

Scarred VESSELS



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Micah could barely keep from staring at Mrs. Saunders to be certain she fared well. He'd watched Cuff help her, awkward with child, as she struggled to climb into the carriage before the widow waved a final farewell to Ezekiel.

Had she waved to Micah as well? He probably imagined it. Although he reassured her Ezekiel would be watched over by him personally, Micah understood the ever-present dangers of war. There were no assurances Ezekiel would be protected from any and all harm.

Besides that, Micah, along with the other sergeants and officers, oversaw an entire regiment—200 men. They needed to muster these men into soldiers capable of surviving on a battlefield. As he scrutinized the undisciplined and stoop-shouldered men, Micah shook his head. Training these former slaves into battle-ready soldiers would require all their resources and patience.

His stomach roiled at the occasional revealing of a horribly scarred brand on the shoulder and chest of many of the slaves. “Branded like farm animals,” he muttered under his breath.

Almost worse than the brands were the unseen scars that

kept the colored men from meeting the eyes of the officers and sergeants. Accustomed to submitting to their white masters, they'd been cowed into subservience.

This must change first. These men were military now. If they were to pass muster, they needed to learn drills and marches and how to handle their weapons. They needed to believe they were men with the confidence to stand off against another man of any shade of skin. They also must be free in their minds to proudly face off against any enemy. In their hearts, they must become free men.



AFTER SHE RETURNED HOME, Lydia slowly emerged from the carriage with Cuff's assistance. Hannah hurried out the front door to help her indoors. Her eyes held a thousand questions, but Hannah remained silent. Lydia was grateful she didn't have to fill in any details just now.

Comfort ran toward her mother.

"Dear, please go inside. 'tis still too cold to forget your cloak. I'll come with you indoors."

Her daughter's presence reminded her of the message she had yet to convey. The thought of telling Comfort her father would ne'er return tore at her soul. Would Comfort fully understand at this tender age? Death was so permanent, but her four-year-old lived in the day-to-day.

How would she understand what it meant that Papa would never come back to her? Never hold her or read a story to her again? For a moment, Lydia wished she were four again and did not understand the finality of death. But she remembered what she had discovered at the age of four. She breathed in deeply, then fought back the panic her haunting memory always elicited. Would that nightmare never cease?

Lydia forced her thoughts back to the present and put her

arm around her daughter's shoulder. Drawing the child indoors, she removed her cloak and hung it on the coat tree.

"Comfort, let us sit in the parlor together and talk."

Comfort's eyes danced with anticipation. "Can we read from a book together, Mama?"

"Of course, dear one." Lydia smiled, but her eyes were moist

They snuggled into the settee that Jeremiah had bought her for a wedding gift.

"I love this chair. Papa gave you this chair, did he not?"

"Aye, Comfort, he did."

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and Comfort's eyes narrowed when she stared at her mother.

"What is wrong, Mama?" Comfort placed her small hand on Lydia's face and smoothed away the moisture.

"Those soldiers who came here, Comfort. They came to tell us some news." Lydia sniffed sharply, and her lips contorted with the pain of revealing it. "Papa got very sick at the war camp. So sick, he died of a terrible fever."

"I had a fever once." Comfort cocked her head to the side. "What is died?"

"He ... cannot get better. God took him to heaven. We can't see him anymore. At least, not here on earth."

Tears emerged in Comfort's eyes. "He can't get better?"

"No, my dear love. Sometimes, our bodies are not strong, and we have to go to heaven instead of coming home to those we love."

"But I want Papa home."

"I know. I wish more than anything Papa could come home."

She held Comfort for a time while they both cried. When her daughter stopped, Lydia brushed the child's hair to the side. She picked up Comfort's small hand and placed it on her swollen belly. "Your Papa left us a gift, Comfort."

Comfort sniffed. "A gift?"

"Aye. Your father left us a wee baby to cherish. In a few

months, we shall get to love and hold a new little one. A gift from Papa.”

The unborn child greeted Comfort with a healthy kick. She gasped. “Is that the wee baby?”

“Aye, Comfort.” Lydia grinned. “That is exactly what you felt. Your new brother or sister was saying ‘hello.’”

Comfort smiled, but her lips trembled. “I still want Papa to come home.”

“Aye.” She wrapped her arms around her daughter and hugged her. “Aye, Comfort. I truly wish that as well.”

Lydia did not know how long they sat together, but Comfort fell asleep snuggled next to her. She refused to think about Jeremiah never coming home, nor how the farm would survive without Ezekiel, nor whether Ezekiel would return safely from the war.

All she wanted to think about at this moment was her children and the joy that stirred within her whenever she felt Jeremiah’s child move within her womb. She would not allow the memories of the past, nor the worries of the present, to overcome the happiness this future gift birthed in her heart. She would cling to this hope in these desperate times, even if it seemed she clung to a rope on the verge of fraying.



AS HE’D PROMISED, Micah started a letter to Lydia Saunders, for she’d begged him to let her know how Ezekiel fared. To keep her apprised of Ezekiel’s well-being seemed simple enough. But penning a note to the winsome Mrs. Saunders stirred unfamiliar sensations in Micah—unbidden and pleasurable. He’d been able to keep this attraction hidden while he conducted business the last few days.

Yet now, as he sat by the campfire in the Massachusetts woods, he felt helpless to express ordinary sentiments that would hide the deeper excitation her presence elicited in his

heart. When he thought about Lydia, he envisioned her glorious light-brown hair, the scent of lavender that emanated from her presence, and the soothing tone of her voice that enraptured him.

He'd become smitten with Lydia Saunders in a mere three-days' time. And this woman was with child and mother to a four-year-old. Not to mention, a widow—wife to a favorite officer, now deceased. An officer who'd provided a home for her that Micah could only dream about.

He shook his head in disgust, crumpled up the blank paper, and threw it into the fire.

"Can I join you?" Henry Bearslayer sat beside him on another rock.

"Sure." Micah raked tense fingers through his long hair.

"You are disturbed."

A man of few words, Henry rarely discussed feelings. His heritage as a Narragansett Indian exuded strength and bravery. It also discouraged most small talk with others. Micah had tried to involve him in conversation many a time, but Henry hesitated to engage in friendship. Yet this dependable and loyal soldier elicited deep trust in Micah.

While Henry's manner could be a conundrum, Micah would rather serve alongside him than many white soldiers. But, Henry's timing to visit irritated Micah. He'd rather be alone today and avoid small talk.

"It's the woman, isn't it?"

Henry's unexpected observation took Micah by surprise. He stared at the fire, then took a stick and drew lines in the dirt.

"When a woman captures a man's heart, the ropes she ties around his affections leave scars on a man's face." The Indian gave a rueful smile. "You may think you hide your feelings for her. But others can see your pain."

"Is it that obvious?" Micah wiped his palm across his face.

"Perhaps only to another who carries similar scars." Henry patted him on the arm. "I only know this because my heart was

once imprisoned by one who was not free to love me. She belonged to a white man in New York.”

Micah’s mouth dropped open. “Why did you ne’er tell me before? We’ve served together these many months, and I ne’er knew.”

“There is a time when one is wiser not to speak. At other times, one speaks when there is a wounded brother who needs help. You are wounded, but your situation is not without hope. Take comfort in that.”

Without another word, Henry stood and returned to his tent.

Not without hope? Perhaps Henry did not understand the ways of the white man and their system of wealthy versus poor. But the man did understand the ways of a man and a woman. And in that, Micah found comfort.