

*Scarred* VESSELS



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**M**icah Hughes could not have been more surprised if Washington's troops had just declared victory. He sat speechless, both distraught and in awe of the widow's bravery.

To free her best farm overseer overwhelmed him with both respect and concern for Mrs. Saunders. Ezekiel's presence likely kept the farm going. How would she survive? Especially since she would soon birth another child. This was madness.

He tried not to stutter. "Mrs. Saunders, are you certain? You're making a grave decision."

"I'm aware of the solemn nature of my decision." When she met his eyes, she bore an expression of calm and peace. "Yet I must follow my conscience. And my God."

What could he say? How could he argue with a belief he agreed with? Yet he had earnest concern for her well-being.

"How will you manage, ma'am? With only one field worker?"

"I do not know, Sergeant Hughes." She gripped her china cup so tightly it seemed it would shatter in her grasp. "I find I must take a step of faith, however uncertain my future is." She gave Ezekiel a tentative smile. "I'm certain you have preparations to make. Please feel free to take your leave and get ready, Ezekiel."

“Thank you, Mrs. Saunders. I am eternally grateful. May the good Lord bless you.” He gathered the empty coffee cups and plates and hurried toward the kitchen, balancing the china in his strong hands.

When Ezekiel left, Micah leaned forward in his chair. If it would have been deemed appropriate, he’d have reached for her hands and made an earnest plea for her to reconsider.

“Sergeant Hughes, please do not fear. Whatever happens will be God’s will. I feel that most deeply in my spirit.”

“You ... you have already been through so much, Mrs. Saunders. Your husband told us about the attack on your home in Newport before you escaped to Bristol. Who will defend and protect you? Who will attend your crops and horses?”

“We will manage. Somehow.” She averted her gaze, then stood. “How do I sign the papers necessary to free Ezekiel?”

“This must be done at the county seat.” He rose from his chair. “I can follow your carriage there.” No sense in dissuading her. She’d made up her mind. “We’ll post the recruit signs there and accept signatures within. Once Ezekiel passes muster, the officials will render payment to you.”

“No payment is necessary.”

“Please, ma’am, ’tis the only way Ezekiel will truly be considered a free man. If there is no exchange of shillings, ’twould not be legal.”

She bit her lower lip and frowned. After a moment, she said, “Very well.”

A sudden sensation must have occurred in her large belly as she grasped it and inhaled.

Fear prickled through him. “Do you need a doctor, ma’am?”

Lydia grinned. “’Tis quite normal that infants kick.”

Heat rose in his face. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Saunders, I don’t know what I imagined.”

A quick squeeze of her fingers on his hand left him with a strange sensation that confused yet pleased him. The smile on her face entranced him.

“You really must not fear so,” she said. “God will watch over me.”

“Aye.” He cleared his throat. “I must get a few nods of sleep before dawn. We will have much work to do then.”

He turned and almost tripped over his own feet, increasing his embarrassment. Micah hurried out the door, took a deep breath, and ran toward the barn.



MICAH AWOKE at dawn to the sound of sobs. He heard a female voice speaking amidst tears.

“Hannah, I must do this.” The deep and unique tone of Ezekiel’s voice pierced the quiet. “They need soldiers to fight. And Mr. Saunders, he can’t help in this cause for freedom no more.”

“And just whose cause is this, anyway?” The woman’s voice grew angry. “I don’t see no one offering to free us colored folk if we win this war. What’s to become of us, even if you be free?” She resumed her heartrending cries.

“I don’t know, Hannah. But I promise, I will come back to you. Maybe Mrs. Saunders would free you too, so we can start a family of our own.”

In the quiet that followed, Micah could hear sounds of the couple’s affection, then passion. Embarrassed, he stirred so they would know he was awake. He heard them leave the barn in a hurry.

Since he shared quarters with his regiment for so long, Micah kept thoughts of women and their finer ways at bay. Until last night.

What sort of madness prompted these feelings of attraction to Mrs. Saunders? She may be a widow, but he felt ashamed of his reaction to the touch of her fingers. What sort of man is bewitched by the widow of his newly deceased officer? He must be desperate. Or a deeper sinner than he thought.

Not to mention, foolish beyond comprehension. What wealthy woman would glance twice at a simple farmer from Connecticut? Being a soldier for so long must have rendered him on the verge of insanity to think Mrs. Saunders would be attracted to him. Though proficient at combat, he came across as a complete dunderhead in social circles.

*Focus on this war.* Indeed, he might never return home from future battles, which made any hopes of sharing love with a woman a complete farce. For the first time, that thought left an emptiness in his spirit.

The rooster had already crowed, so he pushed his weary frame up from the straw.

He packed up his gear then took note of the recruiting posters Washington had entrusted to him. Micah still could not understand why the general had requested he and Henry to do this mission. Perhaps they were some of the healthiest in the regiments. That did not speak well for the condition of the rest of the troops.

When he walked past the stall where Henry had slept, he saw his Indian friend had already risen. Grateful for the man's tracking skills, Micah knew Henry's abilities had saved their hides on more than one occasion on the 300-mile trek from Valley Forge. And with Henry's hunting expertise, they'd probably enjoyed more food on that journey than they'd eaten all winter at camp.

As he approached the stately Saunders home, he saw Ezekiel emerge from the front door.

It was evident the gravity of his decision had hit Ezekiel. The serious set of his eyes and steeled jaw revealed no less determination to go to war than Micah had seen in the man last night. But the slave's reddened eyes affirmed the pain this decision caused.

It weighed with heaviness on Ezekiel's heart. The slave would leave behind a woman he cared deeply about, and there were no

assurances he'd ever be free to return to her. Would the man ever be truly free in a world where injustice reigned?

Sympathy crept into Micah's thoughts. Had he faced leaving someone behind who he loved, could he have made such a choice? His boots clomped up the steps, and he knocked on the door.

Hannah answered and motioned him inside. "Have a seat in the dining room." Her face covered in tears, she could barely speak.

Micah removed his hat and set it on the coat rack. Following Hannah's directions, he entered the room. The table was set with exquisite china, covered with a cloth and the finest tableware he'd ever seen. He must have been too exhausted to notice it last night, but today, he felt out of place amid such finery.

"Good day, Sergeant Hughes." Mrs. Saunders's smile, although welcoming, was tinged with sadness.

"Good day, ma'am."

He sat, his movements awkward, and made every attempt not to disrupt the carefully set plates. More utensils were placed for one person than all the cups, trenchers, and spoons used by his entire family at a meal. Although awkward in his manners, his gracious hostess made him feel right at home.

"Please, help yourself," she said. "Miriam, could you pour the coffee this morning? Hannah is not feeling well."

A dark young woman poured a generous amount into his cup.

"Thank you, Miss."

Her smile radiated at his gratitude. "You are welcome, sir."

Miriam had a different way of speaking with unfamiliar inflections to her words. Uncertain where she hailed from, Micah found her accent lilting and melodic. Although not refined, he knew better than to ask about her while she was present. He thought her speech lovely, just unfamiliar to his Yankee sensibilities.

After the servant left the room, Mrs. Saunders explained.

“Miriam came to live with us a few years ago. She was not born in this country.” A disturbed expression of pain crept into her visage. “We are grateful we were able to ... rescue her.”

“Well, she has a beautiful smile.”

“Aye, she most certainly does.” The darkness left Mrs. Saunders’s face as she rested her hands on the edge of the table. “When must we leave for the county seat?”

He swallowed the coffee, then wiped his mouth with his napkin. “I’d say the sooner, the better. General Washington counts on us to glean recruits for this regiment forthwith. Colonel Greene needs time to muster then train them before they are ready for battle.”

“Of course.” She glanced upward. “Is that Colonel Nathanael Greene?”

“Nay, Col. Christopher Greene is his cousin. He’ll be in charge of the regiment, under General Varnum.”

“These names are so familiar to me from Jeremiah’s letters. I almost feel like I know them.”

He almost choked on his toast and drank cider to stop his cough. “I beg your pardon, Mrs. Saunders. I nearly forgot, and I regret I did not bring this up before.” He met her surprised gaze. “I have your husband’s personal effects for you, including several letters that never made it into a courier’s hands. I must have been daft to forget.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears, but she smiled. “I am beholden to you.”

“Nay, Mrs. Saunders, ’tis I who am beholden to your husband’s service in the cause for freedom. And to you as well, for your support of his endeavor. We will never forget him.”

She stared at her hands. “Nay. Nor will I.”



LYDIA COULD NOT BRING herself to delve into Jeremiah’s letters that day, but it was all she could do to leave them in her

bedchamber in a drawer. She must bid the words of her husband to wait one more day. Today, Ezekiel needed his freedom.

Riding in the carriage driven by Cuff, the young slave Jeremiah had purchased shortly after their marriage, Lydia's thoughts traveled over the rutted road of Ezekiel's life with them.

The first time she saw Ezekiel, he man's strength and quiet demeanor impressed her. He rarely spoke a harsh word to anyone, although she soon learned his calm spirit held a fierce loyalty to Jeremiah and then, to herself.

Jeremiah begged his father to allow Ezekiel to come to their Newport home when the couple married. Lydia's father-in-law had been in a generous mood. After all, his only son married the elder daughter of a wealthy shipowner. Why should he not reward his son's affections and commitment to such a prize catch?

Her father-in-law did not realize Jeremiah had an ulterior motive to his request. For some time, he'd known Lydia's maidservant, Hannah, had captured Ezekiel's affections. Jeremiah understood his own love for Lydia, and he could not imagine the thought his father might sell Ezekiel elsewhere. The couple might be separated forever.

Jeremiah's request to unite the two in the same household increased her love for the man she longed to wed. Longing for Jeremiah had turned into heated passion that found Lydia with child just two months after they wed. Her mother had spoken to her about the marriage bed obligation. But Lydia had discovered the "obligation" to be blissful.

The carriage jerked sideways on the dirt road, shaking her from her happy memories. She glanced at Ezekiel, astride the gelding. His loss would fill the household with grief.

Lydia would not contemplate the potential loss of the entire farm if she and the remaining servants could not keep it running well. She shuddered at the thought of being forced from her



home and into the cold arms of her Tory mother. Lydia must make this work.

They drew close to the Bristol courthouse, and Sergeant Hughes, astride his mount, directed the carriage to the side of the road.

Cuff shouted, “Whoa,” to the horses, and the carriage jerked to a stop.

Lydia waited for Cuff, who opened the door to the carriage. As she unfolded her legs from her cramped position, she wondered how long it would be before it would be impossible to climb into this transport—much less get out again. Cuff held out his cocoa-brown hand for her, and she gripped it with force while she held onto the window’s rim with her other hand.

As she stepped down, she cringed. Voices shouted from the corner tavern. Those sounds metamorphosed in her mind to echoes from long ago.

The uproar grew, and her heart pounded faster. In her mind, she heard the auctioneer belting out words to incite a purchase.

‘Gather round and see the finest flesh from Africa ye’ll ever see. Limbs, strong as an ox. And the women, ready to satisfy your *deepest* desire.’

Lydia nearly lost the breakfast she’d struggled to ingest. Her stomach churned at comments about the slaves’ anatomy peeling through the air as if it were the most natural marketplace conversation. Bids on human flesh. With each horrific comment about the women, exposed in vulnerable nakedness, Lydia swallowed back the bile and longed to spit the taste from her mouth.

She stood still, staring at the sky over the wharfs and envisioned the sounds of the slave trade that had been her father’s livelihood for years. Today, there was no such auction. The slave ships had been stifled in their trade while the war raged on.

All she heard were the men who yelled in the tavern and the haunting calls of seagulls along the wharf. The sounds of the

past, so vivid in her memory, refused to leave her mind at peace. The silence from the docks still echoed the horror.

“Mrs. Saunders?” Sergeant Hughes approached her, an image of concern crossing his expression. “Are you well, Mrs. Saunders? Perhaps we’d best hurry to the county magistrate’s office.”

He cupped his hand around her elbow, and his strength encouraged her to walk away from the horrific memories.

The sergeant rounded a bend and pointed toward the building where a sign recruiting “Negro, mulatto and Indian slaves” had been posted earlier by Private Bearslayer.

“Private Bearslayer arrived ahead and posted these. Come inside. I’ll find you a chair.”

The door opened with a high-pitched creak, and Lydia emerged into a crowded room that smelled of sweat and tobacco. Both white and colored men filled the room. A line in front of a wooden table stretched almost back to the door. At the table, men signed a parchment using a long quill pen.

“Well, well, good day, Lydia. And how does my sister-in-law fare?” Phineas examined her large belly with a smirk.

She swallowed with difficulty at the sight of her sister’s husband.

His rancid breath wafted into her face. “I see your rebel husband being gone to war has not kept you from entertaining yourself in his absence.”

Sudden heat coursed through Lydia at the vulgar insinuation.

Sergeant Hughes grabbed the man’s cravat with such force, Phineas’s face swelled and reddened.

“You will apologize to the lady this instant.”

The sergeant’s face, normally calm and kind, filled with the same fury she had experienced at Phineas’s words.

“You will treat our hero’s widow with respect, sir.”

“I apologize.”

For all his odious manner, her sister’s husband was a coward to the core. Sergeant Hughes released Phineas and continued to glare at her brother-in-law.

Phineas readjusted his silk cravat. “So, Jeremiah is dead. I shall let your sister know.” He pointed at Lydia’s belly. “And does she know about this?”

“You know quite well that Phila and I rarely speak. I have nothing to say to her. Or you.”

Lydia spun around so fast she grew dizzy.

A sturdy hand gripped her and guided her to a nearby chair. “Rest here, Mrs. Saunders.”

How would she have endured this day without the sergeant’s help? Lydia must remember to thank him.

She closed her eyes, only to reopen them when the grating voice of Phineas interrupted her short repose.

“You should be grateful I came today at all, Sergeant, especially since I’m freeing my best slave to join the 1<sup>st</sup> Rhode Island regiment.”

Lydia turned her eyes toward Phineas’s ‘best slave.’ The young man appeared to be no more than fifteen. *God help him.*

Sergeant Hughes ignored Phineas but focused his attention on her. “Mrs. Saunders, are you well enough to stand a moment and sign the papers to release Ezekiel?”

His compassion elicited her deep gratitude. In a world of ugliness, his kindness soothed like a healing balm.

“Aye.” She pushed her awkward form up from the wooden chair and felt his hand on her back as he helped lift her weight upward. She clung with a weak grip to his arm and approached the table.

Lydia stood next to Ezekiel and bit her tongue to resist begging him to stay in Bristol. She needed him. How would the farm survive without him?

The recruiting soldier at the table glanced at her. “Do you own this slave?”

“Aye.” Her voice quivered.

“And do ye agree to release this Negro to his freedom to fight in the Continental Army in Rhode Island’s 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment?”

“Aye.”

“Then sign here, ma’am.”

She took the quill in her trembling hand, dipped it into the inkpot, and signed her name. Tears kept her from seeing if her signature was legible.

“Give the quill to the Negro and have him sign his *X* right here.”

Outrage at the inference steeled Lydia’s back upright. “His name is Ezekiel, and he can sign his name as well as you can, sir.”

The soldier’s eyes opened wide. “Beg yer pardon, ma’am.”

Ezekiel took the pen from her, dipped it into the pot of ink, and signed his name with a flourish. He even made a definitive point of dotting the *i* in his name. He handed the pen back to the soldier and turned away when the discussion of a money exchange began.

“Certain sure this Negro should bring ye 120 shillings once he passes muster. The State of Rhode Island will pay ye handsomely for the sale.”

Lydia shuddered. It took every ounce of her strength to refrain from screaming. Humans sold for blood money. She lowered her gaze and tried in vain to silence the voices in her head, accusing her, taunting her, calling her the Judas she knew she was.

Turning away, she hurried out the door.