

“Listening for Birdsong”

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I. Fall, 1862

“I’m taking a pact of deafness,” Henry Shannon declared to the rest of the seated regiment. “Any of you boys wanna join in?”

“I’ll second.” Nate McCreary lifted his hand of cards in the air.

“Third!” said another.

The young man standing on the apple crate didn’t stop his awful singing as he sent them a rude gesture. Laughter spiraled up into the canopy.

He’d been at it all morning. It was a fair day in the Maryland countryside, one of the cooler ones since the final hurrah of summer. The breeze ruffling the skim trees had the chill of autumn to it. Further down the lines of identical white tents, the regiment’s Union band warmed up their various marching tunes. Brass horns cut clean melodies through the air, punctuated by the marching drums. The high pipe of the flutes fluttered like birdsong across the camped army.

Unfortunately, the music had inspired Henry’s fellow soldier to break out the lyrics, and no one had yet been able to stop him.

The teasing was all in good fun, though. The boys of the 118th Pennsylvania seemed to find the man’s wobbly tones and painfully flat harmonies entertaining, and it *was* the first time in months Henry had seen some of the boys laughing. Days of marching, dry hard tack, and coffee that was more water than flavoring would do that. The constant jolt of nerves whenever the pop of an unfamiliar rifle rang out didn’t help.

“I’d like to see any of you do any better,” said the soldier on the grass beside Henry, throwing in his hand. One of the singer’s cousins, he recalled. “At least he’s had lessons.”

“He should get his money back!” said Henry.

McCreary grunted in agreement. “I think I’m turned off music for the time being, thank you.”

The cousin sniffed and guffaws went up around him. Henry thumped his chest a couple times. “First thing when we all get back, I’m taking you boys to Hanover to hear some *real* music,” he said.

“Aw, here he goes again, ‘bout his little bird,” said one of the men.

“We sure he’s got a *real* girl at home, and not some pet?” McCreary smirked.

“She’s more a girl than any *you’d* ever get within ten yards of, Nathaniel,” Henry retorted, to uproarious laughter.

These boys don’t know the sweet voice I could recognize from a mile away. They don’t know Elizabeth Lark.

Brown hair in the sun, brown eyes like honey. Tall and steady and beautiful as she commanded that quiet attention from every threshold she crossed. Henry let his thoughts drift home to Hanover, where the woman he was set to marry was surely waiting...

My dearest Libby.

“On your feet!”

A bugle blast rang out. The regiment’s commanding colonel appeared on horseback, weaving between the tents, saber drawn. “On your feet, boys! We’re needed in the east!”

“What’s in the east?” someone called. Around them, the other boys set about quenching campfires and taking down tent poles. The singer had vanished. *Thank Lord.*

“Skirmish at a little creek outside Sharpsburg,” the colonel called back as he rode past. “For the Union, boys! Pack ‘em up!”

“For the Union!” A couple hurrahs went up.

“Well, if there’s one thing this 118th Pennsylvania is good at,” said Henry with a wink, throwing his deck of cards into the pack beside him, “it’s packing camp.”

“And marching!” another man called. More hurrahs to that. Hooking the pack over his shoulder, Henry rushed through the press of bustling men to his tent, his bedroll.

The 118th Pennsylvania lived up to their record time. Henry was back in the marching line, his whole life bundled on his back, before he even knew it. The band rapped a steady beat and played a jaunty march behind him. Excitement was high.

This is it, Libby, Henry thought gleefully. This is the fight we’ve been waiting for. I’ll be home before the month is out, now, and I’ll finally be your husband after all these setbacks.

That was when the first echoes of cannonfire rumbled across the Maryland cornfields.

Excitement soured to nerves almost immediately - Henry could feel the change in the air. The 118th Pennsylvania was good at packing camp because they’d hardly seen a major battle,

after all. And as they marched ever closer, unable to slow it, a major battle sounded exactly like what they were hurtling into.

“You ever hear that many cannons at once?” Henry murmured to the soldier at his left. The man just shook his head. His pallor was pasty.

Orders trickled down the line. Load rifles. *Corn Field*, spoken with a hush of horror amid the boom and crackle of ever-nearing guns. As the soldiers rushed to swing their rifles to the front, bite off the gunpowder packets, and drop in their bullets, lieutenants carried more commands from the colonel - and the Union lines up ahead. Names of their officers and movements flashed by.

“They’ve been trying to push through a cornfield by Antietam Creek for almost five hours now, but neither our boys nor the Rebs have managed to secure it,” a lieutenant explained further down.

Five hours of fighting and no one’s come out on top? Henry didn’t have time to wonder about what that might mean. The same lieutenant drew his pistol and rallied the men around him. War hollers went up, almost as deafening as the cannon fire. Henry let all thoughts of panic seep out of his mind as he got caught up in the cacophony of the charge. Feet pounding. Rifles and buckles rattling.

They plunged into a thin tree line. On the other side, the men stuttered to a stop. Henry pushed to get a glimpse and immediately wished he hadn’t. Panic surged in afresh.

The cornfield had been *leveled*. Patchy, haphazard cornstalks were all that were left, like a very poor shave. White smoke choked so thick that there was no telling how far the field extended. Bullets rained out of the clouds in every direction, more smoke and fire exploding where shells wracked the earth. Metal tanged the air - the odor of blood.

And there were men, in dark blue and gray alike. Piled between the cut-down rows, sowed like seeds. Wounded, squirming, crying out... or motionless.

There were voices calling out further down the treeline. Probably the Union line preparing for another charge.

It didn’t strike Henry before that he might never make it back to Hanover, didn’t strike him that he’d seen the last of Libby Lark that day their town had sent him off in a festival of glory.

Staring at the field of death and flying metal, it struck him now.

“To the line!” Somewhere, the lieutenant was dragging them away from the sight of the carnage. Three men bumped his shoulders before Henry could uproot himself to follow them. Cold leached from his stomach to the rest of his trembling body.

Voices and hollers and gunshots and cannonfire blended together. Suddenly, many more Union boys surrounded them, all rushing to and fro to carry the wounded, refill their muskets, tie up cuts and gashes and twisted ankles.

“Water... I need water!”

“Orders from General McClellan...”

“57th New York! 57th!”

“Battery D needs reinforcements now! They’re down two men and can’t keep up the barrage!”

That last one was shouted right next to Henry’s ear. He jumped. His lieutenant appeared, brows creased with fear. “Where’s the battery?” he demanded of the runner.

The runner pointed behind him, to a low, thinly-wooded ridge. “Supporting the cornfield charges from that hill there, sir. They’re under fire. If they lose any more men, they won’t be able to back the Union line. There’ll be Rebels in these woods within the hour!”

The lieutenant swore and wiped a hand down his mustache and beard. He jabbed a finger at the nearest soldiers. “Shannon! McCreary! Balmont! Back up those cannons, you hear me?”

“Yes, sir!” someone said behind Henry. A second later, Henry processed the names that had just been rattled off. *Shannon. That’s... that’s me.*

“Y-yes sir!” he exclaimed with a belated salute.

“Well, get a move on!” The lieutenant turned and disappeared back into the chaos. Henry hiked up his rifle and trailed after the rapidly retreating group. Away from the cornfield.

Maybe I’ll survive this yet...?

They trooped over the low hills, keeping to the woodlines that ringed the rolling fields. Shells burst overhead or marred the earth with craters. The heavy booms of firing guns grew clearer - and louder - the further they ran.

As they rounded a final copse of trees, branches shorn off from the canopy above, the gleam of copper cannons finally broke into view.

“This is Battery D, Fifth Union Artillery. Charles Hazlett is your officer,” said the soldier who led them. “You three do whatever he needs you to do. These guns have to hold this position.”

Henry held his rifle close to his chest as he took it in. Six long cannons on their spoke-wheeled frames. A short cart parked behind each, locked boxes hanging open as men ran

back and forth, hauling the heavy shot. Some men bore long cotton-headed poles. The overwhelming tang of gunpowder filled the clearing nearly as much as the white smoke that poured forth from the three functional guns.

A young man with dark hair finally noticed them gawking and rushed to meet them. "Reynolds! Thank the Lord, who's this?" he asked, taking off his cap to wipe his forehead. His dark Union jacket was piped in red - cannoneer garb.

"Boys from the 118th Pennsylvania," said their guide.

"Splendid. I'm Hazlett. Charlie. I'd shake your hands, but there's no time. You boys ever swabbed a cannon barrel?"

"How's cleaning our own rifles?" said Henry, cracking a weak smile.

"Good enough for me." Hazlett - Charlie - hollered over his shoulder, and two of the cannoneers carrying the poles rushed over. "Take these. Every time a cannon fires, you better be there swabbing out the barrel. Not a single spark left in 'em. You ever seen a rifle backfire? These guns are worse. Took out enough of my men already, not even accounting for the rebel fire."

Henry risked a glance around Charlie's shoulder. Now that he noticed it, shell craters pockmarked the grass here, too. Every so often, more branches ripped themselves out of the treetops as Confederate guns tried to pinpoint their location.

There was already a small lineup of men lying limp just inside the treeline, all wearing the same red-piped cannoneer coat.

Henry should have known there was nowhere on the battlefield that'd keep him fully safe.

For Libby. I'm doing this for Libby.

He steeled himself, grabbed a swabbing pole, and hurtled into the unit.

Up close, the guns were truly deafening. More than once, Henry brought a hand to his ear to make sure it hadn't started bleeding from the noise. Every time a boom rocked the earth, he forced himself to run towards it. To eye down the smoking hot barrel with a hole as big as his face and shove in the soot-stained cotton end of his pole. Beat against the rounded back as many times as he dared until one of the senior cannoneers ordered him away. He watched them haul open the side hatch, load fresh powder, fit in the shot - either a solid iron ball or a canister of shrapnel that would burst on impact - and bring down the fuse lighter that would set it off again. Henry tried to clamp his hands over his ears whenever he could. The senior cannoneers barely even flinched.

It went like that for what had to be hours. The ammunition carts dwindled low. They managed to get five of the six guns firing at a reliable rate with Henry and his comrades' help, but not without their own casualties. McCreary - who'd always been scatterbrained in drills anyway - was launched clean off his feet when his cannoneer tried to load gunpowder and a stray spark blew fire out the side hatch. His eyebrows, sideburns, and a fair patch of hair were completely burned off. Charlie ordered him to the treeline out of the way, swearing under his breath.

Henry just put his head down and ran to the next fired gun. His consciousness, his whole world, became nothing but cannon booms, blistered palms, swabbing, and hustling back and forth and back again.

When there were no more booms to chase, it took him several ear-ringing minutes to realize why.

Beside the nearest artillery cart, Charlie shook his head at the note in his hand. The messenger who'd just delivered it was already hauling it back to the Union lines. "I'm really starting to reckon our commanders haven't got a clue what they're doing," he muttered.

"Huh?" said Henry.

Charlie noticed him standing there and forced a bitter smile, lifting the note. "They're putting Battery D in reserve. The fighting's moved too far down the creek."

"Oh," he said. *The battle's over for us. We're done. We made it through.* "Who took the cornfield?"

"Hell if I know," Charlie sighed. "Orders have been a disaster all day. I'm sure we'll hear the results eventually."

All those hours of fighting over a field, and we don't even know if we won...

Henry shook his head. His ears still stung from the battery echoing inside them. *But I'm alive. I made it out of this battle, and I'll make it home to Hanover. I'll make it home to my Libby.*

The battery lieutenant folded the note and buried it in his coat pocket, then gave Henry a pat on the shoulder. "You did good work, kid. What's your name?"

"Oh," he said. He saluted. "Henry Shannon, sir. 118th Penn-"

"Pennsylvania." Charlie grinned. "I know. But say, you really fit in with our boys here. You've got a good temper and you're a natural cannoneer. If you wanted, I could get you transferred permanently."

He straightened. *Out of the front lines, but serving the Union. Henry Shannon, Battery D, Fifth Artillery...* “Really?”

“Sure. How about it, Henry?”

He rubbed idly at his ear. The ringing still didn’t dissipate.

But I’ll risk a little deafness if it means I make it home.

“Thank you,” he said, clasping Charlie’s hand in a firm shake. “I think I’d like that very much.”

II. Fall, 1862

Elizabeth Lark needed an escape.

For well over a year, the women of Hanover had shouldered the work that the soldier boys left behind. Keeping the distilleries and tanneries running. Cycling the buckwheat, corn, and oats through the planting and harvest seasons. Ferrying supplies from woman to woman, household to household, town to town. All of it, somehow too much and not enough at the same time.

All the while, Henry and the other boys marched ever further away in brave service of the Union. Staring a new death in the face every day.

Not that Libby could tell from within the limits of her hometown. There was a *war* going on, for God's sake, and here she was, perusing seed selections for next season at the town grocer, arm in arm with Charlotte and Mama like any other September morning.

"I'm sick of it!"

Libby raised her eyebrows at Charlotte's sudden outburst. Her little sister, fifteen and the spitting image of their mother, had a very un-motherlike scowl painted across her face as they stepped into the street. The day was mild, but the chill blowing in from the orchards west of town held the promise of autumn.

"Now Charlotte, don't shout," said Mama. She hefted the parcel of seed further under her arm, chin steady as ever. "It's not Mr. Walker's fault the pickings are slim this year--"

"But that's just it, isn't it? Not even the *seed selections* are safe from this war," Charlotte huffed. "First the boys, now the harvest. And we just sit here and take it while the whole world turns upside down!"

"Well, what would you rather we do, darling, chop our hair and join the army? Who will keep the homestead?"

"There's enough of us about," she muttered.

Mama clicked her tongue. "Let the boys fix our planting problems by winning this war. All we must do is tough it out and make sure there's still a place to plant when it's over, and then everything will be back to normal."

I don't know if I'm so sure about that. Libby cast a glance at the sparsely populated street, the fields that had been left to fallow on the distant hills. Only a few women in dusty-hemmed frocks trundled along the sun-faded sidewalks, only one horse drawn wagon standing idle at the

far street corner. Not a single young man in sight. Not a remnant of her prewar community but the hushed and sagging storefronts.

“But if there was a way to hurry it up-”

“Charlotte, we’re not talking about this.”

“Oh, Elizabeth, help me out!” Her sister tugged on her arm. “Tell me I’m not the only one who’s determined to do something worthwhile.”

“You’re not,” said Libby.

Mama stared at her. Charlotte did, too, as if she hadn’t expected to meet such little resistance. “What’s this, now? Not you as well, I can’t manage two rebellious daughters,” said Mama.

“It’s not rebellion, Mama, it’s common sense,” said Libby. “We’ve never seen a war like this and neither have you. Forgive me if I don’t think we’ll come out of this unchanged.”

Mama sighed heavily and glanced about them. “Inside, then,” she muttered. “I’ll not have this conversation in public.”

Charlotte all but scurried back to their house - a white-shuttered affair with well-trimmed gables - with Libby and Mama in tow. Libby ignored her mother’s worried look whenever it settled on her. Charlotte may have been short-tempered, but she didn’t voice any opinions that Libby didn’t already harbor herself. The sisters had had enough whispered midnight conversations in the past year to form a unified alliance.

Safely enclosed in their kitchen, Mama dropped the parcel heavily on the table. “Now. What are you trying to say, girls?”

Libby shared a look with Charlotte and spoke first, before her sister could say something overly rash. “Of course, the farms are important. Of course, someone needs to preserve our homestead,” she said. “But this war is affecting everything around us, to the extent no calamity has before. Charlotte and I are well within our right to want to do more to help.”

“But what?” Mama put her hands on her hips, but her expression was more anxious than cross. “What could there possibly be for respectable young girls like you to do out there?”

Charlotte was out of ideas, from the defeated flatness of her mouth. Libby was not. “Doesn’t your friend Christiana live in York?” she asked Mama.

“She does.”

“Where they erected that army general hospital on the town commons?”

Her mother frowned. Libby kept going. “I know she’s working there, now. We’ve all read her letters. Plenty of women are flocking to the hospitals these days, and we’ve got one just a train ride away.”

“That hospital,” fretted Mama, “is practically in Christiana’s backyard. Not ours.”

“We’re going to have to step out of what’s familiar if we’re going to make a difference,” said Libby.

“But the city... what will the neighbors think? You all alone, me sending you off...”

She waved a hand. “I’m not worried about what the neighbors think during a war, Mama.”

“And the nursing? You don’t have any training...”

“I’ll learn. I can do it. I *want* to do it.”

“So do I!” Charlotte piped up indignantly.

Mama hugged her elbows, evaluating them both. At length, she shook her head. “Not you, Charlotte.”

“What? Mama!”

“If I must let one of my daughters loose into this hellish world, it’s going to be Elizabeth,” she said. “She’s one ceremony shy of being a housewife herself. I... trust she’ll be able to handle herself in the city alone.”

Libby’s heart squeezed painfully at the mention of it. Her wedding, postponed indefinitely. She forced that pain deep inside. “You don’t have to make a decision now,” she said. “I know how frightening this all must be.”

“I’ll carry bandages!” Charlotte grabbed their mother’s hands. “I won’t make a fuss. Let me go, too!”

“You? Not making a fuss?” Libby cracked a smile.

“Whose side are you on!?”

“Two hands on the farm is few enough,” Mama replied. “You’ve still got more to learn here, darling. If this dreadful war is still going next year, Lord forbid, we can discuss your involvement then.”

Charlotte dropped Mama's hands and stalked for the back door, fuming. It clattered on its hinges when she let it slam. Libby put a hand on her mother's shoulder when she moved to follow her. "Let her cool off. I'd rather she stay here, too."

"I'd rather you *both* stay," she mumbled.

"So do I." Libby brushed a hair off Mama's face. "There are so many things I'd rather do."

Like keeping my own household. Like shopping for my own seed. Like raising a family of my own to protect.

Like marrying Henry.

Mama's hand covered her own. "He'll come back for you, darling," she said, as if she could read her mind. She could always tell. Even when Libby tried her hardest to tamp her feelings down for the sake of the war, her mother saw right through it.

But I don't know that he'll be back, do I?

"I know," said Libby.

"If you really want to do this... well. You know everything you'd need to command your own home by now. Perhaps Henry would understand you putting it to use out in the world."

"He would," she said. She pulled Mama into a hug. *He's doing his part, I'll be doing mine.* "Thank you."

"Be cautious, my darling," she whispered into her shoulder. "And don't settle up there and leave me to wrangle your sister alone."

Libby couldn't help but laugh. "I'd never dream of it."

~

Charlotte only let her leave after Libby promised to teach her everything she learned at the hospital whenever she came home on breaks. It was a pact made out of Mama's earshot.

A week after their conversation, Libby scaled the boarding platform of the Hanover railway and was off on the train for York.

York wasn't too much bigger than her hometown, but it certainly was busier. A thundering wagon nearly ran her off the dusty, packed road as soon as she stepped out of the train station. Mules laden with busting parcels of the early harvest plodded down every sidewalk, their handlers tugging and hollering at the stubborn ones. Carts and carriages and clusters of people

thronged every intersection. Libby deftly avoided the piles of horse droppings in her path as she followed the bulk of the bustling traffic for the town center.

It wasn't hard to find. A great taupe tent stood on the commons right in front of a boarded-up shop front. Wagons and their horse teams stood idle around the entrances. Aproned women and doctors with handbags meandered here and there, talking to the drivers or amongst themselves.

Libby took a deep breath, hefted her own travel bag, and marched across the green.

"Excuse me," she said to the first doctor she came across, a man who resembled a lamp post in both figure and height, "I'm looking for Christiana Davids?"

The man took a second to realize she was there. He jerked his chin halfheartedly towards a tent flap. "Deliveries go in the back door," he said, glancing back down at his pocket watch.

"I'm not delivering," she said. "I'm here to work as a nurse. Christiana should be expecting me."

"Oh," said the doctor, bored demeanor unchanged. "Another one. Same door, then. Don't block the way."

"Thank you." She pushed past him, holding her bag a little tighter.

Libby spotted her family friend's mop of frizzy blonde curls immediately. Christiana Davids was folding a pile of off-white fabric swatches at a little wooden table just inside the door. Most of the entire broad floor was filled with cots in even rows, almost all of them bearing a soldier. Libby tried not to startle when she noticed the missing legs and arms, sleeves and pant legs tied off well above where they should be.

Gratefully, Christiana noticed her at that moment.

"Oh, Elizabeth! You're early, good!" she said, popping up from her seat and coming around to give her a hug. "How was the journey, not too stressful?"

"Not at all," said Libby. "You look well."

"I am. Truly." Christiana beamed, and there was indeed a healthy warmth in her cheeks. "I think this hospital has done me some good. There are men out there in the world who I've nursed back to health with my own two hands, right in this very tent. Not all of it's glamorous, that's for certain, but it is such a joy to help these boys back on their feet."

That's what I'm here for. Libby couldn't help a smile of her own. "I can't wait to learn."

“Let me give you a little walk about our operation here, then. Put your bag down, put your bag down. We can run it over to my house later. I’ve got the parlor all set up for your stay...”

The two women set off through the rows of beds, Christiana pointing out the various nursing stations along the tarp walls. Water basins and the pumps outside. Bandage tables sorting through the baskets of donated cotton that rolled in every day. Surgeon’s corners, blocked off with a simple curtain that didn’t come close to touching the ground.

“This location treats amputees, for the most part,” said Christiana. “Poor souls. They would have already received initial treatment in the field - losing arms for bullet wounds, and all that horrid business - so they send them here to recover.”

Libby caught sight of a gray jacket hanging from the cot post and did a double take, leaning closer to the woman. “There’s Confederates here, too?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, every so often. A wound’s a wound, as far as I’m concerned,” she said. “They’ll be taken in as a prisoner of war if they make it.”

“And... how many make it?”

Christiana sighed and led her away from the patients. “Not as many as I’d like. Cuts and sutures, we can treat. But if they come to us infected already... there’s usually little more we can do but keep them comfortable.”

Libby’s stomach went icy. She steeled herself against it and set her chin high. *Henry’s seeing all this firsthand. If he can do his part, by God, so can I.*

Her training was a blur from there, mostly because the only training they had time for was on the job. Libby pinned on a spare apron and followed Christiana on her rounds, distributing water and food and fresh bandages. She told her how often to change bindings while unwrapping a man’s stump below the knee. She explained the night terrors that would send dozing men into fits of shouting, and how sometimes all there was to do was hold their hands and talk to them until they remembered they weren’t on the battlefield anymore. She showed her how to sort fabric, treat fevers, and check pulses.

That night, and every night following, Libby collapsed in Christiana’s guest parlor and was asleep before her body hit the mattress.

Surprisingly, she found it was the amputee patients that dominated her attention, morbid as it was at first. She didn’t know what to expect under the bandages every time Christiana helped her change them. Sometimes, it was just a few fingers missing, puckering up at the knuckles. Other times, severed arms were left to heal as they’d been hastily cut - those were usually the patients Christiana had spoken of, the ones who suffered the most infections. Almost

all sported their wounds below the elbow and knee, as cuts closer to the torso frequently bled out before the poor soldier could be transported away.

But for the most part, the battlefield surgeons knew what they were doing. Christiana pointed out the difference between circular and flap amputations - the former more crude, the latter more sophisticated in covering the stump with a layer of skin. She pointed out the gaps left for drainage and showed her how to clean them.

Libby's first patient she cared for on her own was a young man named Thomas from a Massachusetts regiment. He didn't chat like many of the others as she unbound his bandages and wrung out her rag in the bowl of warm water on the ground beside her. He barely even hissed when she gently wiped down the sutures at the end of his right forearm.

So when he did finally speak, Libby started.

"I can't write anymore."

She looked up. The young man's gaze was haggard. She dipped her cloth back in the water and wrung it out again. "Seems not," she murmured. "But you did a good thing, fighting for the Union."

"I hope so." Thomas' head sank deeper into his limp pillow. "I was a clerk at my papa's store. Before all this. I always thought I'd just go back to doing that once this was all over, but if I can't write..."

Everything will go back to normal, Mama had claimed. But the more Libby saw of the war's effects firsthand, the less she believed it - and the deeper her worries delved. *None of us are coming back to our previous plans unscathed.*

"You have two strong legs," said Libby, patting his sutures dry with another rag and closing off her own concerns, "and one good arm. Maybe it won't be what you planned, but you'll make do."

"You believe that?"

"I must," was all she said. She packed up quickly and moved onto the next.

It was a curious little pocket, working in the hospital. It kept her so busy, she rarely got sunlight. But Christiana was right - it was good work. The longer Libby kept at it, the more grisly horrors she saw... but also, the more progress she could track. It *fueled* her like nothing ever had before.

Almost two weeks into her stay, Christiana forwarded an order from one of the surgeons to purchase more soap from the grocer downtown. It was a strange feeling, taking off her apron

and heading out into town in broad daylight with a shopping basket on her arm. She still hadn't gotten used to the intense city traffic.

She did notice, however, an unusual number of stares. The grocer wasn't down one of the residential streets - it was all businesses, banks, and tradesmen. Libby had never been in a large enough city to witness such a distinction, but the significant lack of other women's large skirts through the crowds of top hats and coats still came as a surprise. She spotted only one other woman hurrying up the other side of the street by the time she ducked into the grocer.

"Two pounds of soap," she said to the clerk. The old man flicked his brows at her and shuffled around the wares beneath the counter. When he produced them, bound in paper and twine, he stopped her before she could take them off his hands.

"What's your name, miss? You strike me as familiar," he said.

"Elizabeth Lark," she replied.

The clerk considered her for a moment. "Of the Hanover Larks?"

"Yes, sir, the very same."

"Ah, I thought so!" York wasn't too far from her home - it wasn't uncommon for such a recognition. Relatives and friends were everywhere. "Your old cousin George Lark, just outside of town here, he's my brother-in-law."

"Oh, yes, we did visit his family once or twice," she laughed lightly.

She went for the parcels, but the clerk tightened his hand on them. "Wasn't there meant to be a wedding, over in Hanover?" he asked.

Libby stiffened. "There was. Henry Shannon - my fiance - went off to war before we could set the date."

"And you went off to York. I've seen you at the hospital on the commons. What's your business, all the way out here?"

She pursed her lips and forked over the money Christiana had given her for the job. "Henry's doing his duty to the country. I'm doing mine. If you please, the doctors will be needing this."

"You written this man of yours about this... nursing?" The clerk's scrutiny sharpened. "Those Hanover Shannons aware of your *wandering* while their boy is putting his life on the line?"

"I'm not wandering," she told him. She yanked away the parcels at last. "Good day, sir."

Libby marched out of the grocer. The looks and frowns of the men passing by cut at her like a thousand little pinpricks this time. She crossed the street in a hurry and set off for the hospital again.

For the first time, the connectedness of her hometown region filled her with discomfort rather than peace. Her cousin's brother-in-law working the grocer wouldn't be the only man in York who'd heard of the postponed nuptials just over in Hanover. Might not even be the only man who'd recognize the name Elizabeth Lark in connection.

The war had changed even that, it seemed. Once the glowing pride of her circle, now a source of scandal and suspicion now that she was truly out in the public eye so far from home.

A woman alone in the city, indeed.

That night, she debated writing to Henry and explaining it all. In the end, she just let her head fall on the pillow.

She had work to do in the morning.

III. Spring, 1861

When the news first broke that the Union was going to war, there wasn't a soul in Hanover, Pennsylvania who thought it'd last the year. Every young man clambered for a spot at the front lines. A few months of heroism, and then back to business as usual. No earthly tether could keep them at home.

Even so, the townsfolk did their best to remind them of what they'd be leaving behind. The sendoff party on the eve of their departure to the recruiting offices of Philadelphia was the biggest bash Henry had ever seen. Every parlor was thrown open to the community. The aroma of fresh pies and roasting meats perfumed the packed-dirt streets. People were out in their finery, cheering on the future heroes of Hanover, congratulating, toasting. Paper confetti fluttered like drifting snowflakes from the highest eaves.

I could get used to this, Henry grinned to himself over his second cup of punch.

"This is so dumb."

Henry raised his eyebrows as his younger brother, Jack, slumped heavily into the couch beside him, arms tightly crossed over his middle. The sleeves on his fine shirt jacket pulled up too far on his skinny wrists.

Henry kicked the couch leg with a smirk. "Recruitment officers wouldn't take a thirteen-year-old, huh?"

"It's stupid. They shouldn't be turning away any men who really want to fight."

"They're not, Jack. They're turning away kids."

Jack scowled even deeper up at him. Henry sat on the armrest and ruffled his hair. "Don't you worry. There'll be plenty of wars for you to run off and join once you're older," he said.

"But I want to join this one," he muttered. "It's no fair you're the only one who gets to go."

"Aw, Jack, you don't want this little skirmish to be your first one anyway. You know we're only marching into Virginia and back, just enough time to lick those pesky rebels and come right home. Hardly room for much heroism at all, if you ask me."

"I guess. I still think two Shannon brothers are better than one." Something caught Jack's eye, and he inclined his chin across the room. "If anything, you've got less of a reason to want to leave than I do."

Henry followed his gaze, and his heart gave a little flutter.

Elizabeth Lark, standing at the edge of the parlor. Half a glass of wine cupped in her delicate hands, gazing out over the guests with a distant look in her eyes.

“Well, I think that reason needs a bit of cheering up,” said Henry, clapping his younger brother on the shoulder and making for his fiancée. Jack rolled his eyes.

A brief touch at the corner of her elbow. Libby startled back to reality. “A word with our lovely host?” Henry murmured through a grin.

“A brief one,” Libby murmured back, “lest people suspect something untoward.”

“Please, there’s far worse behavior than ours for people to focus their suspicions on. Haven’t you seen Daniel Tarrey?”

“No.”

“Exactly.”

Libby fended off a grin with a purse of her lips as Henry drew her into the next room. The clamor of the parlor guests dimmed once they were around the corner. Henry stole a quick kiss, which Libby made no moves to reject. “Now who’s being untoward?” she smirked.

“Just showing my betrothed some proper attention,” he replied. “I’ve been in the limelight with the other boys all day, we’ve barely had a chance to talk.”

“Well, the festivities *are* entirely in your honor.”

Henry brought a hand gently to her cheek. “And yet you haven’t seemed all that festive.”

Libby averted her gaze. “I don’t want to spoil the joy of the day...”

“Libby, if something’s wrong, please tell me.”

She sighed. “I suppose it’s... well, all the talk of secession in the papers these past few months. I’d really hoped that things might blow over, or at least cool down long enough for us to marry.”

Right. So that’s what it is. Henry had known Libby Lark his whole life and loved her just as long, but in the rush of the fresh-brewing war, their recent engagement had all but faded into the back of his mind. The very room they stood in still housed the many wedding gifts that had been dropped off at the Larks’ doorstep in anticipation for the ceremony. A pile of paper-wrapped parcels, shoved onto a lace-covered side table to make room for the sendoff festivities in the rest of the house.

“I know,” Henry said. “I’m sorry things have escalated to war so quickly. I daresay there isn’t a soul in town - hell, the country - whose plans have been left intact.”

“I just never imagined the dealings in Washington would ever reach us here,” she said. “But now you’re leaving with hardly any hesitation at all.”

“Hey, now.” He cupped her face closer. “The boys and I won’t be gone long. All the papers are saying the union could whip those rebels without even lifting a finger. We’ll be back before the year is out, just you wait and see.”

“We were supposed to be *married* before the year is out, Henry.”

“And we will be! The minute I step foot back on Pennsylvania soil, I’m taking you right to the church, and that’s a promise. This little old war doesn’t change my love for you,” he insisted. “It’ll only postpone it a bit.”

“Postpone your love.”

“Well, there won’t be much room for it in a soldier’s kit, will there?” he laughed, but Libby wasn’t laughing. Henry swallowed. “It’ll be a quick fight, Libby, I’m sure of it,” he tried again. “I’ll write you so often, you won’t even realize I’m gone. Once I’m done serving our fine nation, nothing will stand in the way of our future together.”

“And you can promise me that?”

Her brown eyes were sharp and steady as she looked him in the face. That steadfastness had always captured Henry’s admiration, the way Elizabeth Lark could hold her ground as strong as any fort with the grace of the fairest spring birdsong. The way she could turn a question into a demand with a single look.

Henry took both her hands between his own. “I can,” he said. “And I do.”

“I’ll hold you to it, Mr. Shannon.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.” Catching sight once again of the wedding gift pile, he snatched up the nearest little box. “And if you ever need a reminder, take comfort in this.”

“What’s this?” Libby took it from him. “I thought we weren’t supposed to open these until the ceremony.”

“Well, since the ceremony won’t be taking place for a few months longer, I think you’re owed a little compensation to tide you over. That one’s from my mother,” he added as she pulled the twine tying the folded paper closed.

“Oh.” Libby’s lips parted as she revealed a porcelain teacup. Delicate flowering tree boughs and a cluster of bluebirds in flight were painted across its fine, glossy surface. “Henry, it’s beautiful.”

“Mama figured you’d like it. My little songbird.” Henry planted a soft kiss against her cheek.

Libby turned his head to kiss him properly, just a bit longer and harder than before. When they parted, that resolute look had overtaken the last traces of lost, distant mourning he’d spotted across the parlor. “Come home as soon as you’re able,” she said. “I mean it.”

“Yes ma’am,” he grinned. “As soon as I finish defending you and the rest of this nation from the last spot of fighting.”

The very next morning at the cold break of dawn, Henry and the rest of the Hanover boys departed their sleeping town for the recruitment office in Philadelphia.

IV. Summer, 1863

1863.

Libby Lark, twenty-one, now hardly remembered a time when the war *wasn't* going on. Over two years of conflict and hospitals and screaming newspaper headlines. Over two years of communities rendered unrecognizable by the demands of the war. Over two years of gripping her dress in her fist while the names of Hanover's injured and dead trickled home. Libby wasn't sure there had *ever* been a time before it all.

She'd taken some time off from the hospital in York to help her mother on the homestead. Late June heat sat heavy on the fields and valleys like a wet woolen blanket, steaming and suffocating. Mama and Charlotte were out back checking on the summer vegetable plots while Libby stood in their mother's kitchen kneading bread on the worn wooden countertop. The push-pull rhythm of the dough had her thoughts wandering.

I should be kneading dough in a kitchen of my own by now.

She pressed her lips together, but just this once, alone in the house, she let herself entertain that fantasy. She *should* have had a kitchen of her own. She should have a husband in the field, a little house just down the road from their families. Maybe... just maybe, even a child. 1863 should have seen her as Elizabeth Lark Shannon, wife and mistress of her home.

Outside the window, Charlotte's sharp holler echoed out. She'd found a garter snake in the zucchini.

Libby exhaled heavily and shoved the heel of her palm harder into the dough. 1863 *hadn't* found her with any of that. She had a mother and sister to look after, a community of children and elderly to see through the strife, a whole hospital of patients just a town away. Her letters from Henry, wherever he was, had dwindled over the long, weary years to almost nothing. Silence and utterly unknown distance were all that linked her to the battlefield now.

And who's to say that may ever change? Who's to say anything should ever go back to the way it once was?

That was when a different shout snapped her out of her melancholy.

Libby's head snapped up. Shooting a look out the front window, she spotted a figure barreling into town, hollering all the way. She wiped her hands on the nearby dishtowel and rushed outside.

Charlotte was already leaning on the fencepost, attention riveted on the incoming herald like a hunting dog on a mark. Mama had dirt on her apron and a pinch between her brows. “What’s happening?” asked Libby.

“He’s raising an awful storm,” Mama mumbled.

“Hush!” said Charlotte.

More people poked their heads out of garden patches and upper window shutters. The newcomer bent double in the middle of the street, heaving breaths and pointing back the way he came.

“McSherrystown!” he gasped. “The Confederates... General Earle’s got men just outside! They’re coming!”

Ice cold fear lanced through her.

“Oh, Lord...” Mama put a hand over her mouth.

“McSherrystown is less than a day’s ride,” said Charlotte, whipping around. There was real fear in her wide eyes. Libby had never seen that look on her little sister before. “Mama, they’ll be on us next!”

“Elizabeth, dear, get in the house. Quickly!” Her mother grabbed her by the shoulder. All Libby could do was stare over the fence. Stare at the herald, at the panic sweeping her hometown afresh.

Henry said he was going to keep this from happening.

“Come on!” Charlotte tugged her by the elbow and brought her inside. Libby found her breath again and took a deep inhale to recenter her thoughts.

McSherrystown. Confederates. We need to get out.

Mama emptied a cabinet of their finest dinnerware, piling it on the kitchen table with a clatter. “Hurry, girls. The valuables. Charlotte, get your father’s chest. Those rebels will raid the fields and houses, if we want a living after this we have to hide our things.”

“Right,” said Libby. She ducked down to help her mother collect their scant pieces of silverware.

A thump from the stairs. “I got the chest!” said Charlotte, plunking it down on a chair.

“Good girl.” They set to work cramming whatever they could into the small box. Mama took them both by the arm, forcing them to look her in the eye. “Now you listen. You girls have

to leave. Take the horse and go to your aunt's in Gettysburg. You should be safe from the warpath there."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to warn your fathers' cousins. If the Confederates are coming to Hanover, they'll be next. But I want you two out of the fighting, you hear?"

Charlotte nodded mutely. Libby pulled them both into a tight embrace. Her own heart thundered against her breast.

"I'll come for you as soon as the coast is clear." Mama put a palm against their cheeks. "Now hurry. Take whatever you want to save and we'll bury it in the garden with the chest. If that won't protect it from the army, I can't say what will."

Charlotte hurried up the stairs again. Libby opened the tea cabinet and grabbed what she could. Family spoons. Her mother's favorite cup and saucer.

Her fingers stilled when she came across the last one. Henry's bluebird teacup. Their wedding gift... or what was once supposed to be one. Libby hadn't so much as laid eyes on it since the start of the war.

It's porcelain, the back of her mind prodded. The Confederates will steal it or break it if you leave it.

She grabbed it without hesitation.

Outside, her mother had found a shovel and was working on digging between the zucchinis, their father's chest full to bursting on the grass beside her. Libby knelt by the tomato vines and dove into the black earth with her bare hands. Dirt shoved under her fingernails but she refused to let up. Once it was deep enough, she arranged the family heirlooms in the hole and covered it back up.

She dug a separate hole for Henry's cup. It didn't fit in the first one, and if she piled it too close to the surface she ran the risk of something breaking if it was stepped on, and then their efforts would be for naught. Dirt smeared into her skirts as she opened up the earth and set the careful porcelain inside. Her fingertips left dirt marks on the painted birds.

Putting it to rest.

Libby shook her head and tried not to think too hard as she buried the wedding gift deep. There was no room for sentimentality in war. *Didn't Henry himself say something to that effect, so long ago?*

"Elizabeth, help me with this, please."

She stood. Brushed the dirt off her dress as best she could. Picked up one side of the heavy little chest while her mother took the other. Together, they lowered it into the ground.

Her mother offered her a brief, sad smile. “This is the best we can do now,” she said gently, touching her face. “We might have to lose the fields, but we don’t have to lose everything.”

Libby covered her mother’s hand with her own and tried to smile back. “We’ll wait for you in Gettysburg. The world has changed out there. Be safe on the road.”

“Don’t you worry,” she said. “If my incredible daughters can handle it, I’ve got nothing to fear.”

V. Summer, 1863

Henry's regiment didn't stop until after nightfall. The men just about collapsed where they stood, grasping for as many hours of sleep as they could get before they had to pack up and march again by daybreak. Battery D intermingled with the infantry corps, scattering like fallen jacks across Maryland's northern terrain.

Henry, at least, managed to keep his sore footing long enough to help pitch a tent with some of the other battery boys. It wasn't that he wasn't hurting himself, but he'd almost gone numb to the monotonous grind of hard marching these past two years straight.

Two years. A blink, and suddenly Henry Shannon was one of the longest-serving soldiers on the field. No greater injuries than a few torn muscles and a bullet graze on his shoulder. Army life was the only life he knew now. He hadn't sent or received a letter from home in almost half a year, hadn't heard once from the woman he'd once been so eager to marry... but in the haze of footfalls, cannonfire, and the oncoming summer, he'd barely even noticed. Henry figured he should be more upset by that thought but he was just too damn tired.

Funny how fast a man can get used to these things, he thought before sleep sucked him into the darkness.

As expected, Charlie came around to pick his battery out of the infantry camp in the wee hours to pitch a breakfast fire. Henry accepted a tin cup of coffee water from the newest member, a stocky fellow called Benjamin Rittenhouse.

"Hell," the boy said, settling next to him, "them birds sure are chirping up a storm this morning. Figure someone oughta tell 'em the other boys need their sleep."

Henry sipped his hot water with a frown. "What birds?"

"What do you mean what birds? There's a whole lot of 'em in that wood over there." Benjamin lifted his cup and pointed for a copse of trees just barely visible in the dark morning distance. "Singin' like there's no tomorrow."

"Really?" Henry furrowed his brow, straining to hear, but all he heard was the crackle of the low fire and the murmur of the battery. Horses whickering somewhere nearby.

No birdsong.

Benjamin was looking at him, the realization dawning. "All them cannons, huh?" he mumbled.

“Yeah.” He wiped out an ear with his finger, but it didn’t change. He’d started to notice the loss in bits and pieces - realizing his name had been called more than once before he heard it, having to get unusually close to creekbeds to pick up on the sound of rushing water - but for some reason, the loss of the distant birds shook Henry the most.

And my little bird...?

Henry shoved that worry away. “Still marching north today?” he asked Charlie. “If we go much further we’ll be just about back in my old hometown, I reckon.”

“Well, maybe you’ll get to say hi to your folks,” said Charlie. “Far as I heard, we’re making straight for Adams County. Old Lee’s trying to take the North.”

“Let’s just see him try!” snorted Benjamin.

“Let’s not,” said Henry, worries wandering again. *Two years out on the field, watching boys and men die just for this rotten war to march right into my backyard when I wasn’t looking...*

“Meade’s hoping to cut them off before they push any further. I’d be surprised if we left this state without a skirmish.”

Benjamin drained his coffee water. “How much further?”

“About a week. Probably less. Depends on what our scouts say.”

The battery groaned. A week more of dawn to dusk marching, all in the hopes to cut off Lee before he could do to Pennsylvania what they’d been doing to Virginia for the past two years.

As they packed up to move at the distant calls of the regimental officers, Henry sent one prayer ahead.

Libby, my little bird... please keep yourself safe if I can’t do it.

~

They smelled the gunpowder on the wind before they heard the booming echoes.

Or, at least, Henry did. Plowing through forest bends and passing cornfields that looked increasingly familiar didn’t ease his nerves. The regiments always got antsy the closer they barreled towards a battle, but this was different. Henry had never smelled the bitter tang of cannon smoke settling over his local roads. Never seen the fields of his childhood community knocked over and ravaged prematurely of their crop.

It gutted him as well as any bayonet every time he laid eyes on those remnants of war he was too late to fend off.

They made their shortest camp yet once the distant fire died down for the night, then marched again when it woke them. *Gettysburg*, the men murmured down the line. *The Union boys set up a line outside some little farm town just ahead.*

“We’ll see battle today,” said Charlie. None of the battery boys responded. *Saving our breath.*

More updates filtered down the line as the day wore on. The Union held a solid formation on the high ground outside of town. The Confederates held the lower woods and were fixing to climb right up and break it. Orders started to cut through the murmurs. Regiments peeled off of the main group. *Peach Orchard. Wheat Field. Little Round Top.*

Battery D stopped at the edge of an open field by the late afternoon. In the distance, a line of tall, wooded hills steamed like frying fish - smoke from the firing guns. Deafening. The Union line under siege. The gunpowder scent bit deep into Henry’s nose, the booms of distant batteries making him wince. His sweat-soaked woolen collar stuck to the back of his damp and clammy neck. The horse teams behind them, lugging their cannons and gear, stood as unbothered as ever despite the onslaught.

Lucky bastards.

Their faithful lieutenant had split off for orders an hour ago. Benjamin caught sight of him jogging just inside the tree line and waved him down. “Where do they want us, Charlie?”

Charlie hesitated, sweat glistening his brow and chest heaving from the run. “Up,” he admitted. He shot a glance at the nearest rise, heavily cloaked in forest. “General Warren wants artillery cover on that little round top there.”

“*That one?*”

“I told him that terrain’s gonna prove an issue. I don’t think our horses can make it up a rise that steep, let alone that wooded. He wouldn’t hear it. They need backup now.”

A *boom* shook the earth too close for comfort, and several boys flinched as earth blew skyward just across the field. Henry tried to filter out the incessant crackling backdrop of gunfire to think. “We’re gonna try, aren’t we?” he asked.

“We can, but those boulders...” Charlie shook his head. “We’ll have to try. Battery D, move it, double time!”

Adrenaline zinged through Henry's every fiber as he hoisted his gear and set off after his junior officer. The horse teams lugging their six guns thundered in their wake. The closer they got to the round top, the clearer the pops of the rifles grew.

The earth started to incline beneath their feet. Boulders and ridges sprang out from between the thickening trees. It didn't take long until the cannon drivers cried out.

"The horses can't go no further, Lieutenant!" the nearest called. "We better look for another way up!"

"There *is* no other way up." Charlie yanked off his cap and dragged a hand through his dark, sweaty hair. "Damn it all, this is what I was afraid of..."

Henry's fist tightened around the strap of his pack. Glancing from the men to the horse teams and back to the men. His adrenaline was souring into panic the longer the moment drew out. *This can't be it... I can't just stand here and do nothing, not when Hanover's just a few miles away from this bloodshed...*

"What about the cannons?"

Henry snapped to attention to see Benjamin with a fresh gleam in his eye. "The horses can't make it up, but the cannons still could."

"And who's gonna pull 'em, Rittenhouse?" Henry snorted. "You?"

"Sure!" Benjamin grabbed him by the shoulder. "We got the boys, Lieutenant. Horses sure can't load a gun, but damn if we can't haul 'em up ourselves!"

Haul six cannons up a cliff ourselves. But if it means defending my home... "Well, they *do* need us up there, Charlie," Henry said.

Others in the battery joined in. That same spark of purpose had reignited his own enthusiasm. There were no blistering feet. There were no aching muscles. There was just them at the base of the round top and a Union line in desperate need of defense.

And my home, which I'll keep safe from this war or die trying.

Charlie looked them over, blinking in awe and cracking the faintest smile. "You know, Rittenhouse, that might not be a bad idea after all," he said, clapping him on the back. "Hope you boys are ready to haul. Get those guns unhitched!"

A whoop went up among the battery - a wild, desperate howl brimming with hope and determination. Buckles unlatched. Harnesses dropped. The horses flicked their long ears in disinterest while the men swarmed their former load. Even the drivers hopped down without

hesitation. Henry dug a shoulder firmly under a painted wooden joint, gritting his teeth for the climb ahead as others took up their own positions around the guns.

“Top of the hill?” Henry called.

Charlie, bracing his feet under the barrel of the nearest gun, spared him a grin. “Top of the hill. Let’s move it, boys!”

The great cannon wheels began to groan forward. Loam and scree scabbled underfoot, but Henry refused to lose his footing. Each step sent fire shooting through his body. Lighting up his muscles as they strained. Three men to a cannon was just barely enough - hollers echoed between the trees to maneuver around boulders, outcroppings, tight trunks.

Ever further. The round top loomed overhead, but Henry didn’t despair. His breath sawed through his lungs, paint splintered under his cracking fingernails, wood and cast iron mauled his shoulder where it bore the brunt of the weight. Agonizing twists around the obstacles of the hill. Every time he wanted to collapse, he took another step. Sweat poured down his back, his legs, his neck. The earsplitting crackle of gunfire faded in the pounding wake of his own pulse through his ears.

Henry barely noted it when new sets of hands grabbed hold of his cannon and eased the burden. Blearily, he lifted his head for the first time in God-knows-how-long.

Union boys. Lots of them, just paces ahead.

The top of the hill.

“Help ‘em up, help ‘em up!” Some infantry commander with a mustache so bushy it may as well have been a beard caught them as Battery D collapsed. “Easy now, boys. Lord Almighty, you lose your horses?”

“Couldn’t... climb,” Henry wheezed. He was on his hands and knees. He didn’t remember falling, but the cannon stood proud and steady beside them. Elsewhere, someone retched. “We... could.”

“Well, that’s one hell of a trip up. You did some stellar work.”

Charlie, looking pale as if he could faint at any second, shoved himself to his feet and saluted the infantry commander. “Where you want us?” he asked.

“The gap in this line would be just fine, whenever you can manage it. We just now sent a rebel wave back, but they’ll be on us again. Think you can fire down this slope?”

Charlie hissed through his teeth. “Doubt it, but we’ve got plenty of long-range shot. We can lay down cover fire for you.”

“That’ll be fine. Anything to head ‘em off, they’ve been getting closer to our bulwarks every time.”

“Battery D!” Their lieutenant’s voice was hoarse from exertion. “Let’s get these guns into position!”

Henry scraped himself off the earth and pulled another soldier to his feet. Together, they maneuvered their six cannons into line formation, adjusted the angle with the nozzle screw, and readied the ammunition boxes. By the time the rebel yell screeched up from the base of the round top, they fired off their first shot.

The infantry commander wasn’t kidding about the waves. The boys in gray would come up, trade volleys, make it a step higher than before, then sink back down. Battery D’s shots ripped through the canopy, aiming for their recuperation zone. Fire spewed in gouts from the cannon mouths. Before the sparks died, Henry was there to swab the barrels and prep the next shot.

He was batting an ember off the end of his staff when he heard Charlie shout.

He whirled to see his lieutenant drop to his knees beside a sprawled infantry soldier. The fallen man’s jacket was rapidly darkening in a wide patch over his heaving chest.

“Shannon, where’s that swab?” one of his cannoneers shouted. But Henry’s hearing hollowed out as he watched Charlie bend low to hear the soldier’s dying words.

And then all the world stopped entirely when Charlie jerked back in a spray of red from his shoulder.

Sharpshooter.

“Charlie!” Henry hollered. Made to dash out of formation.

“HENRY WATCH-”

BOOM.

Vision whited out. The swab was out of his hands. *Misfire.* He found himself on his back, head knocked against a jut of stone, swimming vision and ringing, ringing, *ringing* ears morphing the dappled canopy above him into mush.

I kept my promise, Libby, he thought before sliding into nothing. At least I came home.

VI. Summer, 1863

If only Mama knew. If only any of them had known.

“Thirteen more boys from the Union left flank,” Libby’s aunt’s voice called over the chaos that had become of the barn. Libby wiped her grimy hands on her equally grimy skirt and hurried to the hulking barn doors, dodging groaning soldiers with every step. She could barely see the floor for how many men her aunt’s family had been forced to take in. The air was thick with the metallic stench of blood and every so often a not-too-distant cannon boom rattled the foundations.

It was the same story all over town, they heard. Every building that had a floor was a makeshift field hospital. Every civilian was a doctor.

Libby passed Charlotte, hunched over a soldier leaning against the wall. She looked up from trying to administer sips of water and met her gaze for a brief second. Not hopelessness, but something not far from it. There was too much determination to entirely snuff out her sister’s unbreakable morale just yet.

Libby met her aunt at the doors. Cannons were still firing over the hills, and she winced at a particularly loud blast. “Thirteen, you said?”

Her aunt just nodded at the stream of men trundling out of the thin treeline. Some staggering on their feet, clutching old bandages. Some carried on bloodstained cloth, missing limbs.

I know how to treat amputees. That knowledge didn’t stop her stomach from turning at the fresh sight.

“I worry we don’t have the room,” muttered her aunt.

Libby shot a glance back into the stuffy barn. “What of the hayloft?”

“The hayloft? That’ll barely fit half a dozen.”

“But there’s no one up there now. We could move the most able-bodied soldiers, free up some wall space.”

“And climb up and down that ladder Lord knows how many times a day to treat them?”

“Charlotte and I can do it,” said Libby.

Her aunt opened her mouth to retort, but a holler from the incoming soldiers drew her attention away. Her lips formed a thin white line. “You girls, these days,” she muttered to herself. “Do it, then. And hurry.”

Libby made quick work of finding Charlotte in the sea of bodies and outlining the plan. As new shadows darkened the doorway and collapsed wherever there was space, she and her sister prodded the strongest wounded and guided them up the ladder. Sprains, cuts, the cleanest bullet holes. Libby left a pitcher of water at their feet and hustled down to the barn floor. Her muscles were already starting to twinge and burn.

Back at it. Ever playing my part.

As the last of the new transfers settled where they could, Libby’s aunt appeared at her elbow. “Three amputees,” she said, voice hushed. “Two legs - one above the knee, one below - and a poor fellow who’s lost an ear. Don’t think he can hear much out the other, either.”

Libby swallowed her squeamishness. She identified the leg amputees easy enough - they were moaning the loudest in the corner, barely conscious as their comrades supported them. “I’ll take the ear,” she finally said.

Her aunt nodded her to a body next to the haybale and hurried off for the well outside.

Libby picked her way along, hiking up her skirts so they wouldn’t drag through the bloodstains littering the floorboards. She hugged them close as she stepped gingerly around bandaged ankles, cloth-bound foreheads, and flopping arms. Grabbing the nearest crumple of bandage fabric, she set about tearing a new strip as she made it to the man slumped against the haybale.

Her gaze landed upon his face. The fabric dropped out of her hands.

No.

Henry...

She couldn’t comprehend it. Cold seeped through her body. The cannon fire, the groans and hustle of their makeshift hospital... it all faded to a distant roar, staring down at him. A ratty bandage - part of someone’s shirt - held a clumped fabric pad over his right ear. A small, flaking trail of dried blood marked the other. His soft brown hair was matted and sticking out at harsh angles. His green eyes, eyes that once creased with laughter, eyes that she once longed to be lost in, were closed.

Henry, here...?

How did this happen? Why did I think this would never happen? Why did I never consider the possibility that he might be here, on this very battlefield...

The answer was painfully, icily clear, of course. She'd been simply too busy.

It all came crashing down on her now, so much panic and guilt and love and memory that her heart ached to the point of bursting, just standing there watching her once-fiancee lie on the floor of the barn.

Shaking, Libby knelt to pick up the fallen cloth. She folded her skirts under her knees and alighted at his side, careful as a bird on a twig. Her throat was dry as she swallowed and spoke. "Henry."

He didn't wake. Made no move to indicate he'd heard her.

Don't think he can hear much out the other, either...

"Henry."

Libby leaned in closer, reaching out to touch her fingertips to his arm. He was solid and real and warm.

He inhaled, then. And his green eyes slit open.

She watched them widen, watched the same flicker of disbelief, shock, horror, relief pass over them. His cracked lips parted. "Lib..."

"Don't speak," she whispered back. Henry's brows furrowed, one hand coming up to brush his good ear, and her heart broke at the understanding. She leaned her head in close. His hair smelled of the tang of gunpowder. "Don't speak, Henry. I'm here."

"It won't stop ringing." His words were cracked and little more than a whisper. *He can barely hear himself.* "It's my fault..."

"Hush," she muttered into his ear.

Whether he heard her or not, he kept muttering in a daze. "Charlie's down... after we hauled all those cannons up the hill, too... I tried to reach him, but the cannon..."

"What were you doing near the cannons?"

"I'm a cannonner." The corner of his mouth twitched upwards in a ghost of the smile she loved. "Battery D."

Libby pulled back just a fraction to meet his eyes. "You never told me that," she said.

Henry's smile faded, and he swallowed. "Suppose I didn't," he murmured. "Forgive me, Libby. I was so... so busy..."

We both were.

She leaned in again, lips hovering just over the soft skin of his ear. “I’ve been in more hospitals than this one,” she said. “Made myself useful in York. Nursing amputees.”

“I heard from you so rarely...”

“I was busy, too.” A sad smile pulled at her lips. “Seems like this old war changed both our goals.”

Henry’s hand inched across the floor until it found Libby’s, and she startled. He gripped her fingers tight - a strength she didn’t expect from him. “I never... wanted to come home before I was ready to marry you,” he said. His voice had that same unexpected strength behind it. “Then those damn rebels marched right in...”

“Hush up about the rebels, now.” She eased the makeshift bandage over his head, fingers stilling over the pad on his ear. “We’ll get you fixed right up.”

“You’ll what?”

She pressed her lips together, ignoring his question and steeling herself for the sight under the pad. Gingerly, she peeled it back.

It was as bad as she’d feared - and as bad as Henry had, too, from the look on his face. His right ear had been all but blown off. A mess of blood stained the pad and the hair that had been trapped under it, trailing down his neck. The skin around it was reddened, singed by the heat.

“Am I going to die?” Henry’s voice was distant.

“No,” said Libby. She set her chin and replaced the pad. “Not on my watch. I’ve treated worse in York, you won’t die here.”

“York,” he mumbled. His eyes fluttered shut. “You never let on you liked the city before.”

Her insides clenched and she pulled away. “I’ve got to get you fresh bandages. That ear needs cleaning-”

“Would you have still been home when I came back?”

Would I?

She put her hand over Henry’s, still gripping her wrist like he was afraid she’d disappear. “I was serving the war effort, Henry, just like-”

Henry frowned, eyebrows pinching as he gestured to his good ear. Libby bent down again. “I was serving the war, just like you. There was no guarantee that you’d come home either, you know. I couldn’t just sit idle. Not with times the way they are.”

“I was always going to come home,” he said, weak whisper breaking. “I promised you, Libby. That never changed I never meant to spend so long at war, but our country needed me-”

“It needed me too, Henry,” she told him, and he stilled. She refused to look him in the eye. “Don’t blame me for stepping out into the unknown when you did the same thing. This war’s changed enough. We did what we had to do.”

He swallowed and averted his gaze. Libby didn’t know why that small motion gutted her as deeply as it did. Perhaps the old Henry wouldn’t have looked away. Perhaps the old Elizabeth wouldn’t have, either.

We did all of this expecting to marry at the end of it all... but maybe the people we promised to wed aren’t here anymore. Maybe this is the last thing the war will take from us.

No. Libby wouldn’t accept that. Not just yet.

This war’s changed enough.

“I’ll clean you up,” she told him. Distantly, the cannons boomed relentless. “You’ll make it out of here. You’ll see Jack and your folks again. Your part might be over, but mine won’t be until this Union is whole again, and I intend to see it through. Trust me like I trusted you, Henry. And if, at the end of it all, you’ll still have me...” She shook her head. “Well. Maybe we’ll have that conversation when we get to it. It’s been postponed this long.”

Henry let out a low breath. “I never wanted to abandon you,” he said. “Believe me, I didn’t.”

“I do believe you. All I ask is you believe the same of me.”

He risked meeting her eye, and Libby’s composure almost broke. “What we had to do,” he murmured.

She nodded. “That’s right.”

“My little bird.” His head settled back against the wall and the faintest ghost of his old smile brushed his lips. “War could never take that resolve of yours, could it.”

Libby exhaled a single sad laugh and pressed her lips to his clammy forehead, letting them linger as long as she wished. When she finally pulled away, she said, “You’ll need new bandages and clean water. I’m going to go get them now, all right?”

“Wait.” Henry interlocked his fingers with hers, careful and slow. “Will... will you sing to me? Just a little tune. I’ve... I’ve missed your voice.”

After all these years, that’s still who I am. His songbird. His Libby Lark.

And maybe, after all we’ve been through, he’s still my Henry Shannon.

Closing her eyes against the bittersweet swell in her chest, Libby held his hand and lowered her lips to his ear. Just like her namesake, soft and low, she began to sing.