



Richmond, April 4, 1865
Early Afternoon

Luke fingered the charred locket in his hand—the only identifiable remains of what he assumed had been a woman inside the burned-out building. Uncovering her remains so near where they’d found the girl had him wondering if the two were related. The heirloom necklace would provide the answer.

If the girl still lived.

He stuffed the keepsake in his pocket and swiped a sleeve over his brow. The horrendous heat made rummaging through the ruined buildings all the more intolerable. So much destruction. So many homeless, destitute people lining the cluttered streets. The gutted city seemed more like an eyesore than a coveted prize. No telling how long it would take to rebuild the place.

Was it even possible?

Excited shouts sounded in the direction of the James River. Luke and the other soldiers paused from their work and peered toward the commotion. Though the dilapidated buildings obscured their view, the uproar made it plain something unusual

was amiss. Yet, it was hard to tell if the ruckus was initiated by friend or foe.

Private Fenton stepped toward Luke. “What goes on, Corporal?”

“I’m not sure, but keep your firearms handy.” Luke locked eyes with Sergeant Delmar as he strode toward him from across the street.

The sergeant jerked his head toward the uproar. “Go have a look, Corporal.”

“Yes, Sergeant.” Luke headed out at a spry walk, tension pulling at his shoulders. Had the Rebs tricked them and doubled back? He wouldn’t put it past them. Yet, the closer he strode to the riverfront, the more the raised voices sounded like shouts of jubilation.

Rounding the corner of a building, he could see a cluster of liberated slaves rushing down the street. Curious, he followed them, keeping his eyes trained ahead of him and his rifle half-cocked. A larger mob of people had gathered along the riverfront, leaping and shouting, even lifting their voices in song.

Luke strained for a closer look. What could cause such a stir? Obviously not the Rebs.

He caught a glimpse of a tall, silk hat and a bearded man at the center of the pack, his head towering above the rest. Wide-eyed, Luke stopped short. It couldn’t be. Stretching his five-foot ten-inch frame taller, he shielded his eyes against the midday sun until certain they hadn’t deceived him.

With a chuckle, he clapped a hand atop his kepi. “Sufferin’ polecats. Lincoln? Here in Richmond? If that don’t beat all.”

He watched the procession move as one along the riverfront and into the street. Several naval officers encircled the president, their attempt to keep the crowds at bay fruitless. Ignoring protocol, Lincoln clasped hands with ecstatic former slaves as he passed, while what remained of Richmond’s downtrodden citizens gazed on from a distance. A reverent hush fell over the group as they pressed deeper into the city.

Luke edged back, taking in the scene as if a piece of history was unfolding before his eyes. His shoulder bumped against someone, and he turned to see a teary-eyed woman looking on. Donned in a modest brown dress rather than the mourning garb like the majority of Richmond women, she wore her brunette hair pulled back, a cluster of ringlets gathered at the nape of her neck. The smile on her face asserted the tears were ones of joy not sorrow. "Is it truly him? The president?"

Caught off guard by her elated tone, Luke gave a slight nod. "Yes, ma'am. I believe so."

She pressed her hands prayer-like to her lips, her prominent chin dipping lower. "How I've longed for this day."

Luke stared at her, baffled that a Southerner would applaud the president's entry into the Confederate Capital. Her accent, though milder than most, lent to that of someone reared in the South. "Are you from Richmond, ma'am?"

"Indeed, I am. Born and raised here. Though I left for a time to attend school in Philadelphia."

Confused, Luke scrunched his brows. "And you're ... happy Lincoln has come?"

She blinked moisture from her pale blue eyes. "I assure you there are none happier." Sniffing, she tipped her chin higher. "You might say, I helped bring him here."

By the humored look on the woman's face, Luke's eyes must have swelled to the size of silver dollars. "How's that?"

Her thin lips spread in a wide grin. "Are you, by chance, familiar with the Richmond Underground?"

"No, ma'am." He lowered his voice a notch. "Is that in connection with the Underground Railroad?"

"Not exactly. Their purpose is to usher slaves to freedom. My network's intent is to bring an end to this war so that the loathsome practice of slavery will be abolished. And that day, my dear corporal, is near at hand. The president's visit here is testimony to that."

Intrigued, Luke rubbed a hand over his chin. "That's a tall

order. How do you manage such an undertaking here in the heart of the Confederacy?"

She cast a quick glance in both directions and leaned in closer. "Let's just say my associates and I are adept at sharing undisclosed, vital information with the right sources to tip the war in favor of the Union."

"You're a ... spy?" The words rolled off his tongue in a whispered squeak.

She angled her head side to side in a triumphal sort of way. "I prefer the term 'liberator.' I may not be well thought of by the residents here, but I'm in rather good standing with your sort."

Uncertain what to make of the odd woman's claim, Luke cast a glance over his shoulder, eager to report Lincoln's presence to Sergeant Delmar. "The best to you in your efforts, ma'am. I'd ... uh ... better return to my squad. Nice meeting you."

She gave a slow nod. "If you're ever in need of assistance, don't hesitate to call on me. The name's Van Lew. Miss Elizabeth Van Lew."

Luke tipped his kepi, not quite convinced such a commonplace lady could help topple the Confederacy from within its capital city. "Thank you, ma'am."

He turned and sprinted back to his squad, dodging the bedlam of debris in his path. With heavy breaths, he hustled over to the sergeant. As if sensing the importance of what he had to say, the soldiers stopped what they were doing and gathered around.

"What is it, Corporal? The Rebs?"

Swallowing, Luke fought to catch his breath. "Furthest thing from."

Sergeant Delmar's brows pinched. "What then?"

Luke's lips spread in a lopsided grin. "President Lincoln just arrived."

A rumble of laughter circulated through the group, and the sergeant crossed his arms over his chest. "Nice try, Gallagher."

Luke shifted his gaze from one disbelieving face to another.

“No. Honest. Lincoln’s right here walkin’ the streets of Richmond, a whole crowd of freed slaves swarmin’ around him, shaking his hand.”

Another round of boisterous chuckles sounded. Sergeant Delmar’s eyebrow raised higher. “You expect us to believe that? Jeff Davis and his cronies ain’t been gone much more than a day. Now, why would the president risk comin’ here?”

Bristling at the challenge to his integrity, Luke met the sergeant’s gaze, mouth taut. “Ever known me to lie?”

The group stilled, and the sergeant’s rounded eyes searched Luke’s. Finally, he shook his head. “Can’t say I have. A good-natured tease, yes, but you’re about as strait-laced as they come where your word’s concerned.”

Just then a soldier hollered from across the street. “Hey fellas, did ya hear? Lincoln’s arrived, and General Weitzel ordered all work to cease so everyone can congregate.”

With a satisfied nod, the tension in Luke’s muscles eased. “Like I said. Lincoln.”

Sergeant Delmar grinned and slapped the closest gawking private on the arm. “Well, don’t just stand there. Let’s go.”

With joyful hoots, the men brushed off their uniforms and clamored in the direction from which Luke had returned, their task forgotten. The singed locket jingled in Luke’s trouser pocket as he followed along. With duties suspended, maybe later he’d have time to check in on the girl he’d transported to the hospital.

Alive or dead, the trinket most likely belonged with her.

Robertson Hospital, Richmond
April 4, 3:30 p.m.

ADELAIDE’S EYELIDS fluttered open at the sound of murmured activity around her. A tremor of pain surged through her

murkiness, making her wish she'd remained asleep. She sensed a presence to her right and turned her head, startled at sight of a wavy-haired corporal seated beside the bed. She eyed his blue uniform, then scowled up at him. "Who are you?"

His striking blue eyes stared back at her, a hint of a grin lining his lips. "Corporal Gallagher. The fella who brought you here."

She blinked, attempting to make sense of his words, her mind still foggy from the laudanum. "So, you're the one." Her gaze trailed to her bandaged arms, her clouded mind beginning to clear. "I suppose you want me to thank you." She stared up at him, eyes narrowed. "Well, I'm not so sure you've done me a favor. I'd likely have been better off if you'd left me where you found me."

His brows pinched and his grip on the cap he held tightened. "I suppose that depends on how acquainted you are with the Lord. Since I had no way of knowing that, I figured it best to make the effort to spare your life."

Taken aback by the unexpected response, Addie chewed on her lip. Little did he know, he'd just given her another reason not to like him. "So, you think highly of God, do you?"

"I do."

She tried not to notice his winsome smile, but there was something appealing about the young man's candid nature. Shifting her gaze to the ceiling above, she clenched her teeth. "Well, I don't share your convictions. If there truly is a God, He's brought me nothing but heartache. Same as you vicious Yankees."

His lack of response pulled her eyes back to him. The corporal's head had dipped downward, his long blond lashes pressed to his cheeks. Was he praying?

For her? The very thought made her insides squirm.

At last, he opened his eyes and released a long breath. "I s'pose that's why the Lord allowed us to find you in time. Your soul isn't ready."

Stricken by the sincerity in his tone, she moistened her lips. “You a preacher?”

With a shake of his head, his lips formed a weak grin. “No, miss. Just someone who loves the Lord.”

Before Addie had time to frame a response, the young soldier reached in his pocket and brought out a blackened piece of jewelry. “I was wonderin’ if you recognize this.”

As he stretched out his palm, she sucked in a breath. “My aunt’s locket. Where did you find it?”

The moment the words left her mouth, she guessed the answer. When he hesitated to respond, her spirit plummeted. “She’s dead, isn’t she?”

His mouth twitched, and he gave a slow nod.

Fighting tears, she turned her face to the wall, panic surging through her. “I told her we should flee with the rest. But she wouldn’t listen. Now all is lost.”

“I’m truly sorry, miss.” After a moment’s pause, he cleared his throat. “Have you anyone else we should try to locate? Your parents? Brothers? Sisters?”

She shook her head, anger flaring in her tone. “No one. I have no mother, and you blasted Yankees killed my father and brothers!” She glared up at him. “Now, do you see why I don’t hold to your God?”

His cheek flinched, and a pained look stole the luster from his eyes. The jab seemed to pierce his very soul. She’d wanted to hurt him, the way his kind had wounded her. Yet, part of her regretted being so spiteful. Though she hated to admit it, he’d been nothing but kind to her.

The clatter of those around seemed to intensify as she awaited his response. At last, he wet his lips and looked her in the eyes. “I see why you’re hurtin’, miss. I just don’t see how you can blame God when it’s us who chose to do the fighting.”

Addie opened her mouth to speak, then clamped it shut. How could she argue that?

A tear slid down her temple, and she sniffled. “I suppose we’re all to blame.”

Without a word, Corporal Gallagher slipped a kerchief from his pocket.

Addie tensed as he reached to dry her eyes and nose—a simple act she could no longer accomplish herself. Not since she was a young child had anyone offered her such a thoughtful gesture.

She eyed him. He didn’t seem a bad sort. For a Yank. He was almost charming with his blond waves, vibrant blue eyes, and ruddy complexion.

Her gaze dropped to the locket still cradled in his palm. “Could you open it? I’ve often wondered what was inside. It never left my aunt’s neck.”

Corporal Gallagher rubbed off some of the charred fragments and then wedged his fingernail in the tight crevasse. With a bit of prying, the locket clicked open. After venturing a peek, he turned it toward her. “Is this you?”

Craning her neck for a better look, Addie focused on the two, small daguerreotypes—one of Aunt Polly holding a young child, the other an older version of the fair-haired girl. She shook her head. “No. The woman is definitely my aunt, but I have no idea who the child is.”

Corporal Gallagher pulled the locket back for a second look. “If not you, it appears to be someone she thought a great deal of. A daughter maybe?”

“My aunt had no children. She never married.” Addie dropped her head back on the makeshift cot, a wave of disgruntled curiosity trickling through her. “Who could she be?”

Her mind raced back to the moment just before she’d left her aunt and the desperate words that had poured from her lips. *Find Clarissa. Don’t let him have her.* Was the child in the photograph Clarissa? But who was she? A shiver worked through Addie.

Better yet, who was the *him* Aunt Polly wished the child spared from?

LUKE TOSSED another log on the fire outside his tent, casting a glance at Sergeant Delmar. “You ever hear tell of Miss Elizabeth Van Lew?”

The sergeant brushed his hands together, then scratched his unshaven jaw. “Van Lew? Ain’t she the gal who’s suspected of feedin’ information to some of the higher-ups in the Union ranks?”

Stunned, Luke murmured under his breath. “Then she was telling the truth.”

“What’s that?”

Picking up a mallet, Luke ran his palm along the smooth handle. “I ran into her today. She told me she and some others were passing on vital information to help end the war. I wasn’t sure whether to believe her. Guess she was on the up and up after all.”

“Could be. From what I hear, soon as the Union cavalry crossed into Richmond, Van Lew plunked an American flag outside her home. Created quite a stir among her neighbors. The angry mob threatened to burn down her house.”

Private Fenton edged closer, obviously eavesdropping. “I heard somethin’ about that. They claim she stopped ’em short by sayin’ her friend, General Grant and his army would be there within the hour to set their houses ablaze if they so much as touched hers.”

“I hear tell General Grant even joined her for tea,” Private Cummings chimed in.

Gazing past the rubble to the vibrant sky in the west, Luke shook his head. “After seeing her determination, I wouldn’t put it past her to invite the president himself.”

“Sure was somethin’, wasn’t it? President Lincoln waltzin’ up the rebel Capitol steps and inside like he owned the place?”

At Private Fenton’s loud guffaw, Luke nodded and finished

pounding in the pup tent peg. “Like nothing I ever thought to see.”

Luke stood and stared into the dying embers of the fire he and the men had routed earlier. In truth, he wasn’t sure which was more astonishing—witnessing the president stroll the streets of Richmond or seeing the near-lifeless girl he’d carried alert and coherent.

Even a bit feisty.

Something about her stirred his senses. Maybe it was the fact she’d been rendered helpless, or that she had no one.

Or maybe her violet eyes, coal-black hair, and rosy lips had something to do with it.

Whatever the reason, he couldn’t get her out of his head.

With her hands and arms badly burned, how would she manage? By her own admission, she had no one to care for her. She couldn’t so much as wipe her nose or scratch her cheek, all bandaged up and in too much pain to move. Would the hospital staff tend to her needs? They seemed hard-pressed to keep up with the growing number of patients.

“I cain’t see how the South can hold out much longer, now that we’ve got Lee’s army on the run.” The gangly private’s nasally voice broke through Luke’s concentration.

He leaned on his mallet. “One can hope.”

He’d never forget the haggard look on Lincoln’s face as he passed. Years of tension and worry told in the creases of his eyes and mouth. If anyone wished the war to end more than the soldiers, it was their commander-in-chief.

When the freed slaves made him out to be some sort of messiah, he’d redirected their praise toward God. But what amazed Luke most was the rumor that Lincoln had advised General Weitzel to go easy on the Confederates. An attitude that went against the majority of Union thinking. How Luke longed to become such a humble, forgiving man—a man after God’s own heart.

His mind returned to the girl with the burned arms. He’d not

even asked her name, and yet somehow, he felt liable for her welfare—both physical and spiritual. Maybe, amid the flickering embers of this irksome war, the Lord could use him to spark renewed hope into this lonesome, young woman’s heart. Though he couldn’t shirk his duties as corporal, his off-duty time was his to do as he pleased. Spending time and speaking a few godly truths to the young woman couldn’t hurt.

The question was, would she pay any attention to a “blue-belly”?