

Chapter 3

Any concern about being conspicuous disappeared the instant Dhari entered the lecture hall. The room was so large that even minutes before lecture time she had her choice of a number of empty seats. She chose a seat in the middle of a row near the back.

The feeling was good, as comfortable as when she was the age of the students surrounding her. Maybe better. No stressful note taking, no need to worry about exams. She would just relax while some woman, mired in a century-old bloodbath, bores her into a guiltless daydream. The perfect classroom experience.

Dhari reached into the backpack nestled between her feet and turned off her cell phone in compliance with the sign above the chalkboard. The young woman in the seat next to her was busy reading. Dhari scanned the room. There were others reading as well, and others readying notebooks or talking. The majority of the students were young women. I could do this again, she thought. A class or two at a time and even exams wouldn't be so bad. I could take the web site classes and market myself up and out of a no-extra-money job. What would I lose? Two weeks of vacation time – much of which I'll use up dealing with this mess down here anyway? Won't miss what vacation time I never had.

The sound of miscellaneous conversation changed abruptly to hushed wonderings as three young men dressed in civil war attire entered and stood at the front of the room. The sloped floor made it easy to see even from the back and Dhari watched intently as the first of the three approached the microphone.

“In September of 1861,” he said, removing a faded kepi and tucking it inside a confederate jacket that would have better fit a larger man, “my father and two older brothers and I left our farm and joined the Missouri State Guard to protect our way of life. My mother and sisters and grandfather, along with our loyal slaves continued to work the farm while we were away. I was the only one to return.”

The second man stepped forward and removed his cap. He was dressed in a full union blue uniform with a leather bag strapped to his side. “I was an apprentice at a newspaper in Washington. The information coming back from the early battles was sketchy and terribly outdated by the time we received it. I saw that my skills as a journalist could be put to much better use. When I enlisted in the militia my wife of six months would not leave my side. She traveled with our company and tended to the wounded.”

The third soldier wore a long gray jacket and a non-descript leather hat with a large brim, and carried a long rifle. “I worked in a mercantile,” he began, “for board and room for my mother, my sisters and me. My father had died of typhoid before the battle of Antietam. We

had received no word from my brother for six months. When there was hope for a victory at Fredericksburg they called for volunteers to bolster the reinforcements. I enlisted and killed my first union soldier as we pushed Burnside's forces to the north bank of the Rappahannock River. My company was never captured," he said, pulling off the leather hat to allow dark shoulder-length hair to fall from beneath it, "and we fought until the surrender. No one ever found out that I was a woman."

The room was filled with a hum of surprise that quieted only when Dr. Hughes emerged from a side aisle and addressed the class.

"The roles women played during the civil war were even more varied than the sampling you just heard." She motioned toward the three soldiers. "Thank you to our drama students for so clearly making the point."

Dhari's first thought as the class applauded the actors out the door was that this woman wasn't the middle-aged, professor-type woman she had expected. No salt-and-pepper matronly styled hair, no below the knee two-piece suit or wire-rims on the end of her nose. Instead Dhari was watching an attractive thirty-something woman make a pair of jeans and a blazer look totally appropriate in a lecture hall.

Watching, she chided herself, not listening. Instead of concentrating and learning something, she was watching the sureness of Dr. Hughes' stride as she covered the distance back and forth across the front of the room. Her hands, too, kept Dhari's attention – sometimes

clasped behind her back, sometimes tucked in a pants pocket, but most often cutting the air with emphasis. Their motion rounded her words with conviction and fanned them with a captivating passion.

Concentrate, Dhari reminded herself. There may not be a test, but she could ask you about the lecture later. What would you say, ‘I didn’t hear a word you said, I was too busy watching you?’ This kind of fascination was reminiscent of her college days when watching a woman teach was often more interesting than what she was teaching. Particularly classes that only an instructor could get excited about, and especially instructors that only *she* could get excited about. Dhari smiled and sat straighter in her seat. Unless she was mistaken, when this class was over she would be meeting her second southern dyke in as many days. Not a bad percentage.

“...a woman with a sizeable price on her head,” Dr Hughes was saying, “around \$40,000. at one point, who not only served as a nurse during the civil war, but a scout and a spy as well.”

Damn. Who’s she talking about? She glanced quickly at the notes the girl sitting next to her was writing frantically. Harriet Tubman. You’re damn lucky her handwriting is legible. No kidding, Harriet Tubman?

“Her involvement and incredible accomplishments with the underground railroad are well documented and more widely known than her role during the civil war. With the lessons of the woods taught to her

by her father as background, Harriet Tubman personally led nineteen rescue trips between Philadelphia and Maryland that brought three hundred slaves to freedom. Despite the danger magnified by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Tubman never lost a slave and was never captured. It was reported that she carried a gun and made it clear that if any of them tried to turn back she would shoot them rather than jeopardize the mission.”

With no understandable purpose, Dhari found herself jotting down an abbreviated account of the accomplishments on the back of the map Terri Sandler had given her.

“Astonishing as these accomplishments were, her heroics during the war produced even more amazing statistics. As a scout and spy for the Union Army in South Carolina, Tubman helped to free over seven hundred and fifty slaves in one military campaign alone. There are few in history as worthy as she of the knick-name of Moses. But despite three years of continuously risking her life for the Union, she was paid so little that she was virtually destitute after the war. It wasn’t until 1897 that the government finally acceded to giving her a monthly pension of twenty dollars! This I’m sure allowed her to retire in grand style.”

She smiled as the class groaned and added, “It seems she was valued more highly as a fugitive than she was as a hero.” She motioned toward a portable chalkboard. “Which brings me to your assignment for next time. I want you to give a thoughtful analysis on what, if any, affect

the attacks on the U.S. on September 11, 2001 had on that particular attitude. Remember, I encourage you to discuss the subject with friends and classmates. No less than five pages, please. Have a great day.”

In a matter of minutes the class had gathered their notebooks and backpacks and cleared the room, leaving Dr. Hughes collecting notes from the podium that she hadn’t once referred to, and erasing the chalkboard.

“An astonishing woman,” Dhari said as Dr. Hughes turned from the board, “Harriet Tubman.”

Dhari was greeted with the same smile, bright and unpretentious, that had periodically lightened the lecture. “She empowers me anew every time I talk about her.”

“A heroine to add to my list,” Dhari returned. “At the top of which is Eleanor Roosevelt.”

“Another favorite of mine as well, and a worthy candidate for the top of anyone’s list.”

“I’m sorry,” she said extending her hand, “Dhari Weston. Thank you for letting me sit in today, Dr. Hughes. It was a very informative lecture.” At least the part I heard.

“Dhari. What an interesting name. Where does it come from?”

“I have no idea. I’ve always assumed that I was stuck with it because there were already are so many ‘D’ names in the family –

Donna, Douglas, Grandma Dora, Aunt Deanna – all taken, and it was all they could come up with before they had to start repeating.”

“It’s wonderfully different.” Then she added with a wink, “Be grateful that *Douglas* wasn’t at the end of the list.”

Well, Dr. Hughes. You picked up more about the Westons than I intended to tell. “Yes,” Dhari returned with a smile. “Doogie Weston might have been a hard career sell.”

“Ah, unfortunately, the resumes would probably have a better chance with *Douglas*. But we all fight that battle.” She started toward the door. “Where are you in the family hierarchy?”

Dhari kept stride. “Smack dab in the middle.”

“The peace-maker.” The doctor smiled. “So, what can I do for you, peace-maker Dhari?”

“Terri Sandler recommended you in hopes that you could give us some insight and advice on selling a piece of property I inherited.”

“Dating back to my expertise I’m assuming.”

“I don’t mean to be presumptuous, but I’ll only be here for two days, and I really need some advice. If you normally receive a fee for this kind of thing, I’d be happy to pay you.”

“I don’t—“

Please.

“—charge a fee. How’s tomorrow about four o’clock?”

“That would be perfect. Thank you, Dr. Hughes.” They stopped beside a white Dodge Ram. “Shall I pick you up?”

“Look—“

The tone made Dhari frown.

“—I can’t do this...” She tossed her case on the seat of the truck.

Dhari dropped her head.

“—unless you stop calling me Dr. Hughes.” She smiled at the relief on Dhari’s face. “I can’t decide if it makes me sound stuffy or old – or both. I think Erin fits me better.”

“I think the Dr. thing sounds intimidating,” she said with a little tilt of her head. “So, I’ll be happy to call you Erin.” Dhari slipped her backpack strap over one shoulder. “Right here tomorrow?”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Dhari watched as Erin smiled, climbed into her truck, and pulled from the parking lot. A vision far from what she had expected an hour ago.