

# Fractured City

by

Andrew Kass

**\* WASHINGTON \***

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Viola Ross stepped off the *Percheron* more focused on the poorly-repaired bullet hole in her dress than the bustling chaos of the Sixth Street Wharf. Feeling the awkward stitching against her upper arm did not improve her humor. After beating through a storm to make the Potomac channel, the *Percheron* hardly looked better, but then, it was heading back down the coast with messages for the Union blockade fleets, while Viola was about to deal directly with Washington. She pulled her cloak closed against damp morning chill.

“Yer trunks, Miss?” a stubble-chinned man asked. He wore a long and frayed blue coat with one arm pinned up.

“No, thank you,” Viola snapped. “This is all I have.”

She raised her battered carpetbag for emphasis, light because nearly empty above the false bottom with only the weight of a Kerr Patent Revolver and dagger below. As she pushed ahead to the crowded street she felt a pang for her harsh response, and turned. But the one-armed man had moved on as well, into the skirmishes of disembarkation.

Viola studied the slapdash rows of tenements and warehouses rising from the mud before her. She had known London, serving the American legation there what seemed a lifetime ago. She had grown up in Boston with the view from Beacon Hill to the waterfront that she had walked with Father to inspect his ships. She was most recently departed from Charleston, South Carolina, which under relentless Union bombardment had presented better than the capital of that Union before her.

At least she had a name to call upon to complete her mission.

“Pardon me,” she said, approaching a harried-looking quartermaster directing wagon loading and unloading at the quay, “can you tell me where I might find Colonel George Sharpe?”

“You won’t find him here,” he growled before shouting a volley of invective against a driver trying to barge in on the line of wagons.

Viola stood back against a piling to collect herself. What had Captain Pickering told her the evening before she’d departed the blockade flagship *Housatonic* for Washington? She had asked about the Union spymaster to whom she had putatively been reporting from Charleston.

“He’s not a Washington sort, much to his credit,” the old sailor had told her over tea and ship’s biscuit. “Word is he’s downriver with Meade and the Army of the Potomac, spinning webs throughout Rebel country.”

“What kind of man is he?” Viola had asked.

“I hear Meade doesn’t like him,” Pickering had smiled, raising his cup, “but wouldn’t part with him for all the tea in China.”

Viola heard an Irish voice at one of the lead wagons. That brought warm memories of adventures along the way. What was the Brotherhood pass phrase that had gotten her onto McDonagh’s blockade runner?

“Four leaf clover and a ball of malt to you,” she recalled aloud.

The brawny man with dirty straw hair spraying from below his cap froze a moment before turning with an eyebrow raised.

“Aye?” he said carefully. “What’s it you’re askin’?”

“I have a report for the Army of the Potomac. How might I deliver it?”

The man studied her as her cape luffed open, eyes fixing on where the minié ball had ripped through the dress in her carpetbag while escaping from Charleston. He nodded a chin toward a river steamer up the end of the wharf.

“The *Bluefin*’s heading down to Aquia Creek. See if she’ll take yer.” He turned away. “And don’t be throwin’ that old phrase around again.”

Viola followed a line of porters with barrows and shouldered bales to a low, ungainly steamer that already appeared nearly swamped with men, horses and goods. The smells of soot and shit and decay hung heavy in the morning overcast as she approached a mutton-chopped officer in a clean blue naval uniform and cap.

“I need passage to Aquia Creek,” she declared, presenting Captain Pickering’s letter.

“We’re full up,” the man growled with barely a glance.

“I weigh perhaps a hundred and ten pounds dripping wet. Now if that’s too much for the *Bluefin*, who should I tell Colonel Sharpe is preserving her safe loading when I’m late with my report?”

The officer was clearly peeved, but grumblings from behind Viola in the line and a shout from the deck to get her aboard put his eyes back on the paper, which returned to Viola.

“Go on then and stay outta the way.”

Viola walked up the gangplank, firm and steady, nothing like she felt.

“Well played, Miss! We go forth in good company.”

She looked up to see a blond-haired blue-eyed youth with a wispy goatee and colonel’s bars waving his cavalry hat. They were making boys colonels now. This boy grinned at her.

“Thank you, Colonel,” she replied. “I may now look forward to acquitting my mission.”

“No doubt to benefit mine, Miss...?”

Viola dropped her bag on the deck.

“Viola Ross.”

“Ulric Dahlgren,” he bowed, doffing his hat again. “Honored to escort you to Colonel Sharpe.”

Viola felt a rare wave of relief.

“So you know him?”

“Indeed I do, Miss Ross. We are both in the business of keeping General Meade informed.”

Viola studied the long, even face sprouting from a cavalry colonel’s short jacket and decided not to ask if he were playing dress-up.

“Make way, there! We’re casting off!” the mutton-chop officer bellowed, trudging up to the deck.

The ramp was untied and shipped behind him, mooring lines cast off fore and aft as the steam whistle shrieked and the driving beams started walking.

Viola took up her bag and edged closer to Col. Dahlgren at the rail, trying yet to keep distance, but a sudden swell from the river as the *Bluefin* lurched forward sent her off-balance into his waiting arms, her foot landing on a boot that felt solid as wood. She drew herself up with a harsh breath and a hot flush.

“I am sorry, Colonel.”

He was grinning.

“I am not, Miss Ross. No harm done.”

He read her glance down at his boot.

“Wood,” he said, clomping it on the deck for emphasis. “More durable than the other kind.”

“But, you’re a cavalryman...?”

“I am yet.” He patted a large chestnut stallion with a white blaze nuzzling at his shoulder. “Took a little getting used to, but Clyde is a good, smart horse. Alas, I find myself held close to headquarters these days.”

As the *Bluefin* chugged into the brown river, filmy with the capitol’s waste, Viola had a chance to draw a focused breath and take stock. She might rest, if only she could remember how.

The *Bluefin* was jammed to the gunwales with the sort of bounty Charlestonians could only dream of: grain, guns, horses, hay, men. Lots of men in blue, troops in full packs, officers in field trim, artillerymen leaning on each other or smoking pipes after a hard leave. But even on this crowded, squalling vessel, she felt a warning, noticing a trio of hard-looking men in bowlers and black suits wearing brass badges prominently on their lapels studying everyone, most particularly Viola, the only woman on deck..

“Colonel, who might those men in bowlers and badges be?” she asked.

Dahlgren glanced around from the rail, raised an eyebrow.

“You mean the ones staring at you as though they’ve never seen a female afloat?”

Dahlgren said, leaning on the rail as the big side-wheels churned the brown Potomac.

“Undoubtedly detectives, Baker’s men, defending the Federal cashbox by promoting temperance

and abstinence and fair dealing while, some would have it, pocketing the proceeds.” He grinned.

“You have been off in the field awhile, haven’t you?”

“I have never been to Washington,” Viola replied.

“I daresay that has been Washington’s loss.”

Viola considered what she had read in their posture.

“Do you suppose they will offer trouble?”

“Possibly,” Dahlgren considered, “if they consider you a colorable camp-follower or crooked sutler.”

“What is their authority?”

“That very much depends on your choice of authority. According to Colonel Baker, it is unlimited. If you reference Generals Patrick and Hooker, they have none regarding the Army of the Potomac, which is where you will find yourself when we disembark at Aquia Creek.”

For the moment, the men were not moving, and a glance showed that they were now inspecting the rest of the craft. Viola settled back at the rail next to Dahlgren with a slow, deliberate breath. She was fortunate to have encountered the boy colonel: he had already offered to get her to Colonel Sharpe and knew the overall lay of the land.

As though that land included her thoughts, he cast a raised brow Viola’s way over a warning smile.

“You’ll want to ware those people, Miss Ross, if you don’t want to try accommodations at the Old Capitol Prison.”

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Col. Dahlgren slowed and turned his chestnut Clyde before two huts that Viola would have thought too decrepit for habitation were there not people in and out of uniform buzzing in and out of the open doorways. The young soldier driving after Dalhgren drew up the reins of the cart.

“This is the place,” the boy colonel said. “The Bureau of Military Information.”

Viola rose and took her carpetbag from behind the seat. These sheds issuing woodsmoke from windowless lantern-lit interiors were not what she had imagined, any more than the ranks of tattered A-line tents that flanked them.

“Thank you, soldier,” she said, stiffly descending from rattling hours to mud up to her hem, joining the mud spattered on her skirts.

“Stand by for the lady’s return to Aquia Creek, Anderson,” Dahlgren ordered conversationally. He smiled at Viola. “I must say, I’m jealous of whatever mysterious adventure brought you all this way from Charleston.”

“Colonel, my small effort pales beside what you have done already,” Viola replied.

A shadow passed over the sunny mien under the cavalry hat.

“It is not pleasant to dwell on what one has done at this time, Miss Ross. I thirst for what is yet to be done.”

With that he waved his hat and trotted off.

Viola realized she had forgotten to ask which ramshackle woodpile contained Colonel Sharpe. The one just before her had more soldiers bearing paper in and officers bearing paper out. She stepped up and entered.

A press of blue-coated bodies framed a soft-featured man with thinning hair, a droopy moustache and colonel's bars seated at a lamplit table. He was unremarkable save for the level, assessing gaze and the clear, direct questions he asked of each man around him. The pen in his hand seemed to move of its own accord across the paper on the table before him as he asked, listened, consulted a map or one of many papers at hand.

Suddenly Viola was aware of a tall presence at her shoulder.

"What's your business here, Ma'am?"

A polite voice from a handsome, cleanshaven face framed in curly black hair, carried atop a lean, muscular frame set off by a short pale jacket. There was something far less pleasant in his eyes studying her response.

"My code is 'parasol'," Viola replied. "I have a report for Colonel Sharpe from Charleston."

The fine brows rose.

"May I look in your bag?" the man asked.

Viola handed it up.

"You won't find much."

The report was on top, under it her remaining clothing, her brush and combs. His fingers found the false bottom, with the pistol and dagger tucked underneath Cousin Benjamin's Citadel field uniform that she had kept from her clandestine work. The man issued a low whistle on inspection of each of these. He opened the report to her drawing of the submersible.

“Hum!” he said with an appreciative glance at her. He handed the report to Viola and closed the bag. “Please find a seat, this should be over shortly.”

“I’d as soon stand, if you don’t mind,” Viola replied.

The man nodded and moved aside, between Viola and the door, keeping her in sight, a hand resting on the pistol at his hip.

The colonel slapped the table.

“Thank you, gentlemen. I’ll want the Culpepper and Shenandoah cavalry reports as soon as they come in. At the risk of repeating myself, any information that comes to your attention, note the source and send it here right away. Leave us to review and judge their validity.”

A moment later there was more space in the sparse room. The man at the desk was writing something with numbered points. The handsome man in the short jacket stepped forward.

“George, we have a visitor’s come a long way to see you.”

The level eyes studied Viola a moment, the heavy lower lip pursed beneath the chevroned moustache.

“I saw you looking something over that impressed you, John. Let’s get to it.” He stood, long and gangly. “Parasol, let’s see, that means that you would be Viola Ross. Am I correct?”

“You are correct, Colonel Sharpe. A pleasure to meet you at long last.”

Sharpe glanced about ironically.

“We find pleasure where can, Miss Ross. I am pleased to meet you as well. Mr. Adams spoke very highly of you.”

Viola felt her smile freeze.

“If that was Mr. Henry Adams, I must tell you that I would doubt his sincerity.”

Sharpe cocked his head and gestured to one of the few camp chairs in evidence.

“Purely out of curiosity, Miss Ross, I must ask how you have arrived at that characterization.”

“Henry wanted rid of me,” Viola said, “the more permanently, the better.”

She sat.

“Whatever brought about your mission or Mr. Adams’s motivation, you have succeeded far beyond any expectation we could have placed on you.” He opened the report and rapidly read through to Viola’s scale drawing from memory of being inside the submersible craft in the Charleston Armory. “Extraordinary work, eh, John?”

“Absolutely first rate,” the handsome man said. “Couldn’t have done better myself.”

“Mr. Babcock, whom you have met without introduction till now, trained as an architect but is also a tolerable hand at maps.” Sharpe smiled and straightened the file papers. “That is high praise.”

Viola felt the dim, shabby room closing in on her.

“I must tell you, I discovered that General Beauregard in fact facilitated my initial inspection of the fish-boat. He wanted word of it to get out, to worry the Union.”

“I don’t doubt that for a moment,” Sharpe nodded. He stopped, reading the color rising with the heat at Viola’s neck. “Miss Ross, the fact is that we are rarely treated to the discovery of great tide-changing secrets in this business. It is mostly a matter of observation and accounting. For a field commander, a general of the army, it is far more vital to know an enemy’s strength and movements than whether they have access to a novel weapon. It is absolutely good to know, and know in detail, what Beauregard is up to in Charleston. That speaks volumes. But for this particular weapon to be as vital as he might like us to believe, they would have to be able to make more of them. Scores, at minimum.” He sat back with a sigh. “It could well go badly for

one, two, perhaps more of our ships, but it will not change the course of the war. That is what we work on here.”

Viola focused on breathing, forcefully, deliberately. She would not break down before Sharpe and Babcock.

“So,” she said finally, “for whatever it’s worth, my mission is complete.”

Sharpe nodded.

“But there remains the matter of my father,” she continued. “Colonel, are you familiar with Isaiah Ross?”

“He wrote to me, enclosing a letter of introduction from your congressman, Mr. Baldwin, asking to meet. We set an appointment, but he never appeared.”

Sharpe’s face closed downward with his moustache, but his eyes never left Viola.

Viola held those eyes with all the strength she had left in her.

“Colonel, I need help. I fear that something has happened to him.”

The colonel’s shoulders sloped in his chair, but his jaw set.

“I wish I could, Miss Ross. However, my work is purely military in nature.” His gaze drifted toward Babcock. “There are others who do not observe niceties of jurisdiction, but someone must focus on military intelligence. We cannot divert from getting this war won.”

“She’ll at least need a pass to get around Washington, George,” Babcock said.

“Yes.” Sharpe took a clean sheet of note paper headed *Head Quarters, Army of the Potomac, Office of the Provost Marshal General*, and started writing.

“You’ll just want to try and keep clear of Baker’s secret service detective bureau,” Babcock said. “They’ve noticed that writ of habeas corpus has been suspended. I suggest you see

your congressman first.” He rocked his head back, and side to side. “Trust me when I say that nothing you’ve encountered in Charleston could have possibly prepared you for Washington.”

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The *Bluefin* was still at the dock at sunset, laden with a return cargo of human misery. The stretchers on deck were fouled with dysentery, the groans of the afflicted pocked by coughing of huddled consumptives as a train of orderlies loaded more. The badged and bowlered secret service detectives supervising clearly weren't pleased, but brightened considerably when Viola dismounted the wagon back from Brandy Station.

"What's your business here, Miss?" the largest one rumbled.

Viola produced Colonel Sharpe's pass from an inner pocket of her cloak.

"I've reported on a mission for Colonel Sharpe," she said. "I am returning to Washington to find my father."

"Your father, eh?" the detective muttered, squinting at the note in a way that suggested he could not read it.

"My father," Viola affirmed. "Isaiah Ross. Perhaps you've heard something about him?"

The men exchanged looks.

"And what would your name be?" asked a shorter man with a bent nose. He clearly couldn't read.

"Viola Ross."

They looked at each other again. The third man, thick with vaguely negroid features, pointed to a place in the note and nodded. They closed to confer, then started up the boarding ramp.

"My pass, gentlemen?" Viola demanded.

They paused, halting the caravan of suffering.

“That is an official communication of the Army of the Potomac,” Viola said. “Do I need to request your removal from this jurisdiction by a duly commissioned officer?”

She was bluffing, she knew it, but their collective posture of uncertainty conveyed the sense that they did not want to stir things up, not then and there.

The thick man scanned the pass once more and offered it back to Viola without a word, but with a look that told her she was fair game once back in Washington.

So be it, she thought. Father’s name seemed to have registered. Her name surely did.

Once onboard, she found herself a place near the taffrail, out of the way as far as possible from the misery paving the deck. She should feel something for these men, many of them boys, really. She had come to the army out of battle season, so clearly had evaded the worst of it. But as the whistle shrieked and the wheels turned the *Bluefin* back upriver, she turned her gaze aft where she could see in the water a procession of dead faces she had left behind in Charleston.

She wondered what the Fairmaynes might have reported, and how. There was no question whatsoever that they had been tracking her, but to what end? She had seen that Sharpe was focused on gathering and analyzing concrete information on military subjects; that did not describe Viola in any sense as a target of investigation.

If indeed they were working with Baker, their brief could have been counterintelligence, or perhaps leveraging persons ... for what? Dahlgren had alluded to policing purveyors, as well as drinking establishments and women of pleasure, the last ironic in considering the Fairmaynes. What then could possibly be Baker’s interest in Isaiah and Viola Ross? How would he even have known of her, other than her chance encounter with Grace Fairmayne during the Atlantic passage?

Viola blinked, and the muddy river was roiling in their wake with the first evidence of habitations and commerce. The Capitol and Washington below it were rising off in the dusk on the starboard side.

She turned to scan the shadowed deck. A few of the prostrate figures were covered to the top of the head. Between Viola and the sick and the dead, the three detectives stood casually focused on her.

“You will be coming with us,” the tallest one said.

“On what grounds?” Viola asked.

“You may or may not be a camp follower,” he said. “We’ll see about that. But by your own admission, you are surely a spy.”

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