



Soldiers everywhere. Bleeding. Crying out. Lunging at him. Guns and cannons blaring on every side. Drew reached to unsheathe his bayonet but instead clasped air. “No!”

He thrashed back and forth, his breaths coming in rapid succession.

“Shhh. You’re safe now.” A woman’s soothing voice crooned overhead.

Damp coolness swept over Drew’s sweat-drenched brow, pulling him from his nightmarish dream. His eyes shot open, and dim rafters stared back at him. Where was he? He merely remembered fleeing the battlefield on a borrowed horse.

A cotton sheet lay across his bandaged chest, his bloodied shirt and uniform jacket having been stripped away. He shifted his gaze to the woman leaning over him, her honey-colored eyes a blend of softness and alarm. Like a frightened doe, she sat frozen in place, hand suspended in midair, gripping a dampened cloth.

He’d seen that face before. Except now, instead of pinned up, her dark hair cascaded down onto her shoulders, haloing her oval face.

Such loveliness was difficult to forget.

“Who are you?”

She lowered her hand, the slight movement in her lips hinting she was hesitant to divulge the information. At last, she found her voice. “Caroline Dunbar.”

Pain sliced through him, and his eyes crimped. “Miss Caroline. I ... remember now. You ... found me and ... stitched my wound. Your slave ... Cyrus ... brought me here.”

She nodded, uncertainty marring her expression. “Yes.”

Drew wished to put her at ease, to thank her for her selfless efforts, but his voice failed. He was exhausted and so very weak. Like driftwood floating aimlessly downstream, his limbs hung limp, refusing to budge. How he longed to escape the agony and fatigue tormenting his body. His eyes closed, and like an angelic vision, the woman and his surroundings faded.

---

CAROLINE PRESSED the back of her hand to the sergeant’s blistered forehead, thankful he was resting once again. Fever meant his body was fighting infection. That much she knew. Although the minié ball passed through his shoulder, the damage was substantial. She’d pulled several fragments of bone and lead from the wound.

Would her limited knowledge of medicine be enough?

Heat rose in Caroline’s cheeks as she pulled the cotton sheet higher on his exposed chest. Too riddled and stained to repair, his bloodied shirt and uniform jacket lay rolled up in the corner to dispose of later. His shoulders looked a bit broader than Jamison’s, but perhaps she could sneak into her brother’s room and borrow one of his larger shirts for the sergeant to wear once he’d sufficiently healed.

This abandoned slave shack would provide protection for a time, but frequenting it would arouse suspicion. Yet, the sergeant would need daily nourishment and continuous medical

care to sustain him. Could she risk asking their house servant, Lily, for help?

She gave a soft sigh. Enemy or not, she hoped the sergeant lived. He'd made it this far. She hated to see her efforts to save him go unrewarded. In the short time he'd been alert, his eyes had displayed the will to live.

Something deep within her longed for him to have that chance.

---

THE DECIDEDLY SOPRANO voices echoed through the half-empty church building as the final note to the hymn rang out. Vacant spots dotted the pews, a sobering reminder that the majority of menfolk were still at war.

Or not coming home at all.

Only a handful of older men and young boys remained alongside the women.

Caroline's stomach hitched at the noticeable absence of both the Worthington and Thomas families. Had something terrible befallen them? Guilt riddled her. By not following through with her intentions to check on the neighbors, she'd not only betrayed her mother's trust but quite possibly missed a crucial opportunity to lend much-needed aid.

Pastor Huddleston plucked off his spectacles and motioned for the congregation to sit. Stepping away from the pulpit, he clamped his hands together behind his back. His wrinkled face drew taut as he waited for the room to quiet. At last, he sighed, his voice solemn and profound. "Yesterday's battle at Monocacy Junction was a costly one for many. I've received word that the Thomas Farm was in the thick of battle. The family's home sustained extensive damage when a cannonball ripped through its front."

An audible gasp swept through the sparse congregation. Caroline recalled the plume of smoke she had seen in the

distance. She bit her lip at her parents' puzzled stares from the opposite end of the pew. No doubt they thought her neglectful in sharing their neighbor's misfortunes. But, how could she inform them of something she hadn't known?

The pastor waved the crowd to silence. "Both they and the Worthington family went through a harrowing experience with the constant barrage of fighting outside their homes while they remained hunkered in their cellars. Thankfully no one in either household was injured, but they are in dire need of supplies and assistance. In addition, the Thomas yard is inundated with wounded soldiers in need of care. I spoke early this morning with Mrs. Thomas, who requested all the bedding, food, and willing workers we can muster."

Caroline shifted in her seat. She couldn't undo what had transpired, but she could make every effort to help today.

Pastor Huddleston strode closer to the front pews, gripping his Bible in both hands. "Though this be the Lord's Day, a day for rest and worship, Scripture alludes to the fact we are to do good when it is within our power to do so. Jesus, himself, healed on the Sabbath. I know many of you will want to help. Join me in prayer as we dismiss."

He motioned the congregation to their feet and, with eyes closed, lifted his arms heavenward. "Oh, Lord, we implore You to bring a swift end to this horrific war which has devastated our land. Our nation is divided, and our people perishing. Strengthen our hearts and our hands as we lend aid to our dear friends and the soldiers in their care. May Your grace be upon us all. In Christ's name, amen."

A tear slid down his cheek as his eyes lifted, sadness etched in his long face. Though cautious never to take sides regarding the war, the elderly pastor made clear his contempt for conflict. "May God go with you."

As the somber crowd dispersed, Caroline felt a tug on her sleeve. Turning, she glimpsed hurt in her mother's befuddled

expression. "Why didn't you tell us the severity of the Thomases' hardships? Did you not realize the urgency?"

How could she respond? Any attempt to defend herself would be a falsehood. Mama was certain to see right through her ... and perhaps pry the true reason from her. Dropping her gaze, she could only plead forgiveness. "I'm sorry, Mama. Forgive me."

Her mother shook her head as she followed Phillip and Rose down the aisle. With a grunt, Papa swept past Caroline and limped his way outside. Her throat tightened. If she'd known the need was so great, she'd have been more inclined to pass the wounded Union sergeant by. And yet, could she have been so callous as to neglect the need before her simply because he wasn't one of their own?

Did a person have the right to pick and choose whom they tended? As much as she regretted not realizing their neighbors' distress, the Lord had placed the sergeant in her path. Ignoring him in his time of need would have made her no better than the priest and Levite who passed the injured man on the roadside in Jesus' parable. She'd done what she felt right, and that was that.

She wound her way through the dispersing crowd, talk of yesterday's battle monopolizing the conversation.

"Mary Worthington said her young son, Glenn, watched the entire battle from their cellar window," she overheard Mrs. Connors whisper to Mrs. Delany.

The elderly Mrs. Delany shook her head. "I'm surprised at Mary allowing such a thing. A boy his tender age shouldn't view such violence."

Caroline skirted around them, certain she would glean no more than hearsay from the two white-haired ladies. As she stepped outside, she adjusted her bonnet to better shade her face from the brightness of the midday sun. Her father and two older gentlemen, Mr. Connors and Mr. Jenkins, loitered at the bottom of the steps, deep in conversation. She made her way toward them, catching bits and pieces of their discussion—

enough to convince her eavesdropping on the exchange would be more worth her time.

Pausing at the opposite side of the bottom step, she feigned looking for someone in the dispersing crowd. She focused on their voices, listening for some tidbit concerning yesterday's battle that would aid the sergeant in his escape. Should he recover, he'd need to know where to reconnect with his men.

"They say Monocacy Junction is in shambles. The bridges burned, the railroad tracks destroyed, and the ground ... with weapons and dead soldiers," Mr. Jenkins's subdued voice made a few of the words hard to distinguish.

Mr. Connors' muffled reply was difficult to catch. Something about another Confederate victory.

Caroline leaned closer, grateful her father's back was to her. While the other men seemed oblivious to her presence, had her father noticed her, he likely would have prodded her on.

Papa let out a chuckle, his voice less restrained than his companions'. "The Yankees took a beatin', that's sure. General Early and his men must've chased 'em halfway to Baltimore."

She cringed, noting a few heads veer in his direction. Not everyone in the congregation shared Papa's sentiments. Some of their neighbors' husbands and sons fought for the Union, which explained why their pastor was careful not to declare sides.

Mr. Jenkins cautioned Caroline's father with a shake of his head and an uneasy look around. He leaned in closer, brow furrowed. "Careful, Eugene. You'll offend."

Unable to see her father's face or read his expression, Caroline breathed easier when he remained silent.

Mr. Connors clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm content the fighting has ended, and the Northerners have left the area."

Caroline gnawed her lip. If the Yankees went northward, no telling where they'd be by the time the sergeant recovered enough to travel. Even in good health, the journey would be treacherous for a Union soldier on enemy soil. How would he manage it in his weakened state?

She strolled toward the line of parked carriages, her thoughts in turmoil. It seemed traitorous to help the sergeant recuperate only to send him back to fight the very men who were protecting her family's livelihood. But if she became a nurse, it would be her duty to help restore a patient's health regardless of his beliefs or status. She could only pray her secret act of benevolence would not prove costly.

For either of them.