized she held up a boy's shirt, trousers, and hat.

"Are you mad?" She huffed, her whisper a slice as she tossed them back to him. "I can't go prancing about in men's clothing."

"If we join up with the Union---"

She stomped her foot. "I never said I would do any such thing!"

He clamped his hand over her mouth. "Hush!" His eyes narrowed to slits. "If I release you, do you promise to remain calm?"

She nodded slowly.

"Alright." He removed his hand. "We can try looking for other work if you'd like, but we're still gonna have to travel a fair spell away from here. Too many people know Aunt Hell-spell. Maybe if we make it into Washington, we'll find some employment." He shrugged. "I'm not going to lie. It'll be rough for a while. Living on the streets most likely, until we've saved enough. And I'll not have you working in some unrespectable establishment." He sniffed. "To be honest, I'd rather have you dressed like a boy where I can keep you by my side, protecting you, than worrying that some low-life is hurting you while I'm out working."

Ellie hesitated. Daniel had given this more thought than she realized. With a groan, she turned and started unbuttoning her bodice.

“Toss me the clothes, please.”

The garments landed near her ankles in the near darkness. Heat swamped her body as the night air kissed her skin. Daniel, she knew, had already turned away to give her privacy.

“What should I do about, um, my feminine...”

He coughed. “Rip up part of your petticoat to make a kind of corset for...*that* problem, I suppose.”

She winced. She had but one petticoat and ripping it felt like stepping through a door from which she could never return. She hesitated, biting her lip. The moment was pregnant with uncertainty.

With leaden fingers, she picked up the discarded petticoat and tugged until the cloth gave way. The *rrrrriiiiiipp* sounded like the blast of a gunshot in the stillness of the night. Daniel’s sharp inhale stretched her nerves like taffy.

“Hurry.”

She hastened to bind herself, tying the material with a firm knot, before slipping into the baggy shirt and trousers. Were it not for the suspenders, the pants would have never remained upright.

“How do I look?”

Daniel turned and studied her as best he could in the faint light. He pursed his lips and grabbed her braid, twisting into a jumble and shoving it under the cap. Her head already ached from the tight pinch of the hat band.

“It’ll do for now.”

A bullet whizzed by her ear. Daniel slammed into her side, knocking her to the ground with a bone-jarring whoosh. Pain exploded through her hip.

A masculine voice called out through the woods.

“I know you’re there, young Daniel Sinclair. Word is you shot a fellow named Bertram in the leg mere hours ago. I work for the sheriff and have been tracking you for the past two hours.”

Daniel muttered an uncharacteristic oath under his breath.

“You come out now and give yourself up, and things will go well for you. I promise.”

Ellie’s heart hammered as she lay smothered between dirt and her brother’s panting body.

“It’s not worth it. We can’t outrun a law man.”

“Maybe not, but I aim to try.”

Before she could protest, he lifted himself up and scooped up her bag, grabbing her hand with his free one.

“Stay low and run. If something happens to me, keep going.”

They raced like a snarling, slobbering wolf was on their tails, weaving, turning through every known path and trail they could remember from their childhood. Never had Ellie been so grateful for a father who took them hunting, or enjoyed nature with his curious children.

Minutes bled into an hour. Then two. When she was certain she could go no further, Daniel panted to a stop and pointed.

“Cave...ahead...remember?”

She nodded and followed him to the rocky outcropping they had traversed many times before. They had barely crossed the opening, when she stretched out on a cool rock and fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 4

Ellie gasped and sat upright, banging her head on a rocky outcropping. Pain seared her scalp.

“Ow!” She rubbed her head and glared at her brother who was calmly biting into a juicy apple from her knapsack. Sunlight streamed through the cave entrance.

“Good morning, Ellie-belle. Breakfast?”

He tossed her an apple and she caught it before fixing him with a hard look.

“Don’t you have something to say, big brother?”

He blinked innocently. “What?”

She felt her ire rising, nostrils flaring. “I asked you if you did something that would bring the law down on you and you told me not to worry about it. Then I find out you shot that Mr. Bertram!”

Daniel frowned. “I didn’t shoot Bertram.”

“But the sheriff’s law man said---”

“That wasn’t a law man.” Daniel sighed and tossed his apple core into the depths of the cave. “That was one of Bertram’s men. I met him. He also works for Cumberland Coal and Iron. They do nothing but exploit people, Ellie. Especially children.” He rubbed his hands down his face. “When I told Bertram I wasn’t going last night, his man pulled a gun on me. There was a distraction at the door, so I lunged for the gun. We wrestled over it and I shot the wall. I almost got Bertram’s leg but all that bully really received was some splintered wood in his eye. I took advantage of the moment and ran.” He offered a lopsided smile. “I suppose those two thought I would be running scared, apt to fall for any story they told.”

Relief washed through Ellie like a flood of warm water. “I can’t believe you were able to escape. Daniel, if anything had happened, I---” A lump lodged in her throat.

He moved close and hugged her. “There now, we’re fine. I’m fine. And I think we lost Bertram’s man.” He forced a smile. “And you look pretty good as a boy. I always did want a brother.”

Her tears ended on a laugh. “What now?”

He sighed and let his head fall back against the wall. “Don’t know. We could see if there are any jobs working along the Potomac. Boys to load cargo on boats, wash nets. Work like that is always in abundance. Leastwise, that’s what Papa always said.”

“How long before we would have a place to live?”

He winced. “A long time, Ellie-belle. The wages for jobs like that aren’t good. Never have been.”

She bit her lip, mulling over the possibilities in her mind.

“Perhaps I could get a job in a dress shop or a dry goods store.”

He laughed. “A dress shop? Wearing that?”

She looked down at her dirty clothes and groaned. “I forgot. Even my spare dress is not nearly fine enough to help me gain employment like that.”

Silence settled. Unless...

“Twenty-six dollars for one month of drilling?”

Daniel’s head lifted away from the stone wall. “Twenty-six dollars.”

Ellie lifted a brow. “One month. That’s all. You promise?”

Daniel grinned. “I promise.”

“Looks like I’m going to be a soldier.”

###

June 12, 1861

I’m so weary I can scarcely put one foot in front of the other. The past two days have been naught but a blur of hiding, pushing towards Washington and attempting to keep our hunger at bay. Were it not for the bread and cheese I took at my departure, our energy would be spent. I’m thankful for the water we’ve found in abundance as we’ve traveled. Daniel found an old well yesterday that provided the coldest refreshment I’ve ever remembered enjoying. This morning a stream satisfied our thirst. A good thing too, since the last of our bread ran out. We’ve discovered when food is in scarce supply, water can fill a void. For a time anyway.

At least enlistment will provide food, or so Daniel says. I confess a quaking fear in my soul at the prospect. What if my identity is discovered? How shall I possibly manage? Daniel is not yet enlistment age but he will surely be taken any way, as strong and healthy as he is. Papa never could endure a falsehood and this very endeavor seems traitorous to his memory. That alone has given me many reasons to turn back.

If Daniel and I were to be separated---I cannot endure the thought. So, I shall not give it any room on this paper. There is one thing, one person that remains a blight on my

thoughts, my emotions, and my spirit. If it were not for the vicious nature and cruel decisions of my aunt, we would not be in this predicament. How can any woman be so vile? So unfeeling? So oblivious to the reckless nature of her decisions? She plays at life and death as if it were a chess game, forgetting the bishop, knight and rook are real people, not wooden figures on a board.

I despise everything about her, even the inopportune times when her acidic presence invades my thoughts. She poisons everything she touches. I can feel it. I thought I would be content to escape her but I'm finding escape is not enough. I want retribution for the hurt she has caused. . . not for me, but for Daniel.

Reverend Wright always preached on the necessity of forgiving those who wish us evil. How is such a thing possible? He also quoted verses about all things working together for good to those who love the Lord. How could enduring the pain of a woman like Aunt Hepsibah possibly be good?

Sometimes I wonder if the Almighty is there at all.

Ellie

####

“Sorry, Ellie-belle. It’s got to be done.”

She held up a warning hand to Daniel. “Please! I’ll hide it under my hat. Don’t touch it!”

He offered a sad smile. “Come on, little sis. This is for your own good. Hair grows back.”

She attempted to lunge away but he grabbed her around the waist and in one swift move, sliced his pocket knife through her braid, cutting off the long hair at the nape of her neck. He held it up with a smile as if showing off a snake he’d bested.

“Looks good, don’t you say? Maybe three or four feet. A big one.”

Tears pricked her eyes, but she vented her wrath instead, pummeling him as hard as she could within the privacy of the woods.

“Ow!” Daniel covered his head with his hands. “Take it easy. Now you look like a boy.”

She would not cry. She would not! She fingered the prickly tresses jutting out at the base of her neck and scowled. “Girls don’t dream of growing up, losing their parents, being thrust from their home, and having to pretend to be male to survive, Daniel. My hair was the one thing that was mine to keep and now it’s gone.”

Daniel sighed. "I know. It's not fair. Nothing about this is fair."

She ran her fingers through her short mop and plopped on the ground. "Why? Why is all this happening? Our life was never perfect but it was good. And now it's as if...as if," she let her eyes close and slowly reopen, "God is trying to strike us down."

Daniel eased down beside her, twigs and leaves scraping beneath him. Birds chirped overhead, their song at odds with the tumult in her heart.

"Seems like God gets blamed for an awful lot of things."

Ellie picked up a leaf and twirled it between her thumb and forefinger. "Perhaps."

"Perhaps?" Daniel frowned. "It wasn't the Almighty that started the war. Men did that. It wasn't the Almighty that made Aunt Hepsibah so cruel either. I remember Papa talking about how she was once married years ago to a scoundrel of a man who used and abused her. She's mean and unhappy. Hurting people make poor decisions."

The thought gave Ellie pause. "But what of Papa? He did nothing, but God took him away. God could have saved him, but He didn't."

"I don't know." His green eyes turned glassy. "Sometimes we just don't know, Ellie. But everybody has to die. Is it for us to tell God He got the timing all wrong? We can't see what He can see. It's like the Reverend says. We have two things to do in this life. Love God and love people. You can't love Him if you don't trust Him. The way I figure it, we can either cry all day long about how unfair our lot is, but it's not going to make one lick of difference. Or we can pull ourselves up and give what time we have our all."

Something stirred in Ellie's heart, a small flame that had been dormant for weeks.

"How did you get so wise, big brother?"

He shrugged and winked. "Easy. I'm the oldest."

###

June 13, 1861

Washington D.C.

Ellie stood in line, waiting her turn to be examined by the physician in the medical building. The conscription line was long, giving her far too much time to think.

She studied her fingernails, cringing at their freshly chewed appearance. Her brother had thought of everything, even coaching her in the proper way to walk. He finished her costume with a smear of dirt to the cheek.

"If I had a plug of tobacco to give you, I would. Instead, just spit a lot. Spitting goes a long way towards making you seem manly."

She had wrinkled her nose. "Why?"

He shrugged. “Just does. Let me do most of the talking. Remember, we’re cousins. Your name is Lee Sinclair. If you keep your head down and do what they tell you, you’ll be fine.”

Daniel’s instructions fled as soon as she saw the throng of men clogging the conscription office in Washington. Everyone was so decidedly *male*. Surely she would be caught. Sent packing in mortification and shame. What if she were made to undress in front of them?

The thought made her knees buckle.

You’re a boy. A boy. A boy. Lee Sinclair. Lee. Male. You like to spit. A lot.

“Next!”

Daniel nudged her from behind and she nearly fell on her face as she fought the dizzying sensation threatening to tug her down. She found her footing and stumbled through the medical examination door into a small, stuffy room boasting a single table, one chair and a shelf filled with a variety of bottles and tools. Papers, pens, an inkwell and a ledger lay scattered across the table.

The stern doctor eyed her. His gray hair stood on end, as if he never had time to comb it properly.

“Name?”

What was her name? She attempted a sound but not even a squeak burst from her throat. The physician glared.

“Name!”

The room spun. Why couldn’t she think? Speak?

“Can’t you talk, boy?”

She blinked, unable to do anything but shake her head.

The doctor stomped to the door and threw it open.

“Can anyone speak for this boy? Can’t say a blasted thing!”

Bile rose, threatening to burst from her throat. She couldn’t breathe. Daniel stepped into the room, his smile bright.

“I can help you, sir. This here is my cousin. Lee Sinclair. Mute since the day he was born. Smart fella though. Hard worker.”

The doctor frowned and eyed her sharply. “A mute, you say?” He picked up the ledger and scribbled something. The scratch of the pencil on paper grated her already raw nerves. “Insanity or hysteria run in your family?”

Daniel smirked. “Only when we see Rebels, sir.”

The doctor chuckled and looked up from the ledger. He grabbed her jaw and narrowed his eyes.

“Don’t guess it matters if you can talk as long as you have enough teeth to tear open a powder cartridge. Let me see your teeth, Mr. Sinclair.”

Swallowing hard, Ellie opened her mouth. The doctor grunted as he peered in her mouth, turning her head to one side and then the other before releasing her.

“Are you of age to enlist?”

She nodded dumbly. He scribbled some more in the ledger and snapped it shut. He stooped over the table and dipped his pen in the inkwell, wrote a hasty note on a single piece of paper, and thrust it in her hand.

“You’re fit to serve. Next!”

She stared at the doctor’s messy script, scarcely believing his grouchy pronouncement. A sixteen-year-old girl. Fit to serve.

A mute, spitting one at that.

Chapter 5

July 20, 1861

Prince William County, Virginia

“Daniel, I’m telling you. Something isn’t right.”

Ellie shouldered her heavy pack as their regiment marched through the sweltering July heat. Perspiration glued the insufferable woolen uniform to her skin. The binding around her chest was soaked through. She eyed the snaking trail of blue-clad soldiers from under the brim of her kepi, making sure to keep her voice barely above a whisper.

“It’s been over a month. You said we’d be gone by now.”

She eyed her brother. Daniel’s lips were pressed into a thin, hard line, his jaw tight.

“You don’t think I don’t know that?” He looked around, gaze darting before swinging to hers for a short moment. “They haven’t paid us yet. We can’t go without our pay.”

“It had better be fast.” Ellie braved another look around her. The woods, creeks, wildlife...all were peaceful. Still, something niggled between her shoulder blades like an itch that refused to be placated. Something was coming. Something ominous. She could feel it in her bones.

The weeks of monotonous drilling had been tiring but comforting in their own way. Safe. Other than adjusting to the continual pretense of playacting the part of a male, she had fallen easily into the routine of military life. She and Daniel kept to themselves and did what was required. Morning reveille, drills, work...all of it was different from the world she’d left but yet the same.

Growing up on a farm had its advantages.

But this...this marching into the unknown, the terrorizing plunge of walking into unforeseen traps, knowing the enemy might be lurking around every tree, hunkering over the next hill, this was altogether different. They weren’t supposed to be here. This wasn’t the plan.

A whine at her feet caused her to look down. The regiment’s mascot, a white bulldog they had affectionately named Major Jack, trotted beside her, looking up with pleading brown eyes. She sighed and reached down, rubbing the silky ears of their faithful companion. He could sense the charge in the air too.

Straightening, Ellie bumped Daniel’s shoulder on the pretense of stumbling and whispered, “Pay or no pay, I’m leaving tomorrow.”

He glared. “You know, for a mute you sure do mouth a lot.” He adjusted his kepi and directed his gaze forward. “Fine. I’ll ask around. See if the others have heard when pay is due. Will that suit?”

She responded with a curt nod and clutched her gun tighter.

Not much longer. Not much longer.

Major Jack whined.

If she kept telling herself that, maybe it would be true.

###

Ellie watched the last streaks of orange disappear from the sky, the sinking sensation in her stomach knotting harder with every passing minute. She hugged her knees to her chest as she listened to the other soldiers gathered around the campfire. Major Jack lay at her feet, his tongue hanging lazily from his mouth as he snored. She shot him a traitorous look. Silly dog. Apparently, his prophetic whining earlier in the day was nothing more than a ravenous appetite. Once he'd eaten, he'd dropped into blissful slumber.

Despite the dog's oblivion, a nervous energy buzzed through the camp, as if they were all waiting for something to happen.

And that something was what she feared.

Other regiments had come alongside theirs, filling the Virginia woods with thousands of Union men. She felt both exposed and hidden, all at once. Strange sensation.

A burly man named Briggs laughed boisterously.

"Think you're ready for battle, do you? Ain't got but peach fuzz on your jaw!"

A freckled lad as thin as a rail glared at him, rubbing his jawline, though his eyes twinkled.

"Just because I don't resemble a bear like you doesn't make me less of a man. Am I right, fellas?"

The others chuckled, Daniel included. Ellie could not share their humor. Didn't they sense the impending doom hanging like a cloud overhead? Irritated with the lot of them, she yanked open her knapsack and pulled out her journal and pencil, staring hard at the empty page.

Briggs elbowed Daniel. "Your cousin's a hand with writing?"

Daniel shrugged. "He likes it. It's a way for him to get his thoughts out, you know?"

Briggs laughed. "Turner over there is quiet too, but at least Lee here has an excuse, him being a mute and all."

The others laughed. Ellie looked up to catch the gaze of the man they called Turner. He was slight of build. Dark-headed, at least from what she could tell under his kepi, with a serious countenance and bright blue eyes. His gaze connected with hers for a short moment then flickered away before he went back to cleaning his gun. He was quiet. Ellie hadn't heard him speak a word in three hours. Then again, neither had she.

Daniel leaned back, stretching his arms behind his head. "I think it's neat how Lee is writing everything down. Preserving it. Who knows? Maybe generations in the future will read it and hear how we licked the Rebels in one fell swoop and preserved the Union."

"Hear, hear!" The freckled man named Weeks lifted his fist. "Maybe my own grandchildren will read it." He sobered. "If I live, that is."

His observation dampened the levity. Briggs scowled. "Of course you'll live. Don't go getting all mealy-mouthed on me now."

Weeks shrugged and poked at the crackling fire with a stick. The light danced and shifted across his face. "Don't you ever think about it though? If the worst were to happen? I don't want any regrets."

Silence settled, save for the *pop, pop* of wood snapping in the fire.

Briggs cleared his throat. "I guess I'd like to go knowing my loved ones were safe. Happy. That there wasn't any strife between us."

Ellie swallowed. Strife. Like the way they'd left Aunt Hepsibah. Or Bertram. Even now, living her life wallowing in deception.

Weeks poked the fire again, sending a pillar of sparks shooting upward. "Exactly. No unforgiveness." He glanced up and smiled. "What about you, Turner?"

The quiet man tossed them a long look then went back to cleaning his rifle.

"Don't reckon I'm the one to ask about forgiveness."

Ellie shivered. He was fighting a battle alright, and it had nothing to do with one between the states. Daniel coughed.

"Say, this has nothing to do with making things right before death, fellas, but have you heard when we're supposed to receive our pay? I'd heard once a month and we're a week past that."

Briggs snorted. "Once a month? Nah. Whoever told you that was in his cups. It's once every two months, and that's only if the pay master can find us, what with all the moving around we're doing." He shook his dark head. "I just signed an allotment slip so my pay can be sent home. Seemed easier that way."

Ellie caught Daniel's look across the fire. Two months at the earliest? Bleak misery flickered through his eyes. And worry. For her. Cold fear clamped her in a vice.

Father's soft baritone wrapped around her like a warm blanket, coaxing out memories she'd nearly forgotten.

He had hurt his shoulder, dislocated it completely and Daniel was away, helping the Millers with their haying. Only Ellie was present to help him reset the joint. She had sobbed,

unable to bear the thought of causing her father such pain. Sweat beaded his forehead as he panted, staring up at her from the bed.

“Ellie-belle, you are strong. Come now. Put starch in your spine. Don’t think. Just do what needs to be done.”

Ellie released the breath trapped in her lungs and stiffened. *Put starch in your spine, girl. You are your father’s daughter. Just do what needs to be done.*

She met Daniel’s gaze and offered a lopsided smile. They would get through the next few weeks. Together.

Briggs spit a stream of tobacco into the grass. “McDowell better pay us, if what I’m hearing is right.”

Weeks’ brows lifted. “What’s that?”

“That he’s going to make a stand against the Rebels any day. Catch them by surprise instead of heading into Richmond.”

Daniel frowned. “Where are we now?”

“Near some creek called Bull Run.”

###

July 21, 1861

Near Manassas, Virginia

Boom!

Silence eclipsed sound, leaving a strange void in Ellie’s ears. She blinked, but could see little through the smoke, save watery images of shadowed men and small bursts of fire expelled from the end of gun barrels.

She scrubbed her ears with her hand. It was like cotton was stuffed inside.

A black pillar rose up before her as the ground beneath her feet quaked. Dirt and pebbles pelted her face and hands. She blinked and spit out the grit coating her tongue. Whether it was earth or gun powder, she couldn’t tell. She’d torn open so many powder cartridges with her teeth, fired relentlessly, but the Rebels kept on coming, their shrieks rising like demons through the tumult.

A piercing whistle invaded.

“Ellie!”

The warning sounded strange...dull and thick, just before something slammed into her, knocking her to the ground.

A warm body covered hers. The ground rattled her teeth. She fought to suck in a breath against the weight crushing her. She pushed against her protector but his limp form was resistant. Alarm clawed. His warmth turned strange. She lifted her hand to her temple, blinking at the sticky crimson coating her fingers when she pulled her hand away. Was it her blood or her protector's?

Boom!

The sharp *rat-a-tat* of the signal drums permeated through the cotton clogging her ears. A horse shrieked. Men screamed. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't see. With a guttural grunt, she shoved the body from her. His limp form rolled backwards with a dull thud. Even amid the thick smoke choking her vision, there was no hiding the soldier's identity.

Daniel.

A scream ripped from her throat.

Blood coated part of his head and the side of his body. His right arm was missing.

"Daniel! Please! God, no!"

The roar of artillery was so thunderous, she could not hear his breath, but the shallow rise and fall of his chest gave her hope. She hovered, tears streaming down her face as she scanned the chaos for help.

There. Across the open expanse were the white canvas flaps of the surgical tents. If she could get him close enough...

A whistle quivered the air. She ducked and covered Daniel's head. The world tilted at the impact. A soldier screamed to her right as a splintered tree came crashing down on him.

Cold fear curdled her gut. She scanned the open stretch of field. A dead horse lay on its side halfway between them and the cover of trees.

Get Daniel to the horse. Use it for cover. Just do what needs to be done. Then move again.

She cringed, eyeing his blood-soaked shoulder. There was no way she would be able to keep a grasp on his torso, not slick as he was. Swallowing down her nausea, she crouched and grabbed his ankles, tugging until his weight gave under her exertion.

She did not envy the pain her brother would be in upon awakening. But better pain than death.

Sweat rolled down her face as she pulled him towards the dead horse. Her muscles burned. Dirt and rocks exploded around them on every side.

The memory of Reverend Wright's soft-spoken voice invaded, drowning out the tumult.

“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty...Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day...”

A sob burst past her lips, but she ground her jaw and pulled.

“A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee...”

She blinked against the smoke burning her eyes. *Were you there, God? Did you see Papa fall? Do you hear me sob at night for missing him? Did you watch my mother abandon us? Did you see Aunt Hepsibah misuse and abuse us?*

Anger burned her middle. She strained, pulling her brother to the safety of the large beast before collapsing in exhaustion beside him. She looked up at the sky and screamed.

“Do you see this? This moment right now? Do you even care?”

“Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him. I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him, and show him my salvation.”

The tears flowed as Ellie stared up at the sky. Patches of blue shown through the murky stain of smoke. Purity and goodness amid hate. Her anger siphoned away as her heart set ablaze with a sudden realization.

“God saw it all. He knows.”

Her murmured words were swallowed up in the roar of war but her heart could hear His voice whisper.

I was there. I am here. I am with you wherever you go. I was the One Who carried you through and I am with you always, even until the end of time.

Chapter 6

Ellie stared at her bloodied, dirty knuckles, barely recognizing the fingers that clutched Daniel's limp hand.

He'd rarely stirred since being transported to the hospital. Whether it was due to the dulling effects of the laudanum, or the severity of his injuries, she didn't know. Likely both. The surgeon who had repaired the damage to his arm had assured her sleep was best for the time.

Exhaustion tugged at her weary body and gritty eyes. Stewards, nurses and surgeons scurried like mice between moaning soldiers. So far, few had noticed her presence. All the better. Perhaps her commanders thought her missing or wounded. Either way, she couldn't leave Daniel. A lump thickened her throat as she studied his bruised face.

There would be no more fighting for him.

I am with you. I will never leave you.

Peace seeped through her heart, just as it had continually since pulling her brother to safety. She tugged the scratchy blanket snug under his chin. *Thank You, Lord, for sparing his life.*

Footsteps clicked against the polished floor. She looked up to see a matronly nurse gazing down at Daniel, her weathered face flooded with compassion.

"Friend of yours, aye?"

"Yes. Is it alright if I sit here beside him?"

The matron's brown eyes softened. "Of course. If only all the soldiers had a friend like you to show a bit a kindness to 'em." Her Irish brogue was soft as her calloused hands tucked and prodded, checking bandages and assessing his dressings. She looked back at Ellie over her shoulder and winked. "A course, if ya stay overly long, I may be tempted to put ya to work."

Ellie forced a wobbly smile. "I wouldn't complain, although my captain might. He's probably stewing, wondering at my whereabouts even as we speak."

The nurse's brows pinched and lowered. "I take it ye've not heard the news then?"

"What news?"

She wiped her hands on a rag and sighed. "The Union took a lickin' at Bull Run. No denyin' that. Word has it men are desertin' left and right. I doubt you'll be missed. More than likely your captain will think you part of the exodus."

A dozen emotions swelled through Ellie's chest. Relief, sorrow, guilt, shame...had it all been for naught? How could they all flee? Yet wasn't that the very thing she and Daniel had planned on doing when they received their wages?

She glanced at Daniel's side, noting the emptiness where his arm should have been. For all those men to tuck tail and run...

Anger seared her gut like a white-hot poker.

The matron moved away to tend to the next patient. As she sorted through the thoughts tumbling in her mind, the slightest flicker of movement in Daniel's eyelids snagged her attention. She sucked in a breath.

"Daniel?"

A low groan cracked in his throat.

"Here. Let me get you some water." Elation burst in her chest. He was stirring. That was a good sign, wasn't it?

She pressed a cup to his mouth and allowed a small amount of the cool liquid to dribble past his parched lips. He swallowed and groaned before sinking back into the pillow. He blinked and focused, his green eyes sharpening on her face.

"Where am I?"

"The hospital. You were hurt."

His eyes slid shut as he nodded slowly. "Protecting you."

Tears pricked her eyes. "Yes. You were protecting me. You saved my life."

He reopened his eyes and looked at the ceiling, moving his tongue slowly against the roof of his mouth. "Feel strange."

"It's the laudanum. The doctor gave it to you for pain."

His gaze searched her face. "What is damaged?"

Lord, how do I tell him? Her mouth turned to sawdust. She fumbled for words, but Daniel always hated it when she beat around the bush. She inhaled a fortifying breath.

"You lost your right arm." Warm tears escaped, leaving trails down her cheeks and slipping between her trembling lips. "Oh, Daniel, I'm so sorry."

He swallowed, eyes flickering for a moment, before he gave a slight shake of the head. "I'm not sorry. I would do it---all over again. I'll always take care of you---Ellie-Belle."

Her tears fell in earnest.

"How did I get here?"

She sniffed. "I dragged you to the surgical tent."

"What?" The shadow of a smile tugged his mouth. "You did that?"

She smiled through her tears. “Yes, and that was not an easy feat, big brother. You need to lay off the hard tack.”

He chuckled then groaned. She winced and grabbed his left hand. Leaning over him, she whispered, “I love you, Daniel. With God’s help, we’ll get through this. Together.”

He nodded and squeezed. “Together.”

Leaning in, she pressed a kiss to his forehead and straightened. A strange sensation prickled her shoulder blades. She turned to see the solemn soldier Thomas Turner staring at her with a perplexed expression on his face.

Heat scalded her neck and bled into her face. Kissing an ailing brother’s forehead was innocent enough, but dressed as a Union soldier, it must look...

Turner pivoted and walked away. Ellie’s pulse thrummed as she sped after him.

“Private Turner! Wait!”

She raced to his side, desperate to come up with some kind of explanation. What could she say? She’d already led the regiment to believe she was a mute. Clearly, that was a deception. And what to do about her identity?

Turner whirled back to her, his expression fierce.

“Come with me.”

She stayed silent, following him down a maze of corridors. He led them to a small closet before leading her inside and shutting the door.

Turner’s blue eyes burned into hers.

“You’re a female, aren’t you?”

Ellie fought to come up with a reasonable excuse for her behavior. Kissing another soldier’s forehead, even a supposed best friend or cousin, would be seen as odd at best. Scandalous at worst. Heat crawled up her throat and choked the words from her lips. Turner waited. Ellie wilted.

“I—yes.” Shame washed over her. “Daniel is my brother.” Panic gripped her chest in an icy vice. “Are you going to tell the captain?” She held her breath. If Turner disclosed her identity, she would likely lose her pay, and then how would she care for Daniel until he healed?

Turner stared at her for a long moment. Thinking. He stepped close, dropping his voice to a low whisper.

“I have no intention of doing that. Let’s say there are more women enlisted than you might imagine.”

Something about the weight of Turner’s words caused her to study him, confusion flooding. “What are you saying?”

The tiniest of smiles quirked the young man's mouth.

"I'll keep your secret if you keep mine."

Ellie's heart thumped. "Wait, you mean---?"

"Yes. My name is actually Cassie Kendrick. Let me tell you my story..."

A Note from the Author

It is estimated that at least 400 women enlisted as soldiers during the American Civil War. Some enlisted out of a sense of patriotic duty. Others did so to escape a future that, to them, seemed worse than the possibility of death. Some women couldn't bear to be apart from their husbands and chose to fight alongside them. Their reasons were varied but one thing they all shared was an astounding amount of grit and courage.

Women took up chewing tobacco, adopting the walks, speech habits, and mannerisms of their male counterparts in order to blend in. Sarah Rosetta Wakeman learned to throw a mean punch, ensuring her strength in front of the entire regiment. Other women, like Loreta Velazquez, used costumed effects, like fake mustaches. Among the most formidable women to don a uniform were those working as spies, like Sarah "Emma" Edmonds. Emma's life became the inspiration for Cassie Kendrick, the heroine in my next novel.

If you would like to read more about Cassie's story (Thomas Turner), look for *Where Dandelions Bloom*, coming July 1, 2019.