

The Lady
AND
THE *Officer*

MARY ELLIS



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Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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THE LADY AND THE OFFICER

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*This book is dedicated to my husband, Ken,
who stomped around an inordinate number of
battlefields, museums, monuments, cemeteries, historical inns,
and bed-and-breakfasts for years in the name of research.*

*The man also patiently slammed on the brakes at a
countless number of roadside historical markers.*





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Cashtown, Pennsylvania

LATE JUNE 1863

“Gentlemen, please take heed to what your horses are doing to my flowers!” Madeline Howard spoke with the indignation that simmered after two long years of war.

Four blue-clad officers paused in their conversation to gaze down on her wilted ageratums and hollyhocks. The flowers were trampled almost beyond recognition beneath their horses’ hooves. The soldiers offered faint smiles of regret and then resumed their postulating and pointing, affording her as much attention as they would to a gnat.

Except for one officer, who straightened in his saddle. Tugging gently on his reins, the man guided his mount out of the flower bed toward the road. “Good afternoon, miss. General James Downing, at your service. I apologize for the damage.” He tipped his hat and then turned his attention back to the others.

“Madeline Howard, General. *Mrs.* Howard.” She marched down the porch steps. “If you would kindly move your meeting to someone else’s yard, I shall be forever in your debt.”

A thin, gangly officer mounted on a sorrel mare was quick to retort before the general could reply. “See here, madam. In case you’re unaware, the war has come to the fine Commonwealth of Pennsylvania with the arrival of Robert E. Lee’s infantry. Unfortunately, your posies are of no importance to the Union Army—”

“I’m well aware of the war, sir. My husband died on the banks of Bull Run Creek, leaving me alone to run this farm.” Madeline settled her hands on her hips with growing indignation. “Those Rebs you’re chasing marched through last week, stripping every ear of corn from my fields and every apple from my orchard. They stole my chickens, killed my hogs, and led my milk cow away on a tether. They took every bit of food from my kitchen and larder. So if I request that you not trample my flowers for no apparent reason, I would think you could oblige me!” Madeline

completed her diatribe with a flushed face and sweating palms. After months of privation, she had finally lost her temper.

Silence reigned for several moments as the officers stared at her in disbelief. Then General Downing addressed the wiry, haughty officer. “Major Henry, you will order the troops to remain within the confines of the road so as to not needlessly damage civilian property.” Along the highway, enlisted soldiers trudged in formation toward town, raising a cloud of dust that would linger for days.

Saluting, the major and the other officers spurred their horses and rode off, leaving Madeline’s garden empty but ruined.

“Please accept my apologies, madam. And I thank you for your husband’s sacrifice to our country.” General Downing pulled off his leather glove and extended his hand to her.

“Thank you.” Temporarily flummoxed, Madeline reached up and gave his callused fingers a quick shake.

“I will do my best to protect your town from further harm.” He held her fingers and gaze far longer than necessary...or proper.

Tugging her hand free, she retreated backward so quickly she trampled the few remaining blooms missed by the horses. She felt a flush climb her neck as she picked up her skirt and ascended the steps. Pausing in the shelter of her porch, she looked back at the man who still sat watching. He bowed a second time, replaced his glove, and galloped away, adding another cloud of dust to the heavy air.

Madeline retreated inside and slammed the door, not pleased with her behavior. She wasn’t a woman who normally became flustered in the company of men. Remembering the trampled flowers under her feet, she shook her head. At twenty-six years old and widowed for the last two, she had no time for silly flirtations or coquetry. When her wits returned, Madeline went out to her stable to check the animals. The din of artillery shelling all morning had made her mares skittish. If it hadn’t been for quick thinking last week, her beloved horse stock—Tobias’s pride and joy—would now be in the hands of the enemy. She stroked their sweaty flanks and scratched their noses, trying to calm them with soft words and a gentle touch.

Her own fears were another matter. Widowhood had inspired a

determination to keep her husband's livelihood flourishing. War had created a constant demand for the horses she had bred and raised from brood mares. Although she would never become wealthy, the bills were paid. Tobias would have been proud of her.

Tobias. It seemed so long ago when he marched off proudly with the Sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers. He died at a battle the papers were calling First Manassas—first because a second unsuccessful battle was fought at the same loathsome place. He died before she'd grown used to the idea that he was a soldier. Madeline had missed him fiercely during the first year. Now, with the responsibilities of a farm, endless chores filled her hours, allowing no time for grief. She couldn't remember a day she hadn't fallen into bed exhausted. Usually, though, a sense of satisfaction accompanied her fatigue, so she persevered.

The marauding Confederates had taken everything she had, all but her beloved horses. The moment she spotted ragged butternut uniforms on the road, she had hidden her horses in a nearby cave—a place known only to her and the neighborhood children. Today, while her mares munched hay from their bins, Madeline stood in the barn doorway and watched wave after wave of boys in blue march toward the center of Cashtown. The war had come to Pennsylvania soil. What would happen to her sleepy little community?



JUNE 30

“Reverend Bennett?” Madeline called the man's name through an open window because no one had answered her knock on the door. From every indication, her preacher and his wife were both home. Laundry fluttered on the line, the barn door was open, and the back door stood ajar to catch the breeze. As she'd ridden her mare through the town square and down cobblestone streets, she'd seen very few people—nothing like the way things usually were, with friendly neighbors hanging over picket fences or milling on the church steps Sunday mornings. “Reverend Bennett!” This time she hollered his name in an unladylike fashion.

The middle-aged preacher's face appeared in the doorway. "Mrs. Howard. Come in, come in. Why are you out and about on a day like today?"

"I hoped to hear something of what is going on. Because it's been so hot, I rode my mare instead of driving the carriage. I tied Bo to your water trough in the shade. I hope you don't mind."

The reverend lowered himself onto an upholstered chair. "Of course not. Please sit and make yourself comfortable. I was referring to the commotion on the roads, not the heat. With so many soldiers afoot, my wife insists we remain below in the cellar. So you haven't heard the news?"

Madeline sat on the edge of the couch and shook her head. "All I know is that I've seen troops on both sides moving for several days. First the Rebs stripped my farm, and now our boys in blue are stirring up the dust."

"Everyone appears to be headed to Gettysburg. Entire brigades of cavalry have been spotted, along with long caravans of wagons. And all those poor boys marching in this heat." He fanned himself with a folded newspaper. "Many of my neighbors are scared. They packed up their possessions and left."

"Where were they going?" Madeline asked, sounding childish. The fact she had no nearby relatives to offer shelter undermined her confidence in her ability to wait out the war on her farm.

"North, east—anywhere away from what's about to happen. But the time to leave is long past. It's no longer safe to travel. Rabble-rousers follow every army. You must stay with us until this ordeal is over. There most certainly will be a great battle."

"No, Reverend. I couldn't possibly stay. I need to tend Tobias's horses. If I'm not home, who knows what will happen to them?" She rose to her feet, regretting her decision to ride to town for news.

"All right, but at least come below and share a bite with Mrs. Bennett. She worries about you alone on your farm."

Madeline loved the preacher's wife like a dear aunt, so she followed him down the rickety steps to the cellar.

Later, after arriving home safely that evening, she relaxed and rocked serenely on her front porch. Lamplight from the kitchen window illuminated the handiwork of a spider. The thin gossamer strands weren't organized into a web, but were tiny trapezes strung between porch rails.

Madeline stared, mesmerized by the insect's artistry. As she waited for the spider to reappear, the glittering yellow eyes of some creature peeked from the shrubbery. She felt no fear, only mild curiosity. The opossum issued a high-pitched squeak and then crept off toward home.

Heat lightning danced and shimmered over dark hills. The faint report of gunfire miles away was soon drowned out by peepers and cicadas. The frog-and-insect summer symphony soothed Madeline's nerves with its familiarity. The war, although close at hand, was far from her mind that night. Her thoughts drifted to a tall Union officer with silver glints in his hair and sparkling white teeth beneath a black mustache. Strength and power seemed to emanate from him. For the life of her, Madeline couldn't remember why the situation in the garden had so vexed her. They were *silly flowers*. She had lost much more just days ago. She'd lost her entire world a mere two years ago. For the first time, Tobias's face was replaced by that of another man. General Downing was on her mind as she replayed their conversation over and over.

"Foolish woman," she muttered. Rising to her feet, she peered up at a sky studded with bright stars. The moon had already finished its nightly path when she climbed the stairs to her room. She undressed without lighting a lamp, donned her long cotton gown, and slipped beneath cool sheets. Forcing away thoughts of the general, she quickly fell asleep and slumbered fitfully...until the scrape of a rusty latch roused her senses.

With her heart pounding in her chest, Madeline bolted upright. The sound of a whinny lifted the tiny hairs on her neck. Someone was in her horse barn! She ran to the window and drew back gauzy curtains. Peering into the darkness, she could see nothing until the moon broke free from the clouds. Speechless, she watched as her prize-winning mares and new colts were led from the barn by several men.

What should I do? Grab Tobias's squirrel rifle from above the fireplace? Race outside and open fire on those who would pillage in the dead of night? Clad in my nightgown?

Instead, she did nothing. This time the thieves weren't the same marauding enemy who had stolen her chickens and milk cow. The men riding away with her beloved horse stock tethered to their mounts wore the blue uniforms and gold emblems of the U.S. Cavalry.



JULY 1

The next morning dawned hot and hazy, with acrid smoke hanging heavily in the air. Soldiers in every shade of blue, from the recently conscripted recruits to sage veterans, marched in both directions on the road. Horses pulled limbers of artillery and caches of ammunition, while farm wagons hauled food to a hungry army. White Conestoga wagons with red painted crosses carried the wounded from an early skirmish or boxes of medical supplies. Young couriers galloped down Taneytown Road at breakneck speed, perhaps with vital dispatches.

In the hectic fervor, few soldiers took notice of a woman heading toward town on the side of the road. Walking in ninety-degree heat through clouds of dust didn't put Madeline in the best of moods. She arrived at the parsonage on Hemlock Street three hours later perspiring and thirsty. No one answered her knock until she finally pounded relentlessly on the door.

"Mrs. Howard!" said an astonished Reverend Bennett. "What brings you back so soon? I told you to stay indoors today—"

"May I come in, sir? And perhaps trouble you for a glass of water?" Madeline leaned wearily against the door frame.

"Forgive me, my dear. Come in. Rest in the parlor while I get you something to drink."

Madeline slumped onto a dainty embroidered chair and closed her eyes. The minister returned a few minutes later with a glass, a pitcher of chilled well water, and a plate of gingerbread cookies.

"Thank you." She filled the glass, drank it down, and refilled it. "This isn't a social call. If I may, I would like to borrow one of your horses. I have urgent business in Gettysburg." She pressed the glass to her forehead.

"Of course you may. But why not ride one of your fine Morgans?" Reverend Bennett asked, pushing the plate of cookies a bit closer to her.

"They were stolen. That is my business down the road."

His face blanched with anxiety. "Goodness! That's awful, but you must not endanger your life because of horses. Soldiers are fighting down the

road. There is a battle right here in Adams County.” He whispered as though the enemy might lurk nearby.

Madeline straightened in the chair. “Those Morgans are all I have left. Please, Reverend, I’ve never asked you for anything before. I promise to return your horse safely.”

“I cannot refuse you, Mrs. Howard, although I strongly advise against pursuing this matter. I will saddle my gelding once the sound of artillery ceases.” He lifted his hand to forestall argument. “But I won’t permit you to blunder into the fray. Rest for a few hours and refresh yourself. You can leave when it’s quiet. It should be cooler by then too.” He pointed at the settee and left the room before she could object.

Madeline sat for several minutes. Then she devoured the plate of cookies and reclined on the couch. She’d intended to close her eyes just to rest them, but she awoke from a deep sleep to someone shaking her arm.

“My horse is saddled. Go with God, Mrs. Howard. I will pray for your safe return.”

Mumbling her thanks, Madeline left by the back door and easily swung up into the saddle. The sun was already low in the western sky. She reached the Chambersburg Pike within minutes at a gallop and then slowed her pace. At the outskirts of Gettysburg, she had no difficulty locating the headquarters of the Union Army’s Fourth Corps. Her spirits lifted when she spotted a beehive of activity surrounding the vacated farmhouse. Confusion might allow her to enter unnoticed. Madeline sucked in a breath, set her jaw, and rode into the fenced yard, stopping at the hitching post.

A stout lieutenant shouldered his rifle and grabbed the gelding’s bridle. “Hold up, miss. The Martins no longer live here. This house is army property now.”

“I’m well aware of that. I have business with General Downing. He’s expecting me,” she lied. Madeline slid from the horse and marched up the front walk, leaving the lieutenant still holding the bridle. Determination got her as far as the open doorway.

Then the same wiry, arrogant major she’d met in her flower garden blocked her path. “I cannot allow you to enter, madam. You may state your business to me.” He spoke with obvious disdain for the intrusion.

“My business is that someone in this corps is a horse thief. My brood mares were stolen last night, and I expect redress from your commander.”

“If it’s financial restitution you seek, that is a matter for the quartermaster. You’ll not be troubling the general with—”

“It is not money I’m interested in, sir. I want my property returned.” Madeline fought to control her voice even as her courage flagged. Suddenly the partially open door swung further, startling woman and aide alike.

General Downing appeared as shocked to see her as the minister had been earlier. “Mrs. Howard, come in. I consider your visit a propitious omen.” He turned toward the other officer. “It’s all right, Major. I will spare a moment to settle a civilian injustice.” He stepped to the side so that she could enter. Then he closed the door in the astonished major’s face.

In an austere room smelling faintly of tobacco, Madeline’s confidence vanished in a heartbeat. “You may not be pleased to see me once you hear me out.” She tucked several loose wisps of hair behind her ear. “General, all of my horses were stolen from my barn last night while *Union* troops were moving through Cashtown.” She paused to moisten her dry lips. “From my window I saw blue uniforms on the thieves. I can only surmise they were your soldiers.” Surreptitiously she glanced at the maps and drawings spread across the desk.

General Downing appeared to choose his words carefully. “‘Thief’ is a harsh word that some may consider treasonous. Considering that your husband died fighting for this great nation, would you deny the army desperately needed replacement mounts? Our officers and cavalry require horses.” He dropped his voice to a murmur. “Today, there was a cavalry battle east of Gettysburg. Many good men died on the field. Many horses were lost as well. Everyone must make sacrifices in times of war.”

Madeline’s stomach churned, but she forced herself to meet his gaze and swallowed hard. Then she continued with far less zeal. “I understand your predicament, General, but those horses are my only source of livelihood. Without them, I will be at the mercy of friends and neighbors this winter. But beyond my selfish desire to survive, I respectfully request that at least *one* of those horses be returned. Bo is a medium-sized, brown Morgan with a distinctive white blaze down her face. She was bred from the

best bloodlines in Pennsylvania. I hand-raised and trained her myself. You may keep the others as my contribution to the war, but please not Bo.” Her voice trailed off as she willed herself not to cry.

He reflected on her words for a long moment. Then, “If you would make yourself comfortable, madam, I will be only a minute.” He pointed at a chair and closed the office door behind him.

Madeline strained to hear what was being said through the solid maple, but the commotion outdoors masked all but the intensity of the general’s discussion with the irritable major. She inhaled a breath to steady her nerves and perched on the edge of the straight-backed chair.

What an effect this man had on her. She felt as skittish as she had during her brief courtship with Tobias. She had never been one to be affected by a man’s looks, yet her attraction to the officer was undeniable. Tall and broad shouldered, General Downing had thick dark hair that curled over his jacket collar. So dark they were almost black, his eyes transfixed a person with their intensity. He wore a meticulously neat uniform, distinguished, but with none of the flashy gold tassels seen in daguerreotypes. Yes, he was handsome, but his appeal stretched beyond physical attributes. He possessed some unseen quality—a magnetism that drew her like bees to nectar.

And she didn’t like that one bit.

Madeline’s woolgathering was abruptly curtailed by the door swinging open.

The general crossed the room in a few strides and then turned to face her. “I’ve sent word to the cavalry commander with Major Henry, my chief of staff. When the situation and time permits, he is to look into last night’s *unauthorized acquisition* of civilian livestock, specifically for the horse you described. I cannot promise, but you have my word I will do my best to find Bo.” He bowed from the waist as though they had just been introduced socially.

Madeline leaned back from his close proximity. “Thank you, General. I’m sure your *best* will be more than adequate. It’s truly more than I expected. Good day.” In her haste to leave, she knocked over the chair she’d been sitting in. If she had paused to pick it up, she might have recovered enough composure to make a graceful exit. But when she noticed the

deep wrinkles around his eyes and the smile tugging at his lips, she fled from the room like a startled rabbit.

He is laughing at my clumsiness!

She saw that the young lieutenant was still holding Reverend Bennett's horse when she reached the porch. Madeline swiftly crossed the dusty yard, mounted, and rode home as though the entire Rebel cavalry was breathing down her neck.



James Downing had seen pain and suffering without measure during the past two years. He had witnessed deprivations of every sort in both civilians and soldiers alike. Yet something in Mrs. Howard's tender plea for a beloved horse tore at his soul. From his window he'd watched her disappear into a cloud of dust on the road with her bonnet ribbons streaming behind her. His intrigue with the perplexing woman went beyond a pretty face and comely figure. Was it small-town living that had preserved her sincerity and innocence? Why else would she worry about ruined flowers when the eastern theater of war had arrived at her doorstep? Yet she possessed enough spunk to ride into chaos to rectify an injustice.

He allowed himself one long, delicious moment to stare after her before turning back to his duties. *Great Scott, did I just agree to find a blasted horse in the middle of an engagement?* But before he slept that night, he would endeavor to keep his promise. If he had it to do over, he would agree to that and more. And the realization that Mrs. Howard had such power over him didn't sit well. Closing his eyes, his brain etched a picture of her face to carry into battle tomorrow. With creamy skin dusted with freckles, wavy hair the color of ripe wheat, and blue eyes that flashed in amusement or pique, Madeline Howard would be a hard woman to forget. He'd been smitten the first time he saw her on the road to Cash-town, and he would remember her long after he moved his corps to the next battlefield.

Her long limbs had moved gracefully beneath the cotton dress in her woebegone garden. Considering the fierce look on her face, his staff thought they had met the enemy sooner than anticipated. Never in his life

had an upbraiding been so pleasurable. The moment she marched from her house, he lost his entire train of thought, having no idea what they had been discussing. And when he glanced back over his shoulder, he thought the window curtains had parted an inch. Had Mrs. Howard been peeking from between the lace panels? If he thought so enchanting a woman could be interested in him, he had indeed gone mad.



There was a surreal quality in the air before a battle. The din of the afternoon had mercifully yielded to an unholy quiet that evening. The common sounds of crickets and tree frogs not only failed to calm her, but also added to her trepidation of what the morrow would bring. Madeline had barely touched her dinner. She'd completed her chores in a dream-like state and headed to the porch to read her Bible. Tobias's squirrel rifle, leaning against the post, offered little security. She had just settled into her favorite rocker when the distinctive sound of a sliding latch gripped her heart.

What on earth? There is nothing left in the barn to steal!

"Who's there?" she called into the dark. "Identify yourself or I'll shoot." She lifted the single-shot musket to her shoulder. Moments passed interminably until a familiar face stepped into the circle of light from the kitchen window.

"Please don't shoot. It is I, Mrs. Howard." General Downing pulled off his hat. "I returned your horse to the barn. You'll not be troubled by future procurements." Fumbling with his hat brim, he looked more like a schoolboy instead of the highest commander of an army corps.

"Thank you, General. I'm deeply grateful for Bo's return, but I've been realizing I was selfish to make such a demand on a day like this. Please forgive me." Setting down the gun, she extended her hand over the porch rail.

He walked up the steps and shook briefly. "You are welcome. Truth be told, my adjutant thought me mad to trifle with such an errand, but if the horse was to be found, it had to be tonight. Tomorrow will bring a different world than the one we know today." He walked to the end of the porch and peered into her trampled flower garden.

A frisson of fear snaked up her spine. “Did the battle go well? Did your soldiers prevail?”

“My troops were only marginally involved today. We are still awaiting final casualty numbers from the cavalry commander, but it would seem they did *not* prevail. We have entrenched and established our lines around Gettysburg, positioning our artillery on high ground. We are prepared to meet the enemy.” He turned to face her, leaning back against the rail. “Tomorrow my infantry will yield nothing. They won’t be pushed back, but I’m afraid the outcome is far from decided.”

“You must think me very foolish to ride to Gettysburg about a horse.”

“I thought you were very brave to pursue what you wanted.” Two or three moments passed before he added, “Your husband must have been very proud of your fearlessness.”

She struggled to keep her voice steady. “I had little chance to be brave during the brief time we were married, sir. He signed up at Mr. Lincoln’s first call for volunteers.”

“My sympathies, madam, for your loss.”

Madeline shook away her painful memories. “I have coffee left from supper. Would you like a cup before you return to camp? Inside—away from these infernal mosquitos?” She pulled open the screened door and gestured inside invitingly.

His laughter was an unanticipated response as he followed her into the warm room. “Forgive me, but your question took me by surprise. On my ride here, I racked my mind for some excuse that would allow me to sit at your table, even for a brief while.”

“Why would you be eager to sit in my kitchen? I have nothing to offer you except black coffee.” With a flutter of nerves, she reached for the china cups above the stove.

General Downing gripped the back of the chair she had offered him but didn’t sit. “Because I’m far from home, and this war has stretched beyond anyone’s early estimations. Your kitchen is like a desert oasis.” He gestured at the low-burning lamp sitting on the delicate lace tablecloth. “But mainly because I yearned to gaze again on the loveliest woman I’ve ever seen.” He spoke the words as though they were painful.

Madeline silently stared at him, dumbfounded, and then she resumed filling two cups with the tepid brew. “Goodness, General. This war has certainly dragged on if that description fits me. My feet are blistered, my hair needs washing, and I could use a new dress.” She laughed to ease his discomfort.

Blushing, he averted his eyes as he accepted the cup. His confession, hanging in the humid air, had embarrassed him.

“Please sit and enjoy your coffee after an eventful day.” She slipped onto the opposite chair.

For a few moments he stared into the dark liquid. “Do not leave your house tomorrow,” he said. “There will be heavy fighting. A young woman was killed today by a stray bullet through her kitchen door. I understand she was engaged to be married, and she was only twenty years old. Spend the day in your root cellar, where you will be safe.”

“But I can’t possibly. I need to return my minister’s horse—”

“Please, Mrs. Howard. I have a better idea of what’s coming than you.”

“Very well.” She nodded in agreement as her chest constricted. The air seemed to have left the room. Who was this man who could so affect her? His brash compliment had pleased her, stirring emotions long dormant. Yet at the same time, she felt disloyal to Tobias’s memory.

General Downing drained his cup in one long swallow and set down the cup. His hypnotic gaze held her transfixed. When he lifted his hand, she feared he might reach for her face. Madeline held her breath, unable to move. He was a stranger—a man she had met only two days ago.

Suddenly they heard horses in the stable yard, followed by the clatter of boot heels on her porch steps. She pushed up from the table as someone rapped insistently on her door. She opened it to find the irritable major on the other side.

“General Downing, couriers have brought word that General Buford is on his way to headquarters and wishes to confer with you.”

The general faced her again. “Thank you for the coffee, Mrs. Howard. I’m afraid the demands of war have returned. Remember what I said about tomorrow.” He donned his hat and swept from the room without a backward glance.

She heard the sound of horses' hooves thundering down the road before she could reach the window. The war had returned indeed.



JULY 2

Madeline awoke coughing in the hazy dawn. Her sleep had been dream filled and restless. The window she'd left open to catch the night-time breezes admitted the acrid smell of smoke. Her eyes burned and began to water as she struggled to close the sash. A thick fog hung over the grassy paddocks and stripped cornfields, but at least for now it was blissfully quiet. She bathed and dressed in her coolest frock, anticipating another hot day.

After braiding her long hair in a loose plait, she donned a full-length apron and headed to the barn. Chores would occupy her hands and keep her mind off the general's warning. How could she cower in the cellar when she had two hungry horses to feed? Physical labor would relieve the anxiety building inside her. She sought relief from her restless thoughts of James Downing too.

How on earth did he find Bo among hundreds of cavalry horses?

After filling the grain bins with the last of her oats, she brushed Bo until her coat gleamed and her mane was free of tangles. Later she would return the Bennetts' gelding and buy horse feed with her dwindling cash. At the well she hauled up enough water to fill the troughs and last throughout the day.

The incessant sound of gunfire and cannon fire had begun shortly after first light.

Carrying two more buckets of water, Madeline retreated to the barn to crosstie and calm the horses. Both the gelding and her mare had turned skittish with the increasing cacophony. With her chores complete, she slumped down on a bale of straw in between the stalls. This was as good a place as any to wait out the bombardment. But two hours later, Madeline returned to the shelter of her house. She'd grown jumper than her equine

companions. After sponging off with cool water, she changed her dress and rummaged in the pantry for something to eat. Yet before she finished her meal, deafening roars of artillery began in relentless succession. Blast after blast shook her house to its stone foundation.

Madeline threw herself into a frenzy of activity to keep from going mad. In her room, she filled her largest valise with her favorite garments, personal mementoes, and framed daguerreotypes. She emptied her small horde of cash into her reticule as if embarking on a pleasant shopping trip instead of retreating from bedlam. She wasn't sure why she packed a bag, but when smoke began filtering under the door, she grabbed a jug of water, her Bible, and her valise and then headed to the root cellar.

The general's plaintive words flowed through her mind as she batted away cobwebs in the cellar's driest corner. Settling onto a rickety bench, she tried to collect her wits as the clamor increased outside her home. For an undeterminable length of time, she labored to read in the light from a streaky window while waiting for the battle to cease. Cramped and exhausted, she finally closed her Bible and leaned her head against the cool stones of the cellar wall. Heedless of spiders that might be lurking nearby, Madeline fell asleep in the dank confines as darkness fell across the blighted land.

Hours later, stiff and clammy, she awoke to discover that the shelling had stopped. She fumbled around for a match to light the kerosene lamp. As she struggled to ignite the wick, there was a new assault on her senses. Wood smoke. Not the sulfurous fumes from cannons but the definitive smell of burning wood. It took several moments for her eyes to adjust to the dark, and then she saw with chilling certainty smoke drifting through the floorboards of the kitchen above her head.

Fire! Her beloved home passed down from Tobias's parents was on fire. For several seconds she sat paralyzed until panic cut through her stupor. The cellar, her refuge during the battle, was rapidly filling with smoke.

Stuffing her Bible into her bag, she crawled on hands and knees in the direction of the steps. Not the wooden treads leading to her kitchen but the stone steps leading up and out to the backyard. Her parched throat and seared lungs ached, but she kept her watery eyes clenched shut

against the smoke. On she crawled, dragging her reticule and valise over the uneven river rocks that made up the cellar floor. Something repulsive skittered over her fingers, while sparks and embers drifted down between the cracks overhead.

Coughing and choking with lungs desperate for air, Madeline at last bumped into the hard bottom step. She pressed her cheek against the cold stone and prayed that she wouldn't die in such a loathsome place. With almost no strength left, she pulled herself up toward air and light and life, but before she reached the third step, she sank into black oblivion.