



Movement above Drew stirred him to consciousness. A sharp pang shot through his shoulder and side, jolting him back to reality. He forced his eyelids open and stared into the treetops fringed by the dusky-blue of twilight. A shadowy figure loomed over him, his face obscured by the encroaching darkness. The stocky man hadn't the look of a soldier.

More than likely a scavenger out for what he could salvage.

Drew attempted to rise but fell back, every ounce of his strength spent. Whoever it was, he was at his mercy. "Who are you?"

"Name's Cyrus. Miss Caroline sent me t' fetch ya." The hushed voice sounded like that of a slave.

Confusion fogged Drew's senses. "Miss ... Caroline?"

The figure bent lower, his voice a whisper. "The one who found ya and stitched ya up."

Drew slid a hand beneath his unbuttoned uniform and touched his fingertips to his swollen side. Instead of a gaping wound, his fingers met with a jagged line of coarse stitching hemmed in by bulging flesh covered by a thin cloth bandage. Dim recollection washed over him of a dark-haired beauty who'd reluctantly come to his aid. He forced his eyes wider, the intense

pain and grogginess making him wish he'd not come to at all. "How'd you find me?"

"Miss Caroline told me whereabouts you'd be and left your horse tied nearby. I've rigged up a pole sled to tote ya on."

Cyrus moved aside, allowing Drew a glimpse of the bay mare he'd ridden from battle with a crude travois fastened behind. He gave a slight nod, though he couldn't fathom where a slave could safely conceal an injured Union soldier on southern sympathizer land.

Or why he'd risk trying.

Standing, Cyrus shifted to Drew's head and slid quivering hands under his arms. Was he afraid? He had every reason to be. Miss Caroline put her servant in grave danger on Drew's behalf. If found aiding a Union soldier, the man would likely be severely flogged.

Or worse.

A sharp sting pierced Drew's shoulder as Cyrus placed his hands beneath him and lifted. He cringed and held back a groan. Given the raw sensitivity in his shoulder, the minié ball had either lodged deep within or traveled through him completely. With all the loss of blood, it was a wonder he'd not died hours ago. If not for the Lord's saving grace and the kindness of a beautiful stranger, he might well have.

The horse whinnied and pawed at the ground as Cyrus slid Drew onto the makeshift sled. Sweat droplets dampened his forehead and neck at the exertion. His energy sapped, Drew had no choice but to entrust his welfare to this man's benevolence.

And to his Creator.

Stillness blanketed the night, but for the chant of insects and the rustle of feet in the dew-laden grass. Drew felt the travois grow taut beneath him as the horse tugged forward over uneven ground. Each jolting motion pulsed through him like salt in a wound. He stared into the starlit sky, breathless, vulnerable, wondering if he'd ever see the light of day.

As darkness overspread the sky, he sensed himself fading in

and out. His eyelids fluttered closed, and he gave in to the urge to shut out everything around him—the pain, the mistakes, the uncertainties—as a familiar verse drummed through his head.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.*

Thoughts of war and battles faded into the far recesses of Drew's mind as he drifted into unconsciousness, his body teetering between life and death.

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CAROLINE SLIPPED into her chair at the dinner table under her father's scrutinizing stare. The red blotches in his cheeks indicated his displeasure. He speared a piece of smoked ham with his fork, mouth taut. "You're late."

"I'm sorry, Papa." She brushed a strand of hair from her cheek, working to still her anxious spirit. If her father knew the reason behind her tardiness, his dour mood would seem mild in comparison to what she would suffer.

"No need to scold, Eugene. Caroline has a fitting excuse for her tardiness. She's been on an errand of benevolence." Her mother's calming voice squeezed some of the tension from the awkward moment.

Papa's brow furrowed. "What sort of benevolence?"

Mama passed Caroline a depleted bowl of mashed potatoes, letting a moment pass before answering as though choosing her words with care. At last, she folded her hands together and met Papa's gaze. "With the battle so near, Caroline thought it fitting to look in on our neighbors and offer aid to the wounded."

Papa paused his chewing, his gaze flicking between Caroline and her mother. "Which neighbors?"

Mama's chin tipped slightly upward. "Mr. and Mrs. Thomas."

He scowled. Papa made no secret of his disdain for their neighbors to the west. Though the Thomas family owned slaves, her father often criticized them for not holding as staunch of

allegiance to the Southern way of thinking as he felt they ought. Mr. and Mrs. Thomas's interaction with Union leaders—allowing them to meet in their house on occasion—especially galled him. Rumors claimed they'd welcomed General Ulysses S. Grant himself into their home.

He turned to Caroline, shifting his food to one side of his mouth. "And exactly what was it you did?"

Caroline dropped a small mound of potatoes onto her plate, her mouth turning to cotton. How could she admit she'd not even made it to the neighbors? By the time she'd finished cleaning and stitching up the Union sergeant's wounds, the sun had set low on the horizon. She'd barely had time to locate Cyrus and inform him of the man's whereabouts before returning home to wash and change her soiled dress.

It was wrong to deceive, but to confess her true whereabouts would be her undoing. "I'm afraid so late in the day I wasn't much help."

"Then why did you bother going?" Her father's condescending tone begged an explanation.

Her throat thickened, and she took a hard swallow. With her brother, Jamison, away at war, it seemed she could never do quite enough to aid the Confederate cause. She squared her shoulders, giving in to the urge to redeem herself in his eyes. "I-I did assist one soldier, though he was in such a sorry state, I'm not certain he'll survive."

Her mother dabbed the edges of her mouth with her napkin and shook her head. "Poor fellow."

Papa's chair creaked as he pushed back from the table. "Let's just hope he took down a heap of blue-bellies with him."

Caroline lowered her gaze to the table, heat rising in her cheeks. Though she'd spoken the truth, she'd neglected to mention the soldier wasn't Confederate. She set the bowl of potatoes aside, her appetite waning. Whether she admitted it or not, she'd aided a man her family deemed an enemy.

In her father's eyes, such an act was unforgivable.

While some in Maryland embraced the Northern way of thinking, her father remained steadfast in his conviction that slavery was every landowner's right and privilege, a cause to fight for to the bitter end. A bullet wound to the leg had ended his time of service. His pronounced limp was a constant reminder of why he despised the Yankees and everything they stood for. Perhaps the injury was also why he remained fixated on news from the battlefield—and why he devoured Jamison's infrequent letters as if experiencing the war through his eyes.

"I hear tell our boys sent the Yankees skedaddling." Her father's words sliced through her thoughts, pride replacing the agitation in his voice.

Caroline's younger brother, Phillip, popped his last bite of biscuit in his mouth, his expression earnest. "Wish I was old enough t' fight. I'd have put some buckshot in more than one of their backsides."

The comment garnered a rare chuckle from their father and a raised brow from Mama. "Phillip Wade Dunbar. Such talk isn't suitable at the dinner table."

The boy's wry grin hinted he was unfazed by the reprimand. He returned his gaze to Papa. "Do you suppose Jamison was with 'em?"

"If he was, I'll wager he was first in line to send them scuttling." His stern mood forgotten, Papa reached to tousle Phillip's hair.

Pricked by the amiable exchange, Caroline finished filling her plate. Though Jamison had ever been her father's pride and joy, Phillip seemed to have taken on the role in his absence. All she ever did was incur her father's wrath. Somehow, in his eyes, she never measured up.

Did he favor sons over daughters? It certainly didn't seem so where her younger sister, Rose, was concerned. Many a time, she'd witnessed him extending her a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek at bedtime. Rarely, if ever, had Caroline received such an endearing gesture from her father. Instead, her earliest memories

of him included stern words and an aloofness she didn't comprehend.

She bowed her head, her thoughts veering back to the injured sergeant. When she'd left, he still hadn't awakened. More than likely, he'd not live through the night. A part of her regretted ever lending help to the stranger and convincing Cyrus to join in her deceit. Her stomach churned at having put the dear servant in danger.

What had she been thinking, instructing him to bring a Union officer onto her father's property?

Yet the memory of the sergeant's pleading eyes lingered in her mind. Could it be so wrong to help someone in need, whether he be friend or foe? Jesus commended those who showed kindness to their enemies.

Unfortunately, Papa thought differently.

And she hated to think what would happen should he discover her ruse.