



Contents

A Note on the City of Richmond	9
Prologue	11
Act One: The Privilege to Differ	21
Act Two: Courting Peril	97
Act Three: True Hearts Grow Brave	179
Act Four: A Battalion of Troubles	247
Act Five: The Curtain Falls	329
Epilogue	412
The History behind the Story	418
Selected Bibliography	422
Discussion Guide	424
Acknowledgments	427
About the Author	429



Chapter One

Oakwood Cemetery, Richmond, Virginia
Thursday, September 24, 1863

Tell no one how it ended. Please,” Sophie murmured to Daphne, her gaze flicking over the precious few mourners receding from the graveside. A sticky breeze whispered through her black net veil as she bowed her head, praying she did not look as relieved as she felt to finally lay the past to rest. A thin ribbon of scar tissue itched beneath her wristband.

Questions swimming in their eyes, neighbors paid their respects to Sophie and took their leave until only the household staff and the family lawyer remained.

“My deepest condolences, Miss Kent.” Mr. Whittaker doffed his hat and smoothed his grey hair back from his brow. “You have sent word to your father, of course.”

She hadn’t. Part of her wanted to tell her father every detail, to make sure he knew how much his wife and daughter had both suffered.

She wanted to heap guilt upon him for joining the army and leaving home just when home became unbearable. It was easier to serve the Confederacy, she supposed, than to stay and serve what was left of his family.

“He receives mail at the prison camp?” Whittaker prodded.

“He does.” *He also gets cold, I imagine, and weak, and sick. He is forty-seven years old. What if I tell him about Mother and—it kills him?* Sophie balled her black-edged handkerchief in her hand. “Thank you for being here. If I might have a moment of your time, there is a matter I wish to discuss with you.”

“Regarding your mother’s property, I presume,” said Whittaker.

Sun flashed on spectacles as Otto Fischer, the Kents’ German immigrant steward, looked up. If the slaves had heard, however, none of them showed any sign of it.

“That’s right.”

“I have the documents with me.” His tone was hushed as he glanced at the fresh mound of earth. “Shall we?”

While Daphne waited, Mr. Whittaker and Sophie put a respectful distance between themselves and the grave.

“Now, the only ‘property’ Mother personally owned, was Daphne,” Sophie began. “When my father purchased her four years ago, she was to be my mother’s maid, and freed upon Mother’s death. My father said he’d secured this with you.” He had also stipulated that Daphne not be informed of the arrangement, lest she have motive to end Eleanor’s life herself.

“I remember.”

Sophie’s breath suspended while Whittaker slipped an envelope from inside his jacket. Then his frown sent dread trickling down her spine.

“Did Mr. Kent not inform you of the change?” He unsheathed the document. “The ownership of the property has been transferred.”

Sophie blinked, unable to process the word. “Transferred?”

“Bequeathed. To you.”

She gasped. "There must be some mistake. I don't own slaves."

"You do now, my dear."

No. No.

"You don't already have a maid, do you?" he continued. "It isn't fitting for a twenty-three-year-old woman to be without one. Besides, you know how folks would talk."

"No!" She reined in her voice. "No. I free her. I manumit her myself."

"I'm afraid that has not been left to your discretion. There is a codicil on the will. You may not sell or free her. She is to be yours for life. Daphne will be freed upon your death."

Or hers. Sophie's throat burned as she turned to look at Daphne. Though it was illegal for both of them, Sophie had taught her how to read and write for this day, so she'd be equipped for freedom. "She's thirty-six years old and has never lived according to her own wishes."

Mr. Whittaker held up his hand to stop her. "There is wisdom in this, Miss Kent. I know of your abolitionist leanings, and for your sake, I keep quiet about them." He sighed. "Couldn't be helped, I suppose, with your mother being from the North, and you going to school in Philadelphia. But you are no longer a child. It's time to leave childish thoughts behind you, and accept that this is the way things are. It is the way things *should* be."

She shook her head. But her lips refused to move.

"Accept this, my dear. It's what your parents wanted. Your father wrote you this letter to help explain. Again, my deepest regrets on your loss." His message delivered, he tipped his hat to her and left. By degrees, she absorbed the news, as her black mourning dress absorbed the sun.

Nearby, warping lids of unburied green pine coffins popped loose, cracking through the air like gunshots, exposing the dead from Chimborazo Hospital to the glaring light of day. Sophie pressed her handkerchief to her nose and returned to Daphne without the news she had longed to bring. Nothing had changed, after all. Daphne was

a slave before Eleanor Kent's death, and she was a slave still. *My slave.* Sophie's chest squeezed. *Are the sins of my father now mine?*

Alone in her bed chamber, Sophie's hands shook like linden leaves. Her father's words blurred on the page. *The Negro's happiest condition is that of bondage. Your mother and I could not punish Daphne with freedom.* Since when had Eleanor Kent believed that slaves should not be freed? It smacked of deception. Eleanor most likely had no idea her will had been changed.

The rest of the letter was a repeat of his farewell speech. He was sorry if his absence caused her pain, but after Lincoln announced his Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, the war brazenly attacked slavery in a way it hadn't before. *But slavery is God-ordained, he'd said, and without it, the South cannot survive.* This was why he'd decided to fight. So that white Southerners could keep Negroes in bondage.

White Southerners like me. Her friends in Philadelphia would never believe it. *If Harrison could see me now . . .*

A sigh slipped from her. With Eleanor's body now removed from the house, Sophie withdrew the black crepe draping her mirror. The bright green eyes in the face that stared back at her were wiped of their former bright, inquisitive look. There was no sign in that reflection that its owner had once been the favorite child of her parents, and as protected from unpleasantness as any Southern girl could be. Those lips, which had been slow to speak but quick to smile, now lay flat. The face in the mirror was symmetrical but blank, vacant, so like her mother's at the end, it chilled her. *Make a difference,* her mother had told her years ago. *You'll find a way.*

Sophie thought she had. But her father had cut her writing career short, and now it was too late. To even hint at the opinions she had formerly published as John Thornton would be her ticket to Castle Thunder, the prison for political enemies, deserters, and citizens suspected

of treason. *I have no voice at all.* She had failed her mother, and she had failed herself.

Sweeping out onto her second-story balcony, Sophie watched a flock of geese recede into the blue-and-gold edged sky, then let her gaze drift down Church Hill. From her house at the corner of Twenty-seventh and Franklin Streets, the James River was a gilded, wrinkled ribbon. Though Confederate ship masts at Rocketts Landing and the Navy Yard bristled along the banks, Sophie's mind's eye saw the Delaware River instead, and the island within it teeming with men. Since the stunning Confederate defeat at Gettysburg, her father was one of them. Still he controlled her, even from inside a Federal prison camp.

As she gripped the balustrade, her mourning gown stark against the weathered white railings, Sophie mourned indeed. The war had killed her mother and taken her father. Nearly every family in her neighborhood had a husband, father, brother, or son in the army. The widow Madeline Blair, the only neighbor who had called on the Kents since the war started, had sent three of her four sons. Two of them had already been killed.

While Sophie had been ensconced in her home tending Eleanor, the war had turned her beloved, provincial Richmond into an overcrowded metropolis. The city was bursting with both living and dead, the way unburied corpses burst their coffins. Danger lapped at Richmond so often the tocsin in Capitol Square sounded with the regularity of a grandfather clock. The stakes could not be higher, and yet Sophie had barely even been a spectator, so entrenched had she been with Eleanor.

Marching footsteps grew louder, and Sophie turned toward the dipping sun. Dusty columns of soldiers—hundreds of them, maybe thousands—tramped toward her on Franklin Street. They wore blue. Prisoners from the dazzling Rebel victory at Chickamauga, no doubt. On either side of the street, windows opened, and women and children leaned out to watch. As the prisoners came closer, the jeers that followed them grew louder, too.

Well, you've come to Richmond at last, now where's your arms?

Oh, is these the kind of brutes that has come down here to kill our noble sons?

"Miss Sophie?" Daphne's rich voice drifted out to the balcony. "You hungry for supper? You need anything?"

Sophie beckoned her out on the porch with her. "I need these prisoners to be soldiers again." Her words tasted of treason. "And so do you."

Daphne cocked her eyebrow. "You sound just like your mama, God rest her."

Her throat burned. She wanted Daphne to be free, along with the rest of the Kent slaves. But, "My father says you're to be my maid-servant now."

She bowed. "I'm grateful to stay."

Sophie nodded, mustering her own gratitude that at least her father had not decided to sell Daphne outright. Still, "Do you ever imagine living your life for yourself?"

A short laugh popped from Daphne's lips. "Now what good could come of such a notion? It ain't fitting to dwell on what can't be."

"Look." Sophie pointed at the prisoners now snaking south and east. Some of them may have fought against her father. But they also fought against slavery. "Those men don't think it 'can't be.' If the North wins, you're free. Immediately and forever. If the South wins, slavery will go on just as it has for centuries."

Daphne's shoulders squared. "Well, then. Let the white men fight. Ain't nothing we can do about it."

But as Sophie watched the prisoners pack into the waterfront warehouse that was now Libby Prison, she wondered if Daphne was wrong.



Chapter Two

Capitol Square, Richmond, Virginia
Friday, September 25, 1863

I want to help. Surely you agree with me that a Christian nation such as ours should exhibit charity to those who cannot help themselves . . ." Head down, Sophie Kent weaved between clusters of people strolling through Capitol Square and quietly rehearsed her speech. Gravel crunched beneath her feet on the cobblestone-lined walkways dissecting the grassy lawn.

Stopping on the west side of the George Washington statue's granite pedestal, she shielded her eyes to gaze upon the bronze form of the nation's first president astride his horse. Behind him, the massive white columns of the classical Virginia Capitol gleamed in the morning sun. "The wounded Confederate have nurses enough," she practiced aloud, as if she were addressing the statue before her. "I want only to serve where the need is greatest . . . Surely *you'd* understand, Mr. President," she added, musing that though Washington was a Virginian and a revo-

lutionary, he was also the founding father of the United States and would certainly wish for its preservation.

“Look! That’s Eleanor Kent’s daughter!” The whisper froze Sophie in place. “Did you see her talking to herself just now?”

“Or is she talking to Mr. Washington?”

“Either way, she’s going the way of her mother!”

A chill swept over Sophie as she fought for composure. She had hoped she had buried the past last week at Oakwood Cemetery. But wagging tongues were slow to stop.

“Nonsense.”

Sophie turned just as Madeline Blair looped her arm around Sophie’s waist. “Don’t you listen to any of that talk now, dear. It’s all nonsense.” Madeline darted a sharp gaze over her shoulder, and the whispers fell silent.

“Thank you,” Sophie breathed. “How are you, Mrs. Blair?”

“Happy to see you out and about, that’s for sure. Fresh air is always an excellent choice.” She smiled, and kindness filled her hazel eyes.

“Have you heard from Asher lately?” At age twenty-seven, he was the eldest brother and had been the man of the house since his father had died several years ago. The middle boys, Thomas and Solomon, had both been killed at Antietam, a year ago.

“It’s been sixty-three days since the last letter. The house seems awful lonesome now.”

“I imagine that’s so,” Sophie murmured. She and Susan had grown up listening to the Blair boys scramble up their mother’s garden trellises and chase each other with firecrackers. They had teased the Kent girls mercilessly with lizard tails and frogs, but eventually learned more gentlemanly ways to capture female attention. “I suppose Joel misses his brothers something fierce, as well.”

Mrs. Blair pressed a crooked smile from her lips. “It’s no wonder you haven’t heard, considering.” Her gaze skimmed Sophie’s black dress. “Joey joined up, too. Left a fortnight ago.”

Joey. The baby. He couldn’t be more than fourteen years old.

“Oh, Mrs. Blair,” Sophie whispered. “However do you manage?”

“I’m proud of my boys, Sophie. Our cause is worth the sacrifice. Independence. Isn’t that what the first Revolution was all about? Breaking away from a tyrannical government? Joel’s young, but he knows what he’s about. Who can fault him for wanting to protect our rights and our homes?” Sniffing, she pulled a lace-edged handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed her leaking eyes. “And who can fault me, for wearing holes in my floor with my knees?”

“May God protect him,” Sophie said. Images of Joel as a chubby toddler stumbling after his brothers scrolled through her mind. “And Asher.”

“And your father. I pray for him, too, dear, and you can tell him so.”

Sophie nodded. “May He bring them all home.”

“Amen. In the meantime, do come see me sometimes, won’t you? I would dearly love some company.”

Sophie promised she would visit, and they parted ways.

Drawing a steadying breath, she turned north, thoughts swaying like the hoops beneath her skirts. She was overcome by Mrs. Blair’s sacrifice and genuinely concerned for her sons. All she could do for them was pray.

She could do more than that for the sons of Northern mothers. Resolutely, Sophie marched to the corner of Tenth and Broad, just outside Capitol Square. With the spire of St. Paul’s Church impaling the sky behind it, the frame building serving as the provost marshal’s headquarters seemed a shanty in comparison.

Once inside, she found the provost marshal and two busy clerks writing at a table. Thick waves of frosty hair crowned General John Winder’s bullish head. His piercing eyes and Roman nose reminded Sophie of her father. Nervous-looking people seemed to have sprouted in his office like mushrooms, some in clumps, a few by themselves. Passport seekers, Sophie guessed. The news from Chickamauga was favorable for the South, but the defeats at Vicksburg and Gettysburg

cast long shadows of poverty and despair over the Confederate capital. Those with less hope of victory than most chose to go North.

Finally, it was her turn. Winder spared her but a glance. “Speak,” he barked, glancing at his pocket watch before steepling his fingers.

Sophie sucked in her breath. “My name is Sophie Kent. I’ve come to request your permission to do my part in the war.”

“You need no permission to sew, knit, roll bandages, donate food to the hospitals.”

“If you please, sir, I’d like to help our prisoners.”

“Fine. Packages may be received at the Northern prison camps, and I’m sure our boys will be glad of whatever you can spare.” He waved his hand toward the door in dismissal.

“Forgive me, I haven’t been clear. I want to help the prisoners among us. Libby Prison is just blocks from my home. I would like to bring the prisoners there small comforts. Food, blankets, reading material. As I have my own resources, this would not burden the government at all.”

His eyebrows pinched together. “Better to use your resources for our own wounded soldiers. There are dozens of hospitals in Richmond. Chimborazo alone has three thousand patients on any given day—I’d say that’s ample enough outlet for your benevolent instinct.” With more than 120 buildings, the hospital complex was the largest in the South, perhaps in the North as well. In truth, it was just as close to her home as Libby was, but in the opposite direction.

Yet, “The women of Richmond are already pouring themselves out to meet those needs. But as you likely know, the gospel of Matthew says we are to love our enemies, and do good to those who persecute us. To minister to the hungry, the sick, those in prison—the least of these. Are not Yankee prisoners the very least of these?”

He grunted.

“If we wish our cause to succeed, and believe in the Christianizing influence of our nation, certainly we must begin with charity to the unworthy. I am not speaking of military policy, but of personal, individual kindness to those already captured.”

General Winder's chest swelled. "Your views—"

"Forgive me, General. They are Christ's views."

His eyes narrowed, chin jutting forward, and Sophie held her breath. "If you show sympathy for the Yankees, you will generate talk."

People are already talking. "I am less concerned with what people say than with what my heart is telling me to do. I just lost my mother, and I need something meaningful to fill the time."

"What does your father say of this?"

She swallowed. "He is a prisoner of war himself. Fort Delaware, Pennsylvania. Isn't it true that our treatment of Northern prisoners often produces treatment in kind of our own soldiers in Union captivity?"

Winder guffawed. "Do you expect better treatment for your father because of your good deeds here in Richmond?"

She bristled at his condescending tone. "I pray that women in the North feel the same pity toward our Rebel prisoners that I do for the men now languishing in my very neighborhood!"

By now, the two clerks were staring at her, nibs of their pens suspended above their papers.

Winder's chair scraped the plain pine floor as he stood and walked to the window. After a moment's hesitation, Sophie joined him there. At length, he spoke. "My job is to keep the city safe."

"I understand."

"Your Unionist sympathies are suspicious. Dangerous."

Sophie's eyes widened. "Dangerous?"

"Spies, like roaches, skitter throughout the city. Until we destroy them." With a jerk, he consulted his watch again. "I must be off."

Sophie took a half step backward. "Are you suggesting I'm a spy because I want to visit the prisoners? I assure you, my motive is to relieve suffering!"

He rounded on her, fire burning behind his coal black eyes. "Join me on my—errand. I'll consider my answer by the time we return."

Sophie's gaze darted about the room. The clerks had already gone. "Where are we going?"

“Camp Lee.”

Sophie blinked. *The garrison and hospital grounds?*

“And it is imperative that we not be late.”

A little more than two miles outside the city, Camp Lee writhed with people. Men in top hats and women in their threadbare gowns spilled out of carriages and omnibuses while still others arrived on foot. Old men leaned on canes, while small boys made guns of sticks. Nearly every conversation, whether shrill or hushed, was punctuated with *Yankee* and *spy*. Goosebumps raised on Sophie’s flesh. There could only be one reason for this vast congregation.

A rhythmic rattle grew louder until drum taps penetrated the din of the crowd. Soon voices dimmed, and the people ebbed from the Broad Street gate. The marching footsteps and steady drumbeats thudded on Sophie’s chest as they drew closer to Camp Lee.

All around her, necks craned and toes tipped toward the empty gate until the drum corps filled the space. Behind them, with the slow crush of a tide, came two companies of worn and faded militia, and then a hack, closely guarded by mounted men. At this, shouts erupted from the tittering mass of onlookers. Insults exploded until the hack was obscured from view, swallowed up by two companies of infantry bringing up the rear.

Sophie thought she was going to be sick.

With razor sharp tone and West Point bearing, General Winder parted the crowd. Sophie followed in his wake, breath squeezing against her corset to keep up with his spit-polished strides. The throng pressed around and between them.

Winder grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her to his side. “Pay attention.” He pointed up at the wooden gallows. “Do not turn away.”

A man in captain’s uniform stood beneath the gallows. In booming voice, he read the charges against the accused, a man named Spencer

Kellogg Brown, and the sentence of the court-martial: "Hanged by the neck until dead."

Winder bent his head toward Sophie. "This is what we do to spies, Miss Kent. Observe."

Her eyes and throat stung. Just as horrifying as the impending hanging was the multitude who had come to glut their hatred on the morbid spectacle. As the condemned man climbed the scaffold, however, he gave no impression of horror himself. Though his skin was pale from months of confinement, his blue eyes were clear and bright.

"He attained his twenty-first year while in Castle Thunder," Winder said. "Leaves behind mother, father, sister, and a bride. A personal favorite of Captain Alexander's, given a spacious room, reading material. Even ate at the captain's table. The prison chaplain tells me he is a most devout young man, firm in his faith."

Sophie's gut twisted. By now his arms were pinioned and his ankles tied together, but no shadow cast over his face, even as he watched a Negro climb a ladder and tie the rope to the upper beam. Wonder filled Sophie as Brown examined the rope, declared it too long to do the job, and politely requested they shorten it.

"But you see, Miss Kent, it matters not. Spies hang. We do not spare for love, youth, charm, or religion. Take heed."

The rope now shortened, the black cap was placed over Brown's head of rich brown hair. After bowing for mere seconds, he stood perfectly erect, and proclaimed himself, "All ready!"

Sophie squeezed shut her eyes. A sickening bang as the floor dropped away. The squeak of stretching, jerking rope. Finally, the silence of a soul departed.

At length, Sophie exhaled. The death achieved, the crowd turned its back and receded.

General Winder pinned Sophie with his gaze. "Now tell me, Miss Kent. Do you still want to play this game?"

"It's not a game." Tears bathed her cheeks, when she wanted to be stoic. Furiously, she wiped them away.

He sneered. "Contact with Yankees in the Confederate capital is a game, indeed. A deadly one. You play by my rules, and know that if there is ever a question, I always win."

Sophie tucked her fear behind her indignation, and still she could form no response.

"I grant you no pass to Libby Prison. Simply and absolutely out of the question. But if you choose to visit the hospital room on the first floor of the east side of the building, you may be of some use to the medical staff there. I make no objection. Your pass."

With trembling hands, Sophie took it, and turned to leave before he could ridicule her for that as well.

"Remember," Winder called after her. "Play by the rules. And I always—always—win."