

# Chapter One

“Halt!” The Yankee Captain dressed in Union blue held his hand up in a fist. The long column of soldiers came to a grinding stand still. Medical wagons and mules rattled to silence. A lone private ran up the lines toward the Captain to hear the orders.

“Private, we are in the middle of nowhere. By now, we must be near Laurel Hill. Have the sergeant come look at this map and point the way.” The private ran as fast as his long skinny legs could go and very soon, a stout, grizzled sergeant was deep in conference with the Captain. Turning his horse to face the column of soldiers and wagons, Captain Bohanan Sturgess of the first Pennsylvania medical core, shouted his orders. “Rest easy men. Give the horses, cattle and mules a drink and take one yourself. We are approaching Laurel Hill. This will be our last stop before commandeering the farm.”

Bohanan took off his dusty cap and whapped it across his knee as he dismounted. The dust flew but it hardly improved the hat’s appearance. He wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his glove. Damn, the south was hot. He was glad he and his men only had to come as far as Richmond. What must the heat be like in Georgia or Alabama? As far as he was concerned, the whole South could go to hell for all he cared. He wanted to go home, not be down here setting up hospitals to work on men no older than boys. What a waste of young life. Grant’s army was approaching Richmond and if they could break through the lines, the war would be over. His orders were to set up an army field hospital and commandeer Laurel Hill farm near the Appomattox River. He was near his destination, and it had been a long day.

Captain Sturgess wandered down to the bank and sat beside the beautifully flowing water. He removed his hat, gloves and neckerchief. He put his hands in the water and used the kerchief to wet his face. Ah that felt good. He leaned out over the river against a fallen tree to draw some clean water into his canteen.

A small snuffle sounded to his right. If he wasn’t sure he was crazy, he’d swear it sounded like a little sneeze. Seeing nothing move among the leaves and branches, the Captain continued filling his canteen. A shout rang out on the hill. “Hey, looky what I found boys! Wonder where the owner to these pretty playthings is?” Dirty and gaunt, Private Watkins was standing on the

crest of the hill waving some obviously female garments in the air. This was cause for celebration. The other men ran towards him and Captain Sturgess stood to see if he could determine just what was going on. He could hear whoops and hollars as the men wrestled over a petticoat. Lt. Wheeler began barking orders for the men to stop. The Lieutenant's horse reared amidst all the mayhem.

"Pssst, pssst, Yankee, over here."

Captain Sturgess couldn't quite believe his ears. His attention suddenly turned from the nonsense going on with the men to the spot where he thought he had heard a whisper. Leaves parted between two branches and a wet face with eyes as blue as the sky peered out.

"Yankee, I need my clothes, will you get them for me?"

Captain Sturgess could not believe his eyes. A young woman was treading water under the very tree he was leaning against. Her long dark hair floated around her shoulders and she made every effort to stay submerged up to her neck and secluded by the leaves.

"Please, help me, sir. You might be a Yankee, but you can still be a gentleman. I cain't get home without my clothes."

Bohanan cleared his throat. No, the young lady certainly could not get home without her clothes. Especially with an entire union hospital column between her and home. What kind of wild hellion ran about the countryside swimming in the river without any clothes! He supposed she was some poor farmer's daughter. He had half a mind to take her home himself and watch as her father gave her a good whipping. As it was, he did not have the time nor the inclination to be bothered with an errant female.

Standing on the bank, he gave the young woman a glare. "You stay right where you are, young lady. I shall retrieve your clothes. After I dismiss my men, you will dress and go straight home. You are never to do such a foolish thing again. Do you understand me?"

The face in the water frowned mutinously. "This is our land not yours, Yankee, and you've no right to be ordering any Virginian around. I can swim anywhere I dang well please."

His face, already red from the heat, turned a darker crimson at hearing her words. How he longed to pull that young woman out of the river and give her a whipping she would never forget. Of all the...the impudence! He wasn't about to let his men know the owner of the garments they were fighting over was submerged unclothed in the river right beneath their noses.

"Be quiet."

Turning his back on the naked young woman, he strode up the bank towards his men. “Private Watkins, give me those things, immediately.” The men stopped fighting and pawing over the items, and Private Watkins gave the collection to the Captain. “My orders have changed. You men are to make straight for Laurel Hill. You should be there in less than an hour. I will follow behind. Now move!”

The horses pulled out and the men hurried to obey but many a slack-jawed face passed the Captain as he stood holding an armful of female frippery. At last, the column of men and wagons disappeared and Bohanan walked over to the bank of the river where he had last seen the lawless rebel. There she was, still hiding in the same spot, quite concealed, unless one knew where to look.

“Here are your garments, madam. I will lay them on the bank and turn my back. You will come out of there immediately.” He could hear splashing and dripping and moaning and groaning and then...tittering!

“My, my, as I live and breathe, that was a nice dip for a hot day. And I do so heartily thank you, Yankee. I don’t know what I would have done had you not rescued me from my very precarious position. If you didn’t have that ugly blue uniform on, sir, I would have taken you for a Virginia gentlemen for sure.”

He clenched his fists at his sides. The woman was a lunatic. Wandering around during war time wasn’t safe for anyone, let alone, a half-witted female. She didn’t seem fazed by her bad judgment in the least. He was just about to set her back on her heels when he heard the thundering of hooves as a Lieutenant from his division rode up.

“The Colonel sent for you, sir. He’s been injured. We must hurry.” Bohanan turned just as the young woman was tying the last of her dress together. His horse had wandered a few steps away and the little rebel flashed him a brilliant smile, tossed her long dark locks and jumped astride his saddle, her legs spread just like a man. She gave not one fig that her ankles and calves were completely exposed and bare! Giving Josephus a kick, she took off in the same direction his army had taken.

“Of all the...” Bohanan threw his hat in the dirt and let out a loud expletive. His Lieutenant gave him a regretful look.

“Sorry, sir. We don’t have time to chase her. You’ll have to ride behind me. The Colonel is waiting.”

Resentfully, with no other choice, Bohanan jumped up behind Lieutenant Miller and the two rode toward the column of men in the distance. He reached Laurel Hill in plenty of time to attend the Colonel, and well ahead of his men. When he had time, he was going to find his horse and that little rebel to boot. She would be lucky if he didn't hang her from the tallest oak tree. There were plenty of those lining the lane down the road to Laurel Hill.

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Eliza Jane Sankey paused on the rise overlooking the road home. She watched as the huge conglomerate of Yankees poured onto her farm. She would return the horse, she only needed to get home first. The owner wouldn't be hard to find. There were Yankees everywhere. Deciding the best route to avoid the Union army, Lizzie, as she was known to her family and friends, gave the well trained horse a little kick and rode west and away from the army. She would come up the back way and have Sam return the stolen property.

Yankees! At Laurel Hill! The thought was unfathomable. Her father would roll over in his grave. Mother! Lizzie needed to get home and tend to Mother. Her mind and spirit broken with the loss of their father, there was no telling what her response would be to strange soldiers clambering all over the house. Truth be told, Eliza wondered if her mother would even notice. Ever since Papa had died two years before, her mother seemed to stray farther and farther from the present. When they received notice that her older brother Jimmy had died in the war, her mother's mind had completely left her. Annie Sankey now lived in the past and Eliza was content to let her be. She would like to disappear from all the destruction the war had brought as well.

Richmond lay to the north. Lee's army of Northern Virginia had surrounded the city to defend it. The sound of cannon and shot went on all day. She hoped and prayed it would stay away from Laurel Hill. Now it looked like her prayers would be denied. Laurel Hill was swarming with the enemy.

Eliza's father, Clifton Sankey, had freed his slaves when the emancipation proclamation was announced. He said there was no hope for what was coming and Laurel Hill would have to get on with things the way they were going to be in the future. He was the only one around Richmond who had that thought. Laurel gave a disgusted snort as she thought about all the

arrogant young men who had boasted and shouted how they were going to whoop the North. Where were they all now? Mostly lying in a grave somewhere in a forgotten battlefield, far away from home.

Laurel Hill was a small farm and had never housed many slaves. Some left, but Sam and Betsy and their children chose to stay. Sam said they didn't have anywhere else to go and would be willing to work for wages. Money to pay wages had long ago disappeared and they were all living at Laurel Hill trying to scratch out enough from the garden and smoke enough meat to keep from starving in the winter. The only money left was a small bit of coin that Eliza's father had stashed in the hay loft of the barn. It had been enough to keep them alive for two years. Eliza hoped it would last until the war was over, though she was almost convinced it would never end. She turned eighteen this summer. She couldn't remember the years before the war. It seemed like all she had ever known was war—the long, interminable, war. Richmond was devastated and there had been no way in or out of the city for a long time. There was nothing to do in Richmond anymore anyway. The city had been bombarded and barely a building was left standing.

Roger Emory, a neighbor, was the last person Eliza had spoken to that had seen the city. He reported that the state capital was still standing but little else. He said Grant must have pitied the building Thomas Jefferson had designed because it had somehow survived, so far anyway.

Eliza kicked the horse into a trot and doubled back around the army. Arriving at the barn, Sam saw her coming and ran to greet her. "Lord have mercy, Miss Lizzie. What are you doing riding on a Union horse? You gonna git all of us killed."

"You're right, Sam, you're right. I'm sorry." Ellie looked at her feet. Sam had every right to be angry. She wasn't the only person at Laurel Hill. Her actions could indeed get them all killed. "Sam, I took the horse from a Yankee, down by the river. I'm sure he's here, what should I do?"

Sam shook his head and thought a few moments. "Miss Lizzie, you take that horse and let it loose. The army will find it. They just better not find you with it when they do. You just keep your head down and be still. Your high-strung ways been trouble enough, this time, you best mind your manners."

"Oh, I will, I will, Sam. I will. I wasn't thinking. I promise, I won't do anything like that again. I'll stay out of the way."

“See that you do. Get to the house then and tend your mama. Those Union soldiers gonna be looking to speak to the lady of the house. Best be prepared.”

“All right, Sam. And, Sam...I’m sorry.”

Sam gave her a wink. Eliza knew he’d be just as glad to have the war over as she would. They were all sick and tired of the killing. She ran to the kitchen door and up the old stone steps. Laurel Hill was really just a clapboard farmhouse built by Eliza’s grandfather. The farm had nice acreage and they had raised tobacco, but now there was no money crop. Not enough people to work the farm. Just a garden and some livestock to which it seemed the union army was already helping themselves. Eliza frowned as she ran in the back door. In a day or two, there would be no food stores or livestock left.

“Betsy! Where’s Mama?” Betsy was busy in the kitchen and she shook her head at Eliza.

“This is a dark day, a dark day, Eliza Sankey. I hid all the food I could, but it won’t be long before this army gobbles it up. I’m afraid this is going to put the last nail in the coffin of old Laurel Hill.”

“Oh, Betsy! Don’t say that!” Eliza cried. “Even if it’s true, I can’t bear to think of it. Is Mama in the front parlor as usual?” Betsy nodded her head and Eliza ran to see. There she sat, Annie Sankey, by the old parlor organ next to the window. Her hands were gently folded in her lap and the old rocking chair went back and forth. Annie stared outside and watched as the Union troops set up camp on the front lawn.

Eliza ran to her mother and knelt beside her chair. Taking her mother’s hands in her own, she pleaded with her mother for sanity.

“Mama, it’s going to be all right. I’m here. It’s Lizzie, your Lizzie. Sam and Betsy and the children are still here, you don’t need to worry a bit.” Eliza glanced out the window at the cacophony of noise and horses and smelly men. She needed to get her mother away from the scene. “Mama, why don’t you go upstairs to your room and lie down? I think you’ll be more comfortable there.”

Eliza’s mother turned and gave her a vacant stare. “Look, dear, there’s a party setting up outside. Do you suppose there will be dancing tonight?”

Eliza patted her mother’s hands. “I’m sure there will be, Mama. Let’s go upstairs and have a lie down for the afternoon. It’s so hot, you’ll feel better.”

“I want to watch the party, dear.” Eliza sighed and decided to leave her mother alone. She would not be able to shield her mother from the goings on around her and it was just as well she see what was happening. “Eliza, dear, where is your father? He’s supposed to be home by now.”

“Yes, Mama. He’ll be back soon.” Eliza had learned there was no use arguing or explaining things. It was just as well her mother believed her father would return. Eliza wished for that same thing with all her heart.

Eliza flew to her own room to gird her loins against the Yankees. She would meet them in the finest gown she had left. She tried not to worry too much about a fancy hair-do. It would be fine to simply brush out her long dark locks, part it in the middle and form a nice conservative bun at the nape of her neck. The more respectable she looked the better. Eliza took off her old worn day dress and donned the last nice dress she owned. A pretty blue checked with a sweet lace collar at the throat. She decided against wearing Mama’s cameo. She didn’t want the Yankees to think there was anything left in the house to steal. Her parents had been far from wealthy, but the few items that managed to survive were hidden under the floor board of her room behind the dresser. Mama’s cameo lay there, Papa’s watch and her Grandmother’s string of pearls. So far they hadn’t had to sell them for food. Eliza could see that might change now that they were being eaten out of house and home by the Union army.

The front door slammed and the noise of heavy booted feet sounded in the hallway. Eliza gave her hair one last pat and took a deep breath. She gently closed the door to her bedroom and regally descended the stairs . The union officers looked up as they watched her come down. She immediately recognized the officer who had retrieved her clothes at the river. What rotten luck she thought as she came to stand on the bottom step, her hand still resting on the simple balustrade.

“How do you do?” All the officers removed their hats and the man Eliza recognized stepped forward. Eliza gave a little curtsy.

The Union Officer was filthy. He had clearly been on the road for many days, but was not without some amount of respectability. He held his hat contritely in his hands but his eyes told a different story. They scowled at Eliza from underneath dark brows, and his disapproval of her was obvious. He must have recognized her as well. Eliza was tempted to stick her tongue out at him but resisted when she remembered the fate of the whole household rested on the word of this one man. He sported a large moustache and pointed beard. Eliza had once heard the style called a

Van Dyke. His dark brown hair was curly and rested on his shoulders. At least he's not bald, Eliza idly ruminated.

"Captain Bohanan Sturgess of the first Pennsylvania Medical Corp, at your service." He bowed at the waist. "How do you do, ma'am?" He hesitated over the word 'ma'am' as he looked at Eliza with raised eyebrows. If this had been a different circumstance, Eliza would have taken off her shoe and thrown it at the insolent Yankee. As it was, she managed to return his 'how do you dos.'

"Miss Eliza Jane Sankey, of Laurel Hill, Virginia, sir." Eliza turned on the moonlight and magnolias. "Nice to make your acquaintance."

The Captain cleared his throat and, obviously irritated, turned his hat in his hands. "The first Pennsylvania has been authorized by the government of the United States to commandeer such buildings as are necessary for the pursuit of the war. It so happens that Laurel Hill sits at just the right location for an army field hospital, of which there is a great need at present. I, Captain Sturgess, will command this hospital. You and your family shall be allowed to stay and remain unmolested and under my protection. As long as you do not present any obstacle for the Union Army during the duration of our visit. Do I make myself clear, ma'am?"

"As clear as day, Captain." Eliza blinked her eyes up at him but was met with a withering glare. She turned her nose up in the air. "Do you have any estimation of your time frame of occupation, Captain Sturgess?"

"No I do not, ma'am. Battles do not follow a set time frame." He stuffed his hat back on his head in a very annoyed fashion. "We shall try to preserve your farm as best we can but when there are so many troops, I cannot guarantee the final outcome. However, we are not here to purposely destroy Laurel Hill. How many of your family reside here at present?" The Captain looked around in search of an answer to his question.

"There are not many of us left. My father died two years ago and my mother still lives, but she is very ill. My brother, Jimmy, died at Antietam and we have not heard a word from my brother, Peter, for over a year. Sam and Betsy Johnson and their two children, Libby and Eli, live here as well. Besides my mother and myself, there is no one else, Captain. I fear we are at the mercy of the Union army. If there is any mercy to be found there."



The Captain made no response to her jibe as he scratched his chin. “My condolences in the loss of your father and brother. I will need to secure two rooms if you have them, here in the house. One for myself and one for my lieutenant.”

Eliza nodded her head. The request was to be expected. “Of course, Captain. There are two spare bedrooms at the top of the stairs. I shall prepare them for you.” Eliza turned to go but the Captain cleared his throat once again causing her to turn back in his direction.

“Just one more thing, Miss Sankey.” Eliza hesitated at the bottom of the steps. “I happened by the Appomattax River this morning and found a very strange fish lurking just beyond the bank among the leaves and branches. These are dangerous times and the fish was powerfully lucky not to have ended up in a frying pan over a Union camp fire. I hope I will not be seeing such a fish again, Miss Sankey.”

Of all the gall! Just like a Yankee. Crude and rough and twice as impertinent! He was certainly no gentleman! Eliza blushed to the roots of her hair. “I can assure you, Captain, you will not be seeing that fish again.”

“Good,” he replied tersely.

Eliza turned her back and flounced up the steps to ready the rooms the Captain had requested. How she longed to take her fingernails and scratch that yellow-bellied Yankee across the face. Well, there was nothing to be done for the moment. She would have to go along with things until another option presented itself. However, that didn’t mean she couldn’t enjoy plotting dire revenge.