

The nightmare came again, spreading like an ink stain over my brain . . .

I am alone in the alley. Stealthy as a cellar rat, the girl creeps up behind me. I'm too busy fishing her dispatch out of a slops bucket to sense her. It is too late to pull my revolver from my boot. I feel hers in my back.

"Turn around, Yankee." She whispers. I face her full on. I gasp. We are so alike: wide-set blue eyes — starburst eyes flecked with green, rambling brown curls, and tall, close in age—young, we are young. We are wearing wrinkled black frocks that hang loose on our thin frames. Are we in mourning, or in disguise? We might pass for sisters. But I don't have a sister, not a living one.

She cocks her revolver . . .

I duck low, and dart past her down the long, narrow alleyway. A bullet whizzes past my cheek and smashes into the wall as I run toward the street.

She does not take her kill shot.

She wants to capture me if she can, parade me before her handlers—her prize. I hear her panting behind me like a slave-tracking hound after its quarry. She catches me by the ankle. I fly forward and hit the ground. She is leaning over me, trying to pull me up. I rake my fingers down her face. She bleeds.

Kick, like they taught you, fight, I tell myself. I slam the heel of my boot into her kneecap.

Before she buckles, she punches me in the mouth. I am bleeding, too. She is down. Her weapon clatters to the cobblestones. In that instant, I pull my pistol out of my boot.

Behind me, I hear a man, his voice slurred by drink, ask, "Anything broke, sweetheart?"

I hear her snarling, like a wild thing.

"Little witch. Bit me, did you?" He yelps.

I can hear him cursing as he totters away. She is clutching her leg, crawling toward her weapon. I grab it up, and yank her to her feet. I jam my gun into her side.

"Walk," I tell her. She sways, her teeth clenched, in pain.

"Yankee devil." She hisses.

I am near my boss's headquarters. Even in the darkness, with the moon smudged by clouds, I see it. I pull her along, past two Union soldiers who eye us, leering.

"Don't ever let me catch you out drinking again, Nancy." I say loudly, holding her against me, supporting her. "If papa saw you like this, he'd beat you blue."

The soldiers laugh as I drag her along.

Three men guarding Mr. Pinkerton's door, step aside at the sight of me.

Inside, the girl collapses in a chair, her head down. I tie her hands together, avoiding the blazing hatred in her eyes.

Mr. P. hands me his handkerchief. I wipe at my bloody lip.

He walks to the girl. "This time, lassie, we win."

She throws back her head. She is laughing.

The room explodes in a flash of blinding white light. I am no longer flesh. I am in pieces—bone, bits of skin and glass.

I am screaming. I cover my mouth to muffle the sound, and fumble for the revolver I keep by my pillow: The smooth wooden stock, the cold metal barrel warms in my hand.

Breathe. Slow, easy. Breathe.

Something tugs me toward wakefulness. It is the easy light of dawn, soft and gray, slowing the thudding of my heart.

I am angry at this nightmare, like it is a living being. Much of it, not all, but much of it is wrong.

Write it down, then, the truth, the way it really happened, how it all began, I tell myself.

Take up pen and paper. Write.

One

You've probably guessed by now that I am a spy.

We are slippery sorts, like the eels that slither out of my father's fishnets back in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. That's where I was born and lived until we came to Washington City.

You might pass me on the street and not even know it. I could be the one-armed beggar with a half-moon scar on her forehead, the orphan under the gas lamp selling wilted violets, or the young woman in crimson velvet awaiting her escort to one of President Lincoln's White House balls.

Or maybe I am the lanky serving maid with a mass of springy, light brown curls. I might be the muleskinner's brat, with blue eyes in a dirty face, my hands stained from tanning animal hides.

Sometimes I am known as "Fiona," or "Dragonfly." These are aliases, fake names given to me by Mr. Alan Pinkerton, so my true identity and movements can remain secret.

Between missions, I stay in Washington City, in my aunt's boarding house that is my sometime stopping place, not really my home.

My father is a private with the 2nd New Hampshire Infantry regiment. Brave men like him aim to win the fight against the Confederates. If that happens, the Negro slaves might well go free. I'd never seen human beings dragged like cattle to auction until I came to Washington City. Their freedom, and putting our broken country back together, my father says, is worth dying for. I agree with my whole heart. Even about the dying part.

Some call this conflict between the North and the South the Civil War. That's a bunch of bosh! There is nothing civil about it. After more than a year it still rages, destroying everything in its path.

And here I am smack in the middle of it, a girl of fifteen who never believed she'd fit in anywhere, let alone contribute to a great cause. In spite of the danger, I am bursting proud to do my part. Bursting proud and changed forever.

Here then, is the story of the lonely kid I was; roaming in the forest at all hours of the night—and after an accident, how I became a homebound misfit with a fired-up brain that rattled and sped like a runaway engine, and why I am, I think, becoming a woman.

I write in secret, of course.