

THE HAWK AND THE DOVE

CHAPTER 1

Annie

Isaac and Ransom are dead, and it's my fault, just as surely as if I'd murdered them. Copper-colored stains from burying my son and husband remain on my gray flannel skirt. It's been two days, but I cannot muster the energy to change my clothing—nor do I deserve the comfort of wearing something clean. My soul was cleaved in two when I left their graves, but in wartime, a person who stops moving dies.

My team of mules pull a wagon laden with everything I own. I wrangle the uncooperative beasts north on the Wilderness Road—an apt name for this miserable, muddy collection of potholes between Knoxville and Boonesborough. I continue on the course Ransom chose, but what is my destination? Without my husband's guidance, I no longer know.

My grief-stricken stupor is interrupted by the harrowing sound of Rebel yells. Confederate guerillas ravage this part of Kentucky, and I have failed to be vigilant. I sting the mules' rumps with the reins, but they balk, forcing the wagon to a sudden halt. Men wearing ragged clothing burst from their hiding places. The motley troupe surrounds my wagon like bottle flies on manure, their once-fine gray-and-butternut coats almost indistinguishable under layers of grime.

The mules buck and bray, but they are quickly subdued by burly men on foot who grab hold of their bridles. A man riding a glorified plow horse jumps off his mount, lands on the wagon bench, and snatches the reins. He spurts snuff-colored juice on my shoes. "Look, men," he says, "We've bagged a lovely prize."

A slim Rebel on horseback emerges from a grove of chinkapin oaks and brambles. I pull back the brim of my bonnet to look upon the leader of this unholy brigade. “I am no one’s prize and no threat to thee. Let me go in peace.”

The ne’er-do-well sidles his horse snug beside my mules, which make a futile attempt to bolt. He peruses me from bonnet to boots with enough regard to cause the muscles under my eyes to twitch. His smooth features and long, wavy hair make me question his gender. Is this a woman?

“Where do your loyalties lie, ma’am?” The voice is pitched higher than most men but not enough to tell me if this person is male or female.

“Thee knows who I am from my attire and speech. Quakers do not take sides in war. I am loyal to God alone.”

“Too bad.” The leader’s brows furrow. “I might have let a Southern woman go. If you’re not for us, you’re against us.” Turning around, the rider signals the men. “Seize her property for the Confederate States of America. Colonel Morgan can always use another rig.”

Morgan’s Raiders. Tennesseans laud them. Kentuckians—at least loyal Federalists—revile them, particularly this individual, who from news reports I’ve read must be the infamous Sue Mundy. I am dragged from my seat with no courtesy. My struggles are fruitless.

Fear may come later, but at this moment, the devastation of losing the last ties I have to my husband and son consumes me. The ruffians rifle through my belongings with glee. One man drops a burlap sack, and it bursts. A stream of flour, ground by Ransom’s own hands, cascades into a mud puddle.

“Stop!” My plea is ignored, prompting laughter from the man who pins my back to his chest. I am a pacifist, but I cannot remain stoic in the face of such loss. I stomp his instep with the heel of my boot. He yelps, and I escape.

I dash to the wagon to retrieve the carpetbag containing Isaac’s baby clothing, sewn in the long months I waited for his birth. I embroidered tiny flowers on the hem of a gauzy white nightgown, hoping for a girl. Ransom had chuckled and asked how it would look on his son.

But I am too late. A grizzled man with a rotund belly grasps my bag and pulls out my treasure. The frock flutters in the late winter breeze. I try to snatch it from his grip, but the bully towers over me. His grubby hand leaves a print on the tiny garment. It will be tainted forever.

Though my creed demands it, I cannot submit meekly to the will of God—not now. Rage courses through me, but I am unfamiliar with its effects. Does it cause one’s vision to narrow into a tunnel? Does it make one wish for a blade or pistol to snuff out the life of another human being? I shriek and claw my fingernails down the outlaw’s cheek until it bleeds.

The sounds of chaos fade as I retreat into my own thoughts. I study the gashes I made on the man’s face. How could I so easily betray everything I believe?

Before he can retaliate, the men’s merriment transforms into cries of alarm. A squad of soldiers dressed in spotless bright blue rides full speed toward us. Federals. Startled Confederates scramble for their weapons and try to form ranks, but they are mowed down under hooves, revolvers, and sabers.

I cannot move. A horse gallops past, and its tail whips my face. Still, my feet will not obey my command to run. The man whose face I scratched yanks my bonnet, its ribbons firmly tied beneath my chin. The force jerks me backward, and I flail while I try to get my feet under me. The knot has tightened, and I can’t untie it. The brute drags me into the brush, and the

ribbons cut off my air. Perhaps choking to death is apt punishment for the hatred I permitted to overtake me. Black fog encroaches on the edges of my vision. I repent and prepare to meet God.

A Federal atop an enormous black stallion gallops my way, a golden oak leaf glistening on his shoulder. The major hunkers low over his mount, man and beast charging in unison. He clenches his chiseled jaw, and sunlight glints from the barrel of his pistol, which is cocked and aimed at the Reb. He fires.

My captor and I fall. Released from his hold on the strangling ribbons, I roll to my feet. Brisk air rushes into my lungs as I gasp for breath. A muscled arm wraps around my waist, and I am boosted into the saddle in front of my hero. His horse whirls, and we race away from the fray.

Fire flashes from the underbrush, and the arm around me slackens. The stallion rears, and we spill to the ground. Recovering my senses after a moment, I clamber to my knees and find a singed puncture in the major's jacket which marks the entrance wound on his left upper chest. A crimson river flows onto the ground where the minié ball exited his back. After tearing strips of muslin from the hem of my petticoat and wadding them into balls, I place one under the exit wound and another on his chest. Then I put my hands atop each other and push on the wound with all my might, hoping to staunch the bleeding from both places. I scream for help.

His men, engaged in a brutal battle, do not respond. Blood soaks through the makeshift bandage in less than a minute, and I release pressure to rip another strip. The moment my hands leave the injury, the bleeding intensifies.

A panicked man in tattered trousers flees into the woods. The Federals might prevail, but the major will bleed to death if they do not tend him. A soldier wearing blue trousers with a yellow stripe trots by me in pursuit of the Reb. I stick out my leg and trip him.

He turns on me, his carbine still belching smoke. The trooper scans the path ahead. Only the rhododendron leaves move. “What are you doing, woman? I could kill you for helping that man escape.”

“What good will one more prisoner be if chasing him makes this man lose his life?” I wad up the second bandage and press hard on the wound. The major moans.

“Ian? God 'a mercy!” In his haste to take my place, the big man knocks me flat. “Medic!” The sounds of battle have ceased, so his cry rends the silence. No one moves. “Dougal! Get your a—” The man glances at me and blushes. “To me! Ian’s wounded.”

Ian. The fallen major is a Scotsman, from one of the many ethnic regiments of the US Army. Fierce soldiers, proud and brave. I am blessed these men happened by. No—not happenstance. Providence. But I am unworthy of the Almighty’s attention.

A young man with shocking red hair bounds over the corpse of a fallen Rebel and sprints toward us. “Out of my way!” The medic shoves his compatriot aside, and his nimble fingers begin an examination. He presses on the wound in the same manner I did. “I can’t stop the bleeding,” he says, and pushes down with his full weight. Ian screams and thrashes. “Hold him down!”

Soldiers fasten down each of Ian’s limbs, and still he struggles. Then, eerily, he falls limp. “Ma’am,” the medic says, “I’m going to need more bandages.”

He does not need to elaborate. I turn my back and destroy my petticoat, tossing strip after strip of torn linen over my shoulder to be put to use. I cannot be the cause of another man’s death.

A timid tap touches my arm. “That’s enough, ma’am.”

I turn. A tall, hefty soldier with a profusely bleeding gash on his forehead places a hand under my elbow. He steadies me as I step over the roots of a tree. Five soldiers, including the gentleman who assists me, hover over their fallen friend. Several have removed their forage caps and placed them over their hearts. Their lips move with prayers I cannot hear.

My escort asks the medic, “What can we do?”

“Do?” Dougal snorts, wiping perspiration from his brow and leaving a smear of Ian’s blood. “Do ye have eyes, MacClair? What can anyone do? He’ll be dead fer sure without surgery.”

MacClair looks down the road in the direction I first traveled. “Camp Nelson is twenty miles north.”

“It doesna matter if it’s twenty miles or two hundred. He canna survive it.” Dougal rises, seizes a bedroll from behind a horse chomping grass along the roadside, and props up Ian’s legs.

“We’ve no choice. He’ll die for certain if we doona try.” MacClair barks orders with the urgency of a hound guarding a treed raccoon. “Get the woman’s wagon and steady her mules. Do yer best to make a comfortable spot for Ian in the bed, and no lollygagging.”

The men snap to. Turning to me, the well-mannered giant introduces himself. “Sergeant Angus MacClair at yer service, ma’am.” His breath leaves tendrils of mist in the chilly air. “I’m sorry to commandeered yer wagon, but ye can see the straits we’re in.”

“I’m Annie Lee, Friend MacClair.”

The soldier’s eyes widen as he takes in my attire. “What’s a Quaker lady doin’ in these parts—and alone, no less?” MacClair removes his cap and runs a blood-spattered hand through his hair. “That’s a story for another time. We must hurry. I’m countin’ on yer Christian charity to give us the aid we need.”

“Everything I have is at your disposal.” I’ll sacrifice any of my material possessions—well, almost any of them—to aid this man who helped me.

The soldiers chuck my belongings into the wagon and make a bed with the woolen blankets Ransom’s mother gave us when we married. Three men nestle Ian there with Dougal attending. MacClair tosses me up to the seat and joins me.

While the other men mount, I spy Isaac’s nightshirt still clutched in the hand of the man—now dead—who taunted me. Blood has caked on his skin from the scratches I inflicted. The vein in my temple throbs, and my ears get hot. Springing from my perch, I tumble headlong into a patch of weeds. I stumble to my feet and rush toward the body.

Weighty footfalls pursue me. I won’t reach the man before MacClair catches me. He grips me around the waist and lifts my still-running feet off the ground. Remembering myself, I cease moving.

“Whatever possessed you to do that? Ye could have broken yer fool neck!” MacClair sets me down and spins me to face him, shaking my shoulders just a bit. “I’m sorry for such rough language, but someone needs to talk some sense into ye.”

I haven’t cried all day, and I won’t start now. I swallow the lump that chokes my words. “That man has my son’s shirt. I want it back.”

“What son?”

“My dead son.”

MacClair releases me like a blacksmith dropping a hot poker. “My apologies, Mrs. Lee. I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t tell thee.” We stare at each other like Ian was not bleeding to death in the bed of my wagon.

“Private Gilbertson!” MacClair’s roar makes my ears ring.

A gangly youth dismounts and trots to his side.

“Retrieve the garment from that filthy degenerate and give it to Mrs. Lee for safekeeping—and be careful with it.”

Gilbertson follows directions, his stance blocking my view. I pick the Reb’s skin out from under my fingernails while I wait. The young man returns the shirt to me, its filmy white folds fluttering like a flag of surrender. I will remove the stains if it’s the last thing I do. I clasp the precious memento to my bosom. My shoulders slump, and I nod my thanks.

MacClair once again boosts me into my seat. He takes his place and slaps the reins on the rumps of my mules. The traitors respond immediately to a man’s touch, and the wagon lurches forward. Another snap boosts the team’s pace to a trot, and a “Hyah!” from MacClair incites the beasts to a full-out gallop. They have never moved this fast. I grip the brake lever with one hand for balance, but the other is occupied. I’ll not let go of Isaac’s shirt even if the ruts bounce me out.

The trees blur, and the urgent cadence of hooves on packed dirt reminds me of the stakes. I lean forward as if my posture will help us move faster. Will another man die because of me? I cannot bear the thought.

Please, God. Let Friend Ian live.