

Kathleen Ernst
WRITING AT THE INTERSECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THE PAST

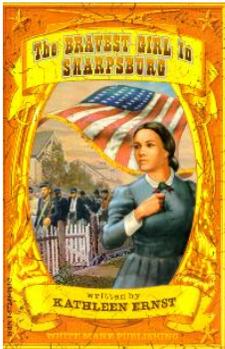


Preview of *The Bravest Girl In Sharpsburg*

An American Civil War Novel

Written by Kathleen Ernst

Published by White Mane Books 1997



The daring adventures of best friends Teresa Kretzer and Savilla Miller have earned them the title of "the bravest girls in Sharpsburg" --and the admiration of Teresa's shy younger sister, Bethie. But when the Civil War looms, the girls become political enemies. Teresa is a staunch Unionist; Savilla, a Secessionist.

Tensions escalate as the Confederate army marches into Maryland in September 1862. The question of which flag to display and how, the fear for the lives of loved ones on both sides, and the daily dangers facing the girls all culminate in the confrontation between Confederate and Union armies along Antietam Creek.

Each girl faces challenges which test everything she believes in. In the end, Teresa, Savilla, and Bethie all learn new definitions of courage as they struggle with issues of love, loss, and friendship amidst the horror of the Battle of Antietam Creek.

This book contains a period map, photos and illustrations, and an author's note about the real people and events that it is based on.

"I've got a plan," Timothy whispered.

I wondered why he didn't want his mama to hear. And why he looked so doubtful. "Yes?"

"I've been watching out the windows. There are two guards. The one in front is marching back and forth like he means business. Keeps his musket over his shoulder. But look at him - "He pulled the curtain aside a hair and pointed.

I looked and saw the guard slouched against the back fence. His gun was leaning against the fence beside him. "What are you thinking?"

"I think I can get past him--"



"Timothy, no!" I clutched his arm. "It's too dangerous! They'll arrest you too! I couldn't bear it!"

He patted my hand, but didn't back down. "I have to try," he said simply. "If I can get past him, I can run up into the hills and warn my father. I can't let him go to prison without trying to save him."

I took a deep breath. "At least wait until it gets dark--"

"That may be too late! Elizabeth, I keep picturing my father walking down the street. He could be coming into sight right this moment! I know he'd hurry home soon as he heard the Southern Army had come. It won't be dark for hours. I can't wait that long."

"But...how will you get by him? That guard may not be marching around, but he'll still see you."

"If I can make it through the back fence, the lilac bushes will hide me. I can't go through the underbrush on either side. They'd hear. But if I go straight back, then creep along the lilacs...I think I can get past them far enough to head out."

"But you've still got to get across the lawn and back garden to the fence," I pointed out. He seemed to be skipping the obvious. "That's where he'll spot you. He's watching the house."

Timothy hesitated. "What I need is...a distraction."

It took me a moment to seize his meaning. "You mean me?"

"Elizabeth, please! Just try--"

"But what kind of a distraction? What can I do?"

"Talk to him. Get him turned a bit, facing away..."

The chunk of ice was growing bigger.



"I wouldn't ask if I had any other way. I can't ask her," he nodded toward his mother, who was staring blankly at the wall. "She's had a hard time of it lately. I don't think she could make it stick. But if you could just get me a chance..."

This was Timothy. My friend. The boy I planned to marry. I felt myself nodding.

Ten minute later, armed with a big wedge of blackberry pie, I walked out the back door. I remembered to leave it partly open, but I had trouble drawing breath. I'd never been so scared.

The Rebel guard jumped to his feet and grabbed his gun. He looked as big as my father, I held up the pie pan and willed my feet to move me down the step, around the garden, across the grass.

"Hey, now, what're you doing there?" The guard took a step forward. "Git back in the house. You ain't supposed to be out here."

Five more steps. I was close enough now to smell him. My skin was suddenly clammy.

"I said, what are you doin'?" He moved the musket from one hand to the other.

I'd rehearsed it with Timothy. It was so simple. Would you like some pie? My lips moved. Nothing came out. In desperation I thrust the pan toward him. When I dared look he was staring at the big wedge of blackberry pie. For a long moment we were both still.

Then, "Is that for me?" he asked suspiciously. I nodded. "Why?"

I took a deep breath. "Y-you look hungry." It came out a whisper. But it came out.



"Well, I surely am..." He debated a moment longer. I made myself look him straight on. The Rebel did look skinny as a stray dog in winter. I could see the hunger in his eyes. He didn't look quite so fierce.

Suddenly he snatched the pan, scooped some pie up with his fingers, and crammed it in his mouth. A look came over his face--almost like the look on Teresa's face when she buried her flag. A church look. "Oh, by crackers, this is fine," he sighed.

I'd almost forgotten my purpose, I'd been so nervy. Now I took a casual step to the side. Another, and another, pretending I was passing time with a friend and felt the call to lean against the fence beside him. He turned a bit my way. I didn't think it was enough. I had to try harder. "You like the pie?"

He bent his head. "Huh?"

My fingers found the fence rail and squeezed. "I said, you like the pie?"

"Well, I surely ain't tasted anything this fine since I left my mama's house." He crammed another chunk in his mouth.

I noticed he wasn't really as tall as Papa. He didn't look much older than Margaret. And with blackberry juice running down his chin, he didn't look too mean. "What's your name?"

He smacked his lips before answering. "Hiram."

Then I stole a glance at the house and saw Timothy belly-slide out the door. The ice jumped into my throat. "Where you hail from, Hiram?" I asked desperately. I took a tiny step toward him and he took one back, turning a bit farther from the house.

"Tennessee. And I surely hope I live to see it again."

"I...I hope so too." Timothy started across the lawn. He was pressed down tight. Not much moved but his toes.



Hiram was shoveling the last of the pie, but he gave me a look. "Why do you talk so low? You ain't much louder than a skeeter."

I felt my cheeks flame. "Well...I--I guess I'm shy."

"You know, you 'mind me some of my sister. Back home. She's shy too." His eyes took on a faraway look. "I miss her."

Timothy was rounding the garden corner. It was hard not to stare over the Rebel's shoulder at him. I scrambled for something to say. "Uh...what's it, uh, like? Being in battle?"

"Well...I ain't really been in one yet. But they marched us over the field up on the mountain. The day after." Hiram shook his head, as if to clear it. "It's a sight I'll surely remember. I don't want to end up like some of those boys did up there. I ain't afeard, now," he added quickly. "But I'm all my mama's got to keep up the farm. The only son. My pa's dead. I've been thinking that maybe this soldiering wasn't the best idea after all."

Timothy had made it to the fence. I could have hit him with a stone tossed over Hiram's shoulder. But he had stopped. Keep going! I wanted to scream. Suddenly I figured Timothy was probably scared he'd make noise sliding through the thick lilac wall.

I had to keep the soldier talking. "Tell me about Tennessee."

He was wiping the last traces of blackberry juice from the pan with his fingers, but suddenly he gave me a funny look. "Why are you so interested?"

I tried to smile. Think. Think! I felt sweaty, all over. "Well...I've never been farther than Hagerstown. I like to read, though. I read books and try to imagine what it's like in faraway places. When I meet travelers, I like to hear about it." And that, I thought, is probably the longest speech I've ever made.



It must have been convincing, too, for he sighed and leaned against the fence, facing me. "Tennessee? Well, it's a purty place. I live in a little cove in the mountains. Our place ain't so much, I guess, but with fair weather and a mule a man can get by..."

I let him talk, nodding now and then. Out of the corner of my gaze I saw Timothy slither beneath the bottom fence rail and into the lilacs. I saw the bushes heave, heard the rustle. Hiram kept right on talking and I realized he was hearing only the wind in his Tennessee cove. He was homesick and lonely and, I suspicioned, more scared than me. The ice started to melt.

I gave Timothy time enough to get a mile away, I figured, before I found the heart to interrupt. "Well, I expect I should be getting back inside."

"I reckon so." Hiram wiped sticky fingers on his filthy uniform and handed the shining pie pan back to me. He suddenly looked embarrassed. "I've talked your ear off."

"I didn't mind."

"Say, you want to see a likeness before you go?" he asked hopefully. He rummaged in a pocket and pulled out a battered tintype. A bony woman was sitting in the photographer's chair, her hair scalded back like she never wanted to close her eyes again. A girl about my age was standing with her hand on the woman's shoulder. "That's my mama and Ida, my sister."

Somehow it hurt to see those two women. "Well, they'll be powerful glad to see you home again," I said. "I hope it's soon. I hope you don't get killed in the battle."

He nodded seriously. "I'm obliged for the thought. And thanks kindly for the pie."

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I was almost back to the house when I heard him shout. "Hey! What's your name?"

"Elizabeth," I called back. Hiram nodded. He'd heard. He'd heard me, all across the yard.

As I walked back into the house, I didn't know what to feel: happy, sad, worried, relieved. And I didn't have much time to figure it out. Just as I closed the door a deafening roar commenced, and shells began to fall in Sharpsburg.

What Others Are Saying

"...a lovely, poignant story."

— ***School Library Journal***

"A vividly drawn story set against a meticulously researched historical background that will raptly engage young readers."

— ***Midwest Book Review***

"A realistic story of the Civil War."

— ***The Civil War Courier***

The Bravest Girl In Sharpsburg is available as a paperback book from local independent bookstores as well as from Amazon, Barnes & Nobles, and other national book vendors. Signed and personalized copies can be acquired directly from the author, Kathleen Ernst. For more information, click on http://www.kathleenernst.com/book_bravest_girl.php.