

PROMISING HEARTS

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Appomattox Court House, Virginia
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The morning of the battle dawned gray and cold. Dr. Vance Phelps surveyed the low rise extending southwest from Appomattox Court House where Lt. General Ulysses S. Grant had deployed the Army of the Potomac after forcing General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia to abandon Richmond. Only a few hundred yards away, 30,000 rebel troops, all that remained of Lee's war-weary forces, prepared to mount their assault. Nearby, the assistant surgeons milled in a restless knot, awaiting orders as to where to establish the regimental field hospital. Vance was the senior surgeon by virtue of having served for nearly three years in the Pennsylvania 155th Volunteers—longer than any of the other medical personnel—and by being the only formally trained surgeon in the division. Many of the others had a few weeks of apprenticeship or no medical training at all. They'd learned the rudiments of their trade under fire.

"There." Vance pointed to a dense copse of trees on a knoll directly behind the close rows of muzzle-loading howitzers manned by Ord's 24th Corps. From long experience in skirmishes and battles too numerous to count, Vance knew that before long the air would roil with the clouds of lung-singeing black smoke spewed out from artillery and small arms fire. The walking wounded and stretcher bearers would have a hard time finding the aid station unless it was close to the battle line and clearly visible. "Set up the tents in front of that hedgerow."

"Gonna make a mighty fine target up there, Doc," noted Milton

Cox, the sergeant who served as her chief hospital steward. In his mismatched uniform of regulation Union blue trousers and a frayed, faded yellow shirt of homespun cotton that he'd most likely stolen off the clothesline of some unsuspecting Southern housewife, he looked more like a vagabond than a seasoned veteran.

"Might be," Vance agreed, her black eyes holding just a glint of humor, "if Lee's men are so unmannerly as to fire upon the hospital. But I figure we'll have the strongest section of the Union line in front of us, and just maybe the ambulance corps will be able to find us once the shooting starts."

The sergeant grinned, showing an uneven row of tobacco-stained teeth. "Well, you've been right more times than not."

Just lucky, Vance thought, swiping the sleeve of her loose blue officer's coat across the icy sweat on her forehead. Sometime during the night, when she'd lain awake on a thin blanket in the back of one of the medical supply wagons contemplating the upcoming battle, the congestion in her chest had relented enough for her to breathe without the stabbing pain that had been present for the last week. The cough and chills persisted, a remnant of the pneumonia she had been fighting since February. Now, her once long and slender form verged on gaunt, though her skin was tanned and roughened by sun and wind, her muscles sinewy from constant labor. As Grant's forces had cut deep into the South, the warm April days and the humid air of Virginia had helped ease the constriction in her lungs. She counted herself lucky not to have succumbed to consumption or dysentery or some of the other diseases that had taken so many on both sides of the war.

Not for the first time, she was bone-grateful for the good health and regular food she'd enjoyed before disguising her sex and enlisting in the newly formed U.S. Army Medical Corps in 1862. After so many losses at the Battle of Bull Run, when thousands died from lack of access to medical treatment and the general dearth of physicians among the regiments, recruiters accepted anyone with the vaguest sort of medical training. No one looked carefully at the credentials, or the gender, of the inductees.

"We're low on chloroform," Milton said.

Vance nodded, considering herself fortunate that they had any of the fairly new substance at all. Rumor had it that the Southern surgeons had been making do with ether for months, a far less reliable

anesthetic. “We’ve plenty of morphine and laudanum if we run out of the anesthesia.”

“Well, if I need any cuttin’ done, I want you to be the one doin’ it.” Milton turned his head and spat a stream of dark brown tobacco juice. “Ain’t none of the others as quick and clean as you.”

“Thank you, Milton,” Vance said, having long since lost count of the hundreds of limbs she had removed. “Make sure you keep the basin of carbolic full and close by today.”

“Yep. Don’t suppose we’ll be runnin’ out of that real soon, seein’ how you’re the only one usin’ it.”

Vance knew that Milton, along with her fellow surgeons, thought the practice of dipping her hands into the caustic liquid between surgeries was not only time consuming, but foolish superstition. Nevertheless, Dr. Lister’s theories about sanitation made sense to her. She thought of how many soldiers she had lost, not to injury, but to gangrene. Far more than she had saved. Her face, thinned down to bone from subsisting on little more than hardtack and salt-pork for months, grew grimmer still. “There’s little enough we can do for them. I don’t see that it will hurt.”

“Right enough.” As if recognizing Vance’s dark mood, Milton said quietly, “This war can’t last much longer. Not with Lee’s forces split and us between ’em.”

“I hope you’re right. There’s been far too much death.” With a sigh, Vance straightened her shoulders and turned to check the progress of the soldiers assigned to the ambulance corps who were erecting the hospital tent and bringing up the supply wagons. Her operating table consisted of a wooden door removed from a grand plantation house balanced across two empty ammunition barrels. Her instruments were her own, brought from Philadelphia when she’d left her post at the hospital to take her skills where they were most needed. Those she cleaned and cared for herself, carrying them in an engraved wooden case that had been presented to her by her father the day she graduated from the Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania. That day in 1861, she’d imagined a life very different than this. But since then, everything had changed.

The sound of small arms fire drew her from a past that had seemed so certain into the present, to a life that might now be measured only in fleeting moments. An eerie sound drifted on the pristine whiffs of

white smoke that rose into the air beyond the Union lines like so many puffs of breath. A keening, undulating cry of defiance and, oddly, joy. The Rebel Yell.

“Here they come,” Milton whispered with near reverence.

“Yes,” Vance said, striding quickly toward the hospital staging area. She removed her coat and rolled back the cuffs of her white cotton shirt as she walked. Once there, she retrieved her surgical kit from the wagon and spread her instruments out on a rough pine bench next to the makeshift operating table. She doubted she would need more than the probes, the amputation knife, and the saw for the first round. Minnie balls and cannon canisters left her little choice but to amputate. She dipped her hands into the carbolic acid and shook off the excess, scanning the nearby rise for the first sign of wounded.



“Look smart, men,” General Philip Sheridan exhorted as he galloped up and down the forward line of the first of his three cavalry divisions, saber rattling against his thigh in its gold-braided scabbard. “Lee’s infantry will be upon us before the sun burns the dew from the grass.”

Sheridan’s line of mounted cavalry, poised for the signal to strike, shifted in the sunlight like a huge black snake, the horse soldiers and animals alike agitated by the sound of weapon fire and men screaming. The light artillery, mounted on wooden platforms, bucked and belched fire as they disgorged their deadly hail of grapeshot. The ground trembled with the force of thousands of feet pounding the hard-packed red earth, and the air shimmered with the ominous thunder of war.

Vance heard the bugler signal the charge, and Sheridan’s cavalry stormed toward the advancing rebel lines. Then from out of the smoke and shifting shadows she saw the first stretcher bearers emerge, running as fast as they could with their burdens of damaged humanity in tow. When the first man was laid upon her table, the battle receded from her consciousness. There were only the wounded now.

“Change the saw blade,” Vance said as she turned from the table and immersed her hands in the blood-tinged antiseptic in the basin balanced on a tree stump by her right side.

“Ain’t got but two left,” Milton said as he sluiced the blood and gore off the wooden tabletop with a bucket of water.

Vance looked at the line of waiting wounded. Those who could walk were sitting under the shelter of the trees, bandaging themselves or their friends. She might get to some of them before the day was over, but those who weren't seriously injured would wander back to their regiments before she ever had a chance to tend them. They knew as well as she that there was little she could do beyond what they had already done for themselves. Those who needed her services were the soldiers with major injuries to body or limb, and these waited on the bare ground in a dense semicircle that stretched as far she could see.

"We'll make do with the one we're using for now," she said. It had taken her a little over fifteen minutes to amputate the last leg because the saw blade was so dull she'd had to wrench it through the bone by sheer force for the last half inch. She'd always been active, eschewing the carriage to walk whenever she could and working in the gardens that surrounded her family home in the spare moments between her studies. She was strong enough in body to do what needed to be done, but her heart suffered. "Next."

The boy looked no older than fourteen and might not have been, because as the war had dragged on, anyone who could carry a rifle and declared they were sixteen was welcome in the ranks. The cannonball had struck him just below the knee, destroying most of his lower leg bone and leaving only a mangled mass of muscle connected to his foot. She looked into the boy's eyes.

"I'm going to remove your leg, son, and you're going to live."

Vance nodded to Milton, who stood to her left with a cloth and a can of chloroform in his hand, and as he pressed the anesthetic to the boy's face, she tightened the leather strap around his lower thigh with one firm yank. Once again, she picked up the amputation knife bare-handed and swiftly cut down to bone, four inches below his knee. With a circular rotation of her wrist, she completed the incision around the stump and dropped the knife on the table in exchange for the saw. It should have taken her less than two minutes to transect the bone, but it required twice that long to worry the blunt teeth through the young healthy leg. When the destroyed portion fell onto the door that served as her table with a thump, Milton picked it up and tossed it onto a nearby pile of amputated limbs.

"Damn flies," Vance muttered, waving at the ever-present insects that buzzed around her head and the boy's motionless body, obscuring her vision. Milton passed her a straight needle threaded with black

silk, and she rapidly located and sewed closed the major vessels in the stump. Then she covered the end of the exposed bone with a flap of skin and muscle and swiftly sutured it in place to complete the amputation. Somewhere behind her she could hear men shouting, even above the cannon barrage and general cacophony of battle.

“Move him to the evacuation wagon. Next.”

When another body did not immediately appear before her, she looked up questioningly. Sweat and blood spatter ran into her eyes and she blinked, then automatically wiped her face on her sleeve. Seeing Milton gesticulating wildly as a lieutenant on horseback leaned down and shouted something at him, Vance called out, “What is it?”

“Lee has broken Sheridan’s line,” Milton called on the run. “We’re to fall back.”

Vance looked at the wounded covering nearly every inch of ground around her and shook her head. “We can’t move all these soldiers.”

“Then we’ll leave them for Lee’s surgeons,” Milton said, hurriedly gathering drugs and instruments.

“No. Lee’s surgeons will take care of their own first, and these men need attention now. You go. I’ll stay.”

Milton stopped what he was doing and stared at Vance. “If you stay, they’ll make you a prisoner.”

“That may be. But I’m a surgeon and I’ll be valuable to them. Go on, Sergeant. Leave me enough medicine for these men and go.”

“I don’t think I can do that, Doc.” Milton moved up beside her. “We fought together side by side these three years. Wouldn’t be right. Besides, my mama didn’t raise me to leave a woman to stand alone when times got hard.”

Vance stared into his placid brown eyes. “You know?” He nodded. “Does everyone?”

“Can’t say. You wouldn’t be the first, and most choose not to remark on it, even if they know.” He shrugged. “Seen some pretty damn good fighters, myself. And never a better surgeon than you.”

“Thank you, Milton. Let’s get the next one up here on the table.”

Vance worked on, the sounds of battle growing closer. As the war closed in around them, the air grew thick with smoke and misery. The pain in Vance’s chest returned, skewering her with each breath. She coughed and shook her head, flinging sweat from her thick dark hair in an arc around her. Incongruously, the sun broke through for an instant,

and crystal droplets danced on the sunbeams before falling into the blood that pooled around her scuffed black boots.

“That’s the last one, Doc,” Milton said. “Now we gotta skedaddle.”

“I believe you’re right, Sergeant,” Vance said, tossing the saw into her kit and rinsing her hands one more time. Reaching for her coat, she glimpsed the look of horror on Milton’s face at the same time as she felt the earth shake. Then the world revolved crazily, and the next moment, she was lying on her back staring at the sky. A few small patches of brilliant blue still peeked through the dense battle fog. She couldn’t hear through the ringing in her ears. She turned her head. Milton lay ten feet away, his neck bent at an unnatural angle, his eyes blank.

The pain came next, unspeakable waves of agony. Reaching out blindly, Vance felt the iron rim of the barrel that supported the operating table and, gripping the top, pulled herself to her feet. The left side of her body was soaked in blood. Her left arm hung uselessly by her side. Dizzy, she sagged against the table and hoped it wouldn’t topple, struggling to sort out her injury. Bright red blood spurting into the air from somewhere near her elbow, the pulsations keeping time with her heartbeat. Of one thing she was certain—she’d bleed to death in another few minutes. Biting down against the pain and the screams that threatened, she found the leather strap she used as a tourniquet and cinched it down around her upper arm. The bleeding slowed.

A minnie ball struck the table and kicked splinters into the air. Not much time. She slid down to the ground, her back against the barrel, her damaged arm cradled in her lap. Then she closed her eyes to wait.