

*All he wanted was to save the world.*

A bullet tore past him just barely missing his arm. A bead of sweat dripped down his forehead and onto the ground now soaked with blood. The smell of gunpowder hung in the air. Only mere hours ago, Gettysburg had been a peaceful town, the mark of war not yet scarring it. All it took was the meeting of the two largest armies in the war to change that.

All day the Union troops had been building their strength, reinforcing their lines with more and more soldiers. Now, they were stretched all the way to Cemetery Hill. That's where Charley was headed, the battle raging all around him. He gripped his gun so tightly that his knuckles were white. Teeth gritted, he ignored the pain searing through his muscles. The pain inside, in his heart, was harder to ignore.

Over and over Charley reminded himself why he was fighting. That he was fighting so that he might save *something*. All his life, Charley had never managed to keep as much as a penny. Even that would slip through his fingers unbidden. He seemed to grow up broke. Nothing changed as he got to adulthood. He was barely making enough to support his wife, the love of his life and childhood friend, Estelle.

When she became pregnant, Charley started working harder than he ever had in his life. He tried to do extra jobs here and there, but nothing seemed to stick. By the time the baby came he didn't have enough money for a midwife. The child came, stillborn, and Estelle had grown deathly ill.

The war had started and the little money that they had disappeared. Estelle died not long after, clutching Charley's hand. He hadn't been able to save her.

Only a month later, Charley answered the call and enlisted in the 90th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Regiment. His goal—help save the country and if not that, his state. So far, he was failing at both.

A tree branch scratched at his face. Charley kept moving forward. He had to. It was all he could do to try and save what little he had left. This was his state, he needed to protect all that he could.

Charley grew up in Gettysburg as a young child before his family moved to Philadelphia. Gettysburg still held many memories of fun times climbing trees with his brother and getting into trouble.

His brother was his best friend. Charley and James had gone everywhere together and done everything with one another, even enlisting in the war on the same day.

Charley could almost see James beside him, charging with him up the hill. Dirt caked James's face, sweat mixing with it to make mud. Then, just like that, James's face faded like it did at Antietam—the place where he died. Charley was right beside him when the bullet hit his heart. Antietam would forever remain the bloodiest day in American history; it brought losses for many. That day, Charley added a loss of his own to his ever growing list. He wasn't able to save James.

His family blamed him for James' death and Charley knew it. They stopped writing to him. Their letters, that had kept him alive with a purpose, ceased to come. He hadn't been able to preserve his family's words. The letters that he treasured were destroyed in a scramble to pack up camp and evacuate.

His only child, his wife, his brother, his family's words—it all slipped through his hands. He hadn't been able to keep any of it, to save any of them.

Now his hometown was going to be coated in blood that would never fully come out of the ground.

Charley was halfway up the hill with only one wish left for his life, that he could save something. He wanted to die remembered as the man who had saved *something. Anything.* Even the smallest speck of life.

A man fell next to him, clutching his stomach. Charley stopped and dropped to the ground beside him. He recognized the face of the man immediately, it was a boy he had gone to school with. A small gasp escaped Charley's lips as he remembered this man as not a man at all but a boy. A child four years younger than him.

Charley pulled off the boy's cap and looked into his eyes. There was no mistaking the childlike fear that filled them. With quick math Charley determined that this boy could be no older than sixteen years old.

Charley unbuttoned the boy's shirt and peeled it open to inspect the severity of his wound.

The boy gasped, his eyes glazing over. "I don't want to die," he whispered hoarsely. "Soldier, stay with me!" Charley shouted.

The boy's eyes rolled back and his chest ceased to rise. He too was gone. Charley was unable to save someone...again.

That was it. The end of Charley's patience. He broke down and cried. In the middle of the battle, with bullets whipping around him, he covered his face with his hands and cried. For his family, his friends, and for the whole messed up world where everything was taken from him.

A cannon ball hit a tree close to him, rattling the ground. Charley rolled away to avoid being hit by the ball.

A bird screeched somewhere, men started shouting. All who were left alive stood up and continued the trek up the hill, but not Charley. He could never explain it, but the bird call caught his attention and he couldn't ignore it. The cry was different from a General calling out orders. It was small, helpless, and it tore right to his heart.

He looked around, standing up when he couldn't find the source of the call. He almost took a step when the bird frantically called out again. Charley froze with his foot midstep. Looking down at his feet, he saw a bird's nest. Three ■ unbroken eggs lay on the ground next to it. Had he taken another step, they would have been smashed.

Someone called out for Charley to keep running. He ignored them.

Slowly and carefully, he bent down and cupped the eggs as delicately and lovingly as a father holding his newborn child. He returned them to the nest and picked up the jumble of sticks and leaves. The nest might have been ugly to any other ignorant traveler, but Charley could see the hard work and loving care that made it a home.

Finding the closest tree, Charley started to climb, the nest cradled in the crook of his arm. Higher and higher he climbed until he was a good ten feet clear of any stray bullets.

Positioning the nest so that he was sure it wouldn't fall, Charley tenderly returned it to the tree. Up there, above the battle, Charley looked down onto a ground covered in death. Men were falling everywhere, dropping like flies.

Something stilled in Charley. Among all this death, something still lived. The eggs were proof that life would go on, new life. And the best part—Charley had saved them.

The mother bird returned to the nest, sheltering her eggs with her wings. Charley started to climb down, keeping his eyes on the happy family.

“Protect them. Never let them out of your sight.” He whispered to the mother bird.

He couldn't predict the end of the war, or how many more friends would fall before they would finally have peace, but Charley was sure of one thing. He might not be able to save the world, but he wouldn't die without saving something. And that was enough for him. A small spark of hope, shining in through the darkness.

Something saved.