

“And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him;
and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” Ecclesiastes 4:12

Chapter 1

Chicago, Illinois – Tuesday, May 2, 1865

Dan Goodman stared at the Lincoln Special with the slain President’s photograph over the cowcatcher, flanked by flags, and festooned in black along the sides of the railway cars. Out of respect, he saluted the train even though his fallen commander in chief remained on exhibit at the Cook County Courthouse until evening.

The sharp crack of mourning bunting slapped against the depot, startling Dan. He inhaled a shaky breath, disappointed in himself. After all these months, away from Andersonville Prison, he still had a reaction to unexpected sounds.

Dan continued to observe Lincoln’s train, until the Chicago and Alton rolled under the enormous Federal flag stretched across the tracks and blocked his view. He smiled at the scene.

His future arrived to carry him far from everything in the recent past.

Steel wheels braking on iron rails filled Dan with eager anticipation, while the locomotive eased to a stop with its brass bell clanging. Raw emotion continued to swell within his chest as the vibration from the powerful engine moved through Dan’s footgear.

“All aboard!” The conductor waved Dan forward.

A shrill whistle filled the air, drawing Dan closer to the train. With each step, his breathing quickened. He hated the noise, longed for the solitude of open spaces in the Far West. For months, he tried to prepare for the crush of travelers, with their strident voices and cloying perfumes, by rehearsing this scenario in his mind. He couldn’t escape the madness. Not now.

Dan squinted at the sun's glare, while first-class passengers scurried by him. Wheeled carts, overloaded with mailbags and trunks, zigzagged through the crowd pushed by baggage clerks who shouted at people in their way. Dan stepped aside to let a man pass and then shifted the straps of his heavy knapsack higher on his shoulders.

"Better not wait to grab a seat, soldier." The conductor nodded toward the depot's clock. "The C 'n A's about to pull out." He rocked back on his heels, his railroad badge moving on his uniform's coat.

"Yes, sir." Dan offered the veteran's half-fare ticket to the railway employee who snatched it out of his hand, punched it, and then turned away to wave others onboard. Dan forced stiff leg muscles to carry him forward.

"Why don't *you* help him?"

Dan's gaze darted to the woman who spoke. Sky blue eyes studied Dan from a cameo face surrounded by hair the color of polished copper. He took in the details like a man who'd been living among men for far too long. Her white suit with navy blue pin striping allowed a high-necked white blouse to show under a form-fitting jacket. His interest drifted to her small matching hat with streaming blue ribbons that trailed over her shoulders.

Dan dragged his attention away from female perfection. The conductor glared at the woman.

"Madam, Lincoln's funeral train will move on to Springfield later today, but some folks arrived early to see him off. I've got bedlam here."

The conductor had shouted those last four words loud enough to cause roaring in Dan's ears. Dan's gaze shot back to the woman whose gloved hands rested on her hips.

"They should've hired a woman to do your job. She'd handle this crowd with a baby on

each hip and two more clinging to her skirt.”

Her comments forced a smile on his tight face. No man planned to meet a young beauty, looking and feeling as Dan did. He grew more aware of his physical limitations as the minutes ticked by. He could not take his gaze off the girl with the husky voice. She had gone toe to toe with the red-faced conductor who looked as ornery as a poked bear. The fact that she had done so, on his behalf, humbled him.

Distracted by his instant attraction to an unknown woman, Dan bumped into someone. “Excuse me.” Recovering his balance, he hesitated to climb the steps to the front platform.

“Hey, you two. Yes, you two.”

Dan recognized the you-better-obey-me voice and focused on her again. The young woman pointed at two soldiers in blue, singling them out from the crowd as she stood a yard away. The veterans frowned at each other and then him.

“You talkin’ to us, ma’am?”

“Can’t you see this man needs assistance? You there, carry his canvas bag. And you—give him a hand. Be quick about it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The soldiers’ replied in unison, reminding Dan of army training.

Dan didn’t want to argue with anyone, especially with the person whose kindness touched his heart. Instead, he turned toward the soldiers. “I can manage. Thanks.” With a stiff nod to his audience, he turned away and got into line with other passengers.

Walking down the aisle of the packed railroad car, Dan maneuvered around box lunches, canteens, haversacks, and personal articles that had spilled over the floor. He found an aisle seat and dropped his black knapsack with US Army initials at his feet. While traveling he had to keep a close eye on his possessions. According to newspapers, thieves were everywhere. And besides

clothing, his best carpentry tools were inside his sack.

Moments later, Dan viewed the woman who tried to assist him aboard the train. She chose a seat one row ahead and across from him and got busy arranging her things. He didn't know what he'd say to her, if he had the chance.

Voices raised in numerous conversations flowed by him, while he tried to relax on the low-back bench. When the engine moved forward, Dan slouched in his unyielding seat and wished for the Pullman Palace sleeper car everyone talked about these days.

From the pocket of his trousers, Dan fumbled for a handkerchief and mopped his brow. Open windows allowed the hot steam, dirt, and soot to surround their transportation and settle on passengers. The oppressive closeness within the car, the odors of sweating men in their old wool uniforms, awakened his memories once more.

No, not this time. This time he put a halt to the intrusive past.

Dan stretched his arms above his head and then turned to view those blue eyes staring back at him. Her enchanting smile made him squirm inside his coarse and shapeless uniform. He couldn't recall when he last received a smile from a woman.

"Thank you, ma'am, for your offer of assistance earlier."

"I hope you're feeling better soon."

"Eventually." His conversation with her ended when she turned away and faced forward.

As the engine gained speed, the talking around Dan increased. He tried to block it out and failed, drawn to the revolting topic like lightning to a lone tree in a field.

"Such nonsense . . . I can't believe those articles in the Chicago dailies," one whiskered man commented to a traveler across the aisle. "Why, I was against the secessionists as much as anyone. However, I do not believe them capable of treating our boys, imprisoned in southern

camps, with such callous disregard for their health. Why, we fed their boys as well as their mothers and were Christian in our devotion to their well-being.”

“You believe they exaggerated?”

“Most assuredly. Some people possess an undisciplined and uneducated mind. I believe unscrupulous folks would like to keep the hatred going. They would make us believe Southerners are heartless people. Besides, we all know many who did not have the constitution for army life, who were weak and consumptive when they enlisted. To the intelligent person, it makes sense that they would not last long in anyone’s prison.”

The insensitivity of middle-aged civilians shouldn’t go unchallenged. Dan noted most male occupants of the car still wore their Federal garb. Surely, someone dressed in Union blue would respond. As a soldier leaned over into the aisle, Dan closed his eyes to savor the reply.

“Hey, back there. By the looks of your fat bellies, I’d say this war didn’t interfere in your lives. So how would you know?”

“No one wants to hear what you think, old men.” Another male voice spoke with force.

The talking trailed off to a low murmur. Dan sat in deep contemplation, recalling those who would never return home, never become husbands and fathers.

“The newspapers are correct.” From somewhere deep within, Dan struggled to speak above the commotion of the train. “You should believe the eyewitness accounts of those prisons as reported in the newspapers. Don’t talk against the men.”

Those now familiar blue eyes studied Dan with delicate brows raised. Tenderness flowed from her gaze and penetrated his innermost conscious. He feared she pitied him and that idea turned his stomach. Thoughts of fleeing the train crossed his mind.

Why did he believe God meant for him to leave today? He must’ve gotten it wrong.

A soldier pulled a bugle from his haversack and blew taps. The men in Dan's unit named the plaintive call Butterfield's lullaby. He closed his eyes again, trying to forget the nights he heard the notes after each battlefield experience. To his relief, the occupants of the train quieted.

A different kind of battle went on now, one for his mind. First, he sent up a brief prayer. Then he retreated into the safety of his imagination, enjoying all the rich details in vivid color.

Dan's magic lantern show of familiar images took him away to a log cabin in the wilderness of Oregon. His plans offered a lifeline of hope while a prisoner of war. Slide 1: a vibrant river beckoned where he could fish near a shade tree, along the green banks.

When the bugler's last haunting note faded away, it signified to Dan not only the end of the day, but also the end of his service to his country. The rhythmic rumble of the car made him drowsy, his eyelids heavy. He needed to conserve his energy for Oregon, a million miles away.

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Excitement filled Letty Talbot each time she arrived in St. Louis. The panorama before her managed to hold her interest no matter how many times she crossed the Mississippi River. She scanned the steam-driven vessels crowding the St. Louis wharf.

Her three hundred miles train journey from Chicago ended on the Illinois side of the river in Alton. From there she took a packet boat and disembarked as the warmth left the day along with the sun. She checked the pendant watch on the collar of her traveling suit and sighed. After brief directions to the driver, she entered his cab.

The driver sat behind the passenger area on his sprung seat, and worked his way through the congested warehouse area shouting warnings to those in his way. Letty snapped shut the little window above her head to block out his strident voice.

She settled against the worn upholstery to survey the foot traffic in front of the one horse

vehicle. Many pedestrians wore blue uniforms, a few wore gray. Newspapers detailed the loyalties that divided the citizens of Missouri. How would people put the war behind them? A chill caused her to shudder and look closer at the crowd. Slumped shouldered men shuffled along in the fading light and reminded her of a funeral parade.

She wriggled on the seat, her tailbone sore from riding in the not-so-genteel coach class instead of first-class sleeping berths and where plush upholstered easy chairs were standard. She blamed her impatience to leave Chicago on her brother. Letty's reluctance to return as songstress onboard the *Miss Jewel* steamboat, centered on traveling with Eddy who gambled for a living.

The bugle call on the train put her in a melancholy mood, and pondering Mary Lincoln who witnessed her husband's assassination, lingered even now. Added to that, the memory of the soldier she had met earlier on the train troubled her mind. Whether ill or fatigued, the veteran had struggled to keep his seat. They hadn't introduced themselves, but for some odd reason she'd kept an eye on him including onboard the packet until she lost him in the throng.

The image of the soldier no sooner entered her mind than she spotted him in the blur of humanity near the road. With a hand braced against the lamppost, chin to his chest, he looked unable to go on. Her conscience wouldn't allow her to pass by him without inquiring.

Letty knocked on the trap door located at the rear of the roof. "Driver, stop. Stop right now." The two-wheeled carriage rolled next to the boardwalk and rocked to an abrupt halt, swaying her back and forth inside.

She looked upward to speak to the driver through the hatch, pointing with her gloved hand. "Will you check on that soldier, please? Ask him if he would like to share the cab with me as my guest." She opened the wooden doors that protected passenger legs from the elements and stones thrown up by the horse's hooves.

The soldier's gaze held her captive, while street traffic from wagon wheels on cobblestones, passing hoof beats and driver's curses, slipped away. She sensed his exhaustion.

The coachman returned to the cab. "Our hero wants to pay the fare."

Letty straightened her skirt to allow room within the tiny space for two passengers.

"That's not necessary. Drop me off first, and then take him wherever he wants to go."

Not in all her twenty-four years had Letty concerned herself about society. She did know etiquette rules, however, about spending time alone with a man who wasn't a husband or blood kin. Those guidelines for living became less important as the war dragged on, and every family experienced loss. With the war over, her homeland now held thousands of widows struggling to make a life for themselves. Who would bother to ask personal questions?

The soldier had her full attention. She noted his thin frame in a loose fitting uniform and his tired brown eyes. She never lacked confidence in her ability to make quick judgments about men. So far, she had no sense of danger and concluded his physique indicated an army hospital discharge, a man far above the common hustler out to seduce a lone female traveler. If she could place a bet this veteran had a wife with a passel of children waiting at home, she would win.

Through the dim confines of the cab, the soldier wedged into the padded bench beside her. He took a deep breath and then dropped his bulky knapsack on the floor near her feet.

"Mighty kind of you, ma'am, to share your ride. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Cabs are scarce with so many traveling these days." The conveyance rolled off in the direction of her hotel. "Do you have lodging in mind?"

With his eyes closed, a soft moan escaped him before he collapsed face downward onto her shoulder. Not even startled by the sudden movement from a stranger, Letty shook her head. With a gentle shrug, she guided him to lean his head against the opposite side of the cab. His hat

held his warmth. Unfamiliar tenderness flooded her chest and made her restless to reach the hotel.

For the sake of a wife and all those youngsters waiting for him, she hoped he wouldn't die in her cab.